

# THE FIRST VISION EXAMINED

*A Study of New Theories  
& Documents Regarding  
Joseph Smith's First Vision  
& The 1820 Revival*

**Jerald and Sandra Tanner**

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# PART ONE

## The Documents

The Mormon Apostle LeGrand Richards made this statement:

On the morning of a beautiful spring day in 1820 there occurred one of the most important and momentous events in this world's history. God, the Eternal Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, appeared to Joseph Smith and gave instructions concerning the establishment of the kingdom of God upon the earth in these latter days. (*A Marvelous Work and a Wonder*, 1966, page 7)

Joseph Smith published his story in the Mormon publication, *Times and Seasons*, in 1842. The following is the description of the vision as written by Joseph Smith:

So in accordance with this my determination, to ask of God, 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. . . . I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head, . . . 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 spoke unto me, calling me by name, and said, (pointing to the other) "This is my beloved Son, hear him."

. . . I asked the personages who stood above me in the light, which of all the sects was right, . . . 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, . . . He again forbade me to join with any of them: and many other things did he say unto me which I cannot write at this time. (*Times and Seasons*, Vol. 3, pages 728 and 748)

This story is now published in the *Pearl of Great Price* and is accepted as scripture by the Mormon people. The Mormon Apostle John A. Widtsoe made this comment concerning Joseph Smith's 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.

Professed enemies of Joseph Smith and his work, have felt themselves helpless in their efforts to destroy the reality of the First Vision and have said little about it. (*Joseph Smith—Seeker After Truth*, page 19)

For years the Mormon leaders have publicly maintained that Joseph Smith told only one story concerning the First Vision. Preston Nibley made this statement: “Joseph Smith lived a little more than twenty-four years after this first vision. During this time he told but one story . . .” (*Joseph Smith the Prophet*, 1944, page 30).

At the very time that Preston Nibley made this statement the Mormon leaders were suppressing at least two accounts of the First Vision, which were written prior to the account which Joseph Smith published in the *Times and Seasons*. Levi Edgar Young, who was the head of the Seven Presidents of Seventies in the Mormon Church, told LaMar Petersen that he had examined a “strange” account of the First Vision and was told not to reveal what it contained. The following is from notes by LaMar Petersen of an interview with Levi Edgar Young held February 3, 1953:

A list of 5 questions was presented. Bro. Young indicated some surprise at the nature of the questions but said he heartily approved of them being asked. Said they were important, fundamental, were being asked more by members of the Church, and should be asked. Said the Church should have a committee available where answers to such questions could be obtained. He has quit going down with his own questions to Brother Joseph Fielding (Smith) because he was laughed at and put off.

His curiosity was excited when reading in Roberts’ Doc. History reference to “documents from which these writings were compiled.” Asked to see them. Told to get higher permission. Obtained that permission. Examined the documents. Written, he thought, about 1837 or 1838. Was told not to copy or tell what they contained. Said it was a “strange” account of the First Vision. Was put back in vault. Remains unused, unknown.

A few years ago we became interested in the “strange” account and wrote to Joseph Fielding Smith, the Mormon Church Historian, enclosing \$1.00 and asking for a photocopy of it. Unfortunately, this letter was never answered, and we had almost given up hope of ever seeing this document. To our great surprise, however, two “strange” accounts of the First Vision have now come to light. The first appeared in the thesis, “An Analysis of the Accounts Relating Joseph Smith’s Early Visions,” by Paul R. Cheesman. Mr. Cheesman was a student at the Brigham Young University. He evidently wrote his thesis in rebuttal to statements we had made concerning the First Vision in some of our writings. Although he tries to support the First Vision story, he has reproduced a document dictated by Joseph Smith himself which not only proves that he did not see the Father and the Son in 1820, but also casts a shadow of doubt upon his entire story of the origin of the church. This document was reproduced in Appendix D of Paul R. Cheesman’s thesis. Paul R. Cheesman states that it “appears to be the earliest written account” of the First Vision. On page 64 of his thesis, Mr. Cheesman states:

This account was never published or referred to by any of the authorities of the church as far as the writer has been able to determine. . . . Instead of going back over and revising, Joseph Smith evidently dictated the story later as we have it in Appendix A. (“An Analysis of the Accounts Relating Joseph Smith’s Early Visions,” Master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 1965, page 64)

marvelous care in the likeness of him who created ~~him~~  
and when I considered upon these things my heart exclaim-  
ed well hath the wise man said <sup>in</sup> the <sup>heart</sup> <sup>of</sup> <sup>man</sup> <sup>that</sup> <sup>he</sup> <sup>findeth</sup> <sup>the</sup> <sup>depth</sup> <sup>of</sup> <sup>his</sup> <sup>heart</sup> <sup>then</sup> <sup>is</sup> <sup>as</sup> <sup>God</sup> <sup>my</sup> <sup>heart</sup> <sup>exclaimed</sup> <sup>all</sup> <sup>all</sup>  
these bear testimony and bespeak an omnipotent  
and omnipotent power a being who maketh almighty  
desireth and bindeth all things in their bound, who  
filleth Eternity who was and is and will be from all  
Eternity to Eternity and when I considered all these things  
and that <sup>the</sup> being <sup>that</sup> <sup>was</sup> <sup>such</sup> <sup>to</sup> <sup>worship</sup> <sup>him</sup> <sup>as</sup> <sup>wor-</sup>  
-ship him in spirit and in truth therefore 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 <sup>the</sup> <sup>act</sup> <sup>of</sup> <sup>calling</sup> <sup>upon</sup> <sup>the</sup> <sup>Lord</sup> a pillar of  
fire light above the brightest of the sun at noon day  
came down from above and rested upon me and I was filled  
with the Spirit of God and <sup>the</sup> <sup>Lord</sup> <sup>opened</sup> <sup>the</sup> <sup>heavens</sup> <sup>upon</sup> <sup>me</sup>  
and I saw the Lord and he spake unto me saying  
Joseph <sup>thy</sup> <sup>sin</sup> <sup>are</sup> <sup>forgiven</sup> <sup>thee</sup> <sup>go</sup> <sup>thy</sup> <sup>work</sup> <sup>in</sup> <sup>my</sup>  
statute and keep my commandments so hold I am the  
Lord of glory I was crucified for the world that all them  
who believe on my name may have eternal life <sup>the</sup> <sup>word</sup>  
birth in sin and at <sup>his</sup> <sup>time</sup> and none doeth good in  
not once they have turned aside from the Gospel and  
keep not commandments they draw near to me with their  
lips while their hearts are far from me and mine anger  
is kindling against the inhabitants of the earth to visit  
them according to their iniquities and to bring to pass  
that which <sup>have</sup> <sup>been</sup> <sup>spoken</sup> <sup>by</sup> <sup>the</sup> <sup>mouth</sup> <sup>of</sup> <sup>the</sup> <sup>proph-</sup>  
-ets and <sup>of</sup> <sup>the</sup> <sup>apostles</sup> behold and lo I come quickly as it was  
written of me in the cloud <sup>in</sup> <sup>the</sup> <sup>glory</sup> <sup>of</sup> <sup>my</sup> <sup>Father</sup>  
and my soul was filled with love and for many days I  
could rejoice with great joy and the Lord was with me  
but could find none that would believe the heavenly  
vision nevertheless I pondered these things in my heart  
and ~~about to tell them any more~~ and but after many

Above is a photograph of the “earliest written account” of the First Vision. Joseph Smith dictated this account to his scribe in the early 1830’s. This picture is taken from the *Brigham Young University Studies*, Spring 1969, page 281.

In 1965 we published this early account of the First Vision under the title, *Joseph Smith's Strange Account of the First Vision*. Because the document was so unusual, some members of the Mormon Church doubted its authenticity. Although the Mormon leaders would make no public statement concerning the document, James B. Allen, Associate Professor of History at Brigham Young University, admitted that the document was genuine. In an article published in 1966, James B. Allen stated:

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

The Mormon leaders suppressed this account of the First Vision for over 130 years, but after we printed it thousands of copies were distributed throughout the world. Finally, four years after we published the document, the Church Historian's Office has made a public statement confirming the authenticity of the manuscript. Dean C. Jessee, who is "a member of the staff at the LDS Church Historian's Office in Salt Lake City," claims that the document was dictated by Joseph Smith in 1831 or 1832:

On at least three occasions prior to 1839 Joseph Smith began writing his history. The earliest of these is a six-page account recorded on three leaves of a ledger book, written between the summer of 1831 and November 1832. An analysis of the handwriting shows that the narrative was penned by Frederick G. Williams, scribe to the Prophet and counselor in the First Presidency. . . .

The 1831-32 history transliterated here contains the earliest known account of Joseph Smith's First Vision. (*Brigham Young University Studies*, Spring 1969, pages 277-278)

Now that the *Brigham Young University Studies* has published a photograph (see page 3 of this pamphlet), we no longer have to depend upon Cheesman's typed copy. Below is the important part of this document taken directly from the photograph of the original document:

. . . the Lord heard my cry in the wilderness and while in the attitude of calling upon the Lord in the 16th year of my age a pillar of light above the brightness of the sun at noon day come down from above and rested upon me and I was filled with the spirit of god and the Lord opened the heavens upon me and I saw the Lord and he spake unto me saying Joseph my son thy sins are forgiven thee. go thy way walk in my statutes and keep my commandments behold I am the Lord of glory I was crucified for the world that all those who believe on my name may have Eternal life behold the world lieth in sin 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 according to their ungodliness and to bring to pass that which hath been spoken by the mouths of the prophets and Apostles behold and lo I come quickly as it was w[r]itten of me in the cloud clothed in the glory of my Father . . .

Notice that in this account Joseph Smith said “I saw the Lord,” whereas in the printed account he said “I saw two personages.” This is definitely a contradiction. In the first account Joseph Smith told that the Lord said he was “crucified for the world.” This, of course, would mean that the personage was Jesus Christ. Therefore, it is plain to see that Joseph Smith did not include God the Father in his first account of the vision. James B. Allen stated:

In this story, only one personage was mentioned, and this was obviously the Son, for he spoke of having been crucified. (*Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, Autumn 1966, page 40)

Paul R. Cheesman tries to excuse this by saying:

As he writes briefly of the vision, he does not mention the Father as being present; however, this does not indicate that he was not present. (“An Analysis of the Accounts Relating Joseph Smith’s Early Visions,” page 63)

This explanation by Paul Cheesman does not seem reasonable. Actually, in the first account Joseph Smith quotes the Lord as saying more words than in the printed account. Why would he not mention the most important part of the story?

If God the Father had appeared in this vision, Joseph Smith certainly would have included this information in his first account. It is absolutely impossible for us to believe that Joseph Smith would not have mentioned the Father if He had actually appeared.

The only reasonable explanation for the Father not being mentioned is that Joseph Smith did not see God the Father, and that he made up this part of the story after he dictated the first manuscript. This, of course, throws a shadow of doubt upon the whole story.

After this “strange” account came to light, a Mormon Seminary teacher told us that there was still another account of the First Vision which the Mormon leaders were suppressing. To our great surprise, this second account was published in the Autumn, 1966, issue of *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*. This account appeared in the article by James B. Allen, Associate Professor of History at Brigham Young University. James B. Allen made this statement concerning this document:

Another document of almost equal importance has recently been brought to light by a member of the staff at the Church Historian’s office. 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”). . . . 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. . . . 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 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. (*Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, Autumn 1966, pages 35-36)

On pages 40-41 of the same issue of *Dialogue*, James B. Allen quotes from this account. Earl E. Olson, who is now the Assistant Church Historian, has confirmed the fact that James B. Allen has accurately reproduced this document. In a letter dated October 26, 1966, he stated:

The quote which you referred to in your letter of October 21 pertaining to Joseph Smith's first vision which is recorded in Book A-1 of the Documentary History appears in the issue of *Dialogue* on page 40. We have compared the account in *Dialogue* with the original recording as we have it here and find that it is identical word for word and has been accurately copied. (Letter from Earl Olson to W.P. Walters, dated October 26, 1966)

The Mormon leaders have now allowed a photograph of this document to be published in the *Brigham Young University Studies*, Spring 1969, page 285. Below is a copy of that photograph.

November 1835

at this time, and with a fixed determination to obtain it, I called on the Lord for the first time in the place a dove 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 then again to pray, but could not; the noise of walking seemed to draw nearer; I sprang up, my feet and looked round, but saw no person or thing, that was when I tried to produce the noise of walking, I heard 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 went down upon my bed, filled me with unspeakable joy, & personage appeared in the midst of this pillar of glory, which was spread all around, and yet nothing commanded, whether personage soon appeared like unto the first, and said unto me, thy son is forgiven, thou art justified, I also unto me that thou art Christ is the son of God, 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 I had another vision of angels in the night season, after I had retired to bed, I had not been asleep, but was meditating upon my first life and experiences, I was well aware that the Holy Spirit was conversing with me, and I received heartily, I felt very sore and tender, I opened and have been blessed very early before I could have any success with things at a praying with at once.

Dean C. Jessee, of the Church Historian's Office, made this comment concerning this document:

Then follows 142 pages of daily, journal-type entries written in the third person singular, commencing with September 22, 1835, and continuing to January 18, 1836. In this journal, under the date of November 9, 1835, an interview with a

Jewish minister is recorded in which Joseph Smith again relates the account of his First Vision . . . (*Brigham Young University Studies*, Spring 1969, page 283)

The important part of this account reads as follows:

. . . 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. I was about 14 years old when I received this first communication.

In this account of the First Vision there is absolutely nothing to show that the personages were God and Christ. The statement, “He testified also unto me that Jesus Christ is the son of God,” would seem to show that the personages were not the Father and the Son. If Joseph Smith had intended to show that the personage who spoke was Jesus, he probably would have said something like this: “He testified also unto me that He was the Son of God.” On the other hand, if he intended to show that the personage who spoke was the Father, he would probably have said something like this: “He testified also unto me that Jesus Christ was His son.”

The reader will also note that Joseph Smith claimed that there were “many angels in this vision.”

## Changes in History

A few years ago we published a book entitled, *Changes in Joseph Smith's History*. In this book we showed that thousands of words were added, deleted, or changed since Joseph Smith's *History* was first published. We quoted Charles Wesley Wandell, who worked in the Church Historian's Office after Joseph Smith's death, as saying the following:

I notice the interpolations because having been employed (myself) in the Historian's office at Nauvoo by Doctor Richards, and employed, too, in 1845, in compiling this very auto-biography, I know that after Joseph's death his memoir was “doctored” to suit the new order of things, and this, too, by the direct order of Brigham Young to Doctor Richards and systematically by Richards. (Statement from the journal of Charles Wesley Wandell, as printed in the *Journal of History*, Vol. 8, page 76)

On page 7 of *Changes in Joseph Smith's History*, we made this statement:

On the title page to Vol. 1 of the *History of the Church*, this statement appears: “History of Joseph Smith, the Prophet by himself”; this study, however, reveals that much of the history was not written by Joseph Smith. Only a small part of the history was printed during Joseph Smith's lifetime, and we are very suspicious that Joseph Smith did not finish writing the history before his death. Joseph Smith probably kept a journal which the historians used to write part of the history. The entries in the *History of the Church* for 1835 sound very much like a

day-to-day journal. The Church historians, no doubt, used Joseph Smith's journals, but they also interpolated material of their own and tried to make it appear that Joseph had written it. An example is found in the *Millennial Star*, Vol. 19, page 7:

... on this evening Joseph the Seer commenced giving instructions to the scribe concerning writing the proclamation to the kings of the earth, ...

It is very obvious that Joseph Smith did not write this; when this was reprinted in the *History of the Church*, the words "Joseph the Seer" were changed to the word "I." In the *Millennial Star*, Vol. 19, p. 630, Joseph Smith was referred to in the third person four different times, but when this was reprinted in the *History of the Church* it has been changed to the first person to make it appear that Joseph Smith was writing the history.

On page 24 of the same book, we made these comments:

In the *History of the Church*, Vol. 2, pp. 80-82, 751 words have been added which were not in the *Times and Seasons* (Vol. 6, p. 1076).

It is very interesting to note that the first paragraph that is added resembles Heber C. Kimball's Journal. Heber C. Kimball wrote the following concerning June 8, 1834:

... while we were refreshing ourselves and teams, about the middle of the day, Brother Joseph got up in a wagon and said, that he would deliver a prophecy. After giving the brethren much good advice, exhorting them to faithfulness and humility, he said, the Lord had told him that there would a scourge come upon the camp, in consequence of the fractious and unruly spirits that appeared among them and they should die like sheep with the rot; still if they would repent and humble themselves before the Lord, the scourge in a great measure might be turned away: but, as the Lord lives, this camp will suffer for giving way to their unruly temper, ... (Extracts from H. C. Kimball's Journal, published in the *Times and Seasons*, Vol. 6, p. 788)

The *History of the Church*, Vol. 2, p. 80 reads almost exactly the same except for the fact that the words "Brother Joseph" and "the" are changed to "I":

... While we were refreshing ourselves and teams about the middle of the day (June 3rd), I got up on a wagon wheel, called the people together, and said that I would deliver a prophecy. After giving the brethren much good advice, exhorting them to faithfulness and humility, I said the Lord had revealed to me that a scourge would come upon the camp in consequence of the fractious and unruly spirits that appeared among them, and they should die like sheep with the rot; still, if they would repent and humble themselves before the Lord, the scourge, in a great measure, might be turned away; but, as the Lord lives, the members of this camp will suffer for giving way to their unruly temper.

Since these words were not in the history as it was first published, and since they so closely resemble Heber C. Kimball's Journal, it is almost impossible not to believe that the Mormon historians are guilty of plagiarism as well as falsification and deceit. (*Changes in Joseph Smith's History*, page 24)

Since we published the book, *Changes in Joseph Smith's History*, we have found a great deal of evidence which seems to show that a large portion of Joseph Smith's *History* was written after his death and that the Mormon Historians used journals, newspapers, and other publications to make the history. They were careful, however, to change these sources to make it appear that Joseph Smith had written them. For instance, Oliver Cowdery wrote a letter in which he stated:

BRO. SMITH was then unknown to Mr. Chandler, neither did he know that such a book or work as the record of the Nephites had been brought before the public. (*Messenger and Advocate*, Vol. 2, page 235)

In the *History of the Church*, Vol. 2, pages 348-349, we find these words attributed to Joseph Smith:

I was then unknown to Mr. Chandler, neither did he know that such a book or work as the record of the Nephites, been brought before the public.

We could cite many other examples, but we will save them for another work.

The point which we wish to bring out here is that the journal which records the visit of "Joshua the Jewish Minister" and Joseph Smith's account of the First Vision is the original source for a large part of Joseph Smith's *History*. Nevertheless, the brief history which Joseph Smith gave to Joshua has been completely deleted from the published version of Joseph Smith's *History*. Dean C. Jessee, of the Church Historian's Office, states that the journal which contained the account of Joshua's visit belonged to Joseph Smith, but that this portion is in the handwriting of Warren A. Cowdery. Mr. Jessee also states:

The Prophets journal containing the 1835 history was turned over and utilized as Book A-1 of the ensuing multivolume work. (*Brigham Young University Studies*, Spring 1969, page 286)

Recently we were given a microfilm copy of "Book A-1," and therefore we are able to compare the journal account with the published version of Joseph Smith's *History*.

| ACCOUNT IN JOURNAL   | HISTORY OF THE CHURCH  |
|--|--|
| While sitting in <b>his</b> house this morning between the hours of ten and eleven a man came in and introduced himself to <b>him</b> calling himself Joshua the Jewish Minister. His appearance was something singular, having a beard about three inches in length which is quite grey, his hair was also long and considerably silvered with age. He had the appearance of a man about 50 or 55 years old. He was tall and straight, slender frame, blue eyes, thin visage, and fair complexion. He wore a green frock coat and pantaloons of the same color. He had on a black fur hat with a narrow brim. When speaking he frequently shuts his eyes and exhibits a kind of scowl upon his countenance. | While sitting in <b>my</b> house, between ten and eleven this morning, a man came in and introduced himself to <b>me</b> by the name of "Joshua, the Jewish Minister." His appearance was something singular, having a beard about three inches in length, quite grey; also his hair was long and considerably silvered with age; I thought him about fifty or fifty-five years old; tall, straight, slender built, of thin visage, blue eyes, and fair complexion; wore a sea-green frock coat and pantaloons, black fur hat with narrow brim; and, while speaking, frequently shuts his eyes, with a scowl on his countenance. |

| ACCOUNT IN JOURNAL   | HISTORY OF THE CHURCH   |
|--|---|
| <p><b>He</b> (Joseph) made some inquiry after his name, but received no definite answer. The conversation soon turned upon the subject of Religion, and after the subject of this narrative had made some remarks concerning the bible, <b>he</b> commenced giving him a relation of the circumstances, connected with the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, <b>which were nearly as follows</b>, . . . [At this point Joseph Smith gave an account of the First Vision and other visions he received. See Below.]</p> <p>While <b>President Smith</b> was relating this brief history of the Church of Christ in these last days, Joshua seemed to be highly entertained. ("Joseph Smith's Manuscript History," Book A-1, November 9, 1835)</p> | <p><b>I</b> made some inquiry after his name, but received no definite answer. We soon commenced talking on the subject of religion, and, after <b>I</b> had made some remarks concerning the Bible, <b>I</b> commenced giving him a relation of the circumstances connected with the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, <b>as recorded in the former part of this history</b>.</p> <p>While <b>I</b> was relating a brief history of the establishment of the Church of Christ in the last days, Joshua seemed to be highly entertained. (<i>History of the Church</i>, Vol. 2, page 304)</p> |

Now that we have made this comparison, the reader can clearly see that this journal was the original source for the published version, yet Mormon historians have deleted over 800 words from this account without any indication! In order to make this deletion the words "which were nearly as follows" were changed to "as recorded in the former part of this history."

Since most of this "brief history" has never been printed (Allen and Jessee only printed the portions relating to the First Vision), we thought the reader would be interested in having the entire story as it appears in "Joseph Smith's Manuscript History":

. . . he commenced giving him a relation of the circumstances, connected with the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, which were nearly as follows. 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 realizing 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 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 swoolen 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 round, but 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. I was about 14 years old when I received this first communication. When I was about 17 years I had another vision of angels; in the night season, after I had retired to bed; I had not been asleep, but was meditating upon my past life and experience. I was well aware I had not kept the commandments, and I repented heartily for all my sins and transgressions, and humbled myself before him, whose eye surveys all things at a glance. All at once the room was illuminated above the brightness of the sun; an Angel appeared before me; his hands and feet were naked, pure and white, he stood between the floors of the room, clothed with purity inexpressible. He said unto me I am a messenger sent from God, be faithful and keep his commandments in all things. He told me also of a sacred record which was written on plates of gold. I saw in the vision the place where they were deposited. He said to me the Indians were the literal descendants of Abraham. He explained many of the prophecies to me; one of which I will mention, which is in Malachi 4th chapter. Behold, the day of the Lord ———? ——— He also informed me that the Urim & Thummim was hid up with the record, and that God would give me power to translate it with the assistance of this instrument; he then gradually ———? ——— out of my sight as the vision closed. while meditating on what I had seen. The Angel appeared to me again, and related the same things and much more, also the third time bearing the same tidings and departed. During the time I was in this vision I did not realize any thing around me, except what was shown to me in this communication. After the vision had all passed, I found that it was nearly day light. The family soon arose, and got up also. On that day while in the field at work with my father, he asked me if I was sick, I replied I had but little strength. He told me to go to the house. I started and went part of the way, and was finally deprived of my strength and fell; but how long I remained I do not know. The Angel came to me again and commanded me to go and tell my father what I had seen & heard. I did so. The old man wept and told me that it was a vision from God and to attend to it. I went and found the place where the plates were, according to the direction of the Angel, I also saw them and the Angel as before. The powers of darkness strove hard against me. I called on God. The Angel told me that the reason why I could not obtain the plates at this time was because I was under transgression but to come again in one year from that time. I did so but did not obtain them, also the third and the fourth years the last of which time I obtained them, and translated them into the english language by the gift and power of God and have been preaching it ever since.

While President Smith was relating this brief history of the Church of Christ in these last days, Joshua seemed to be highly entertained. ("Joseph Smith's Manuscript History," Book A-1, November 9, 1835)

Joseph Smith's "Manuscript History," Book A-1, also provides some important evidence concerning another reference to the First Vision which has been changed in the printed version of the *History of the Church*. Fawn M. Brodie made this statement concerning this reference:

Under the date of November 15, 1835 in the *History of the Church* appears the following statement by Joseph Smith: "I gave him [Erastus Holmes] a brief

relation of my experience while in my juvenile years, say from six years old up to the time I received my first vision, which was when I was about fourteen years old . . .” (Vol. II, p. 312). But Joseph admittedly did not begin writing his history until 1838, and the editors of this history do not state from what manuscript source in the Utah Church library this journal entry came. Access to all these manuscripts is denied everyone save authorities of the Mormon Church. (*No Man Knows My History*, footnote, page 24)

The Mormon Apostle John A. Widtsoe tried to defend the reference from the *History of the Church* by stating:

In 1835 he told one Erastus Holmes of his “First Vision which was when I was fourteen years old.” Clearly the story of the First Vision was common knowledge among members of the Church. The proponents of the theory that the Prophet invented the First Vision in 1838 doubt the accuracy of the Holmes and similar references, because they hold that the *Church History*, the journal of Joseph Smith, has been tampered with by later workers. It is sad when a drowning man does not even have a straw to which he may cling! That seemed and seems to be the need of these critics. (*Joseph Smith—Seeker After Truth*, pp. 24-25)

In spite of John A. Widtsoe’s statement, a woman who was doing research at the Utah State Historical Society searched through a microfilm of the early Deseret News and found information which proves that the Mormon Historians deliberately altered Joseph Smith’s statement. In the 1850’s the *Deseret News* (the Mormon Church’s newspaper) was publishing Joseph Smith’s *History*. In the issue of May 29, 1852 the following statement by Joseph Smith appeared:

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 while in my juvenile years, say from six years old up to the time I received the first visitation of angels, which was when I was about fourteen years old; also the revelations that I received afterwards concerning the Book of Mormon, and a short account of the rise and progress of the church up to this date. (*Deseret News*, Vol. 2, No. 15, May 29, 1852)

Because this statement by Joseph Smith contradicted the teaching that the Father and the Son appeared to him in the first vision of 1820, the Mormon Church historians altered the words of Joseph Smith when they reprinted them in recent editions of the *History of the Church*. They altered the wording so that the word “angels” was completely left out. The following is a comparison of the way this reference was originally published in the *Deseret News* and the way it has been changed to read in the *History of the Church*:

| DESERET NEWS   | HISTORY OF THE CHURCH   |
|--|---|
| . . . I received the first visitation of angels, which was when I was about fourteen years old; . . . (May 29, 1852) | . . . I received my first vision, which was when I was about fourteen years old; . . . (Vol. 2, page 312) |

Dr. Hugh Nibley states that even God Himself, when he visits the earth, could be called an angel; however, he admits that Joseph Smith was being “evasive”:

Not to labor the point; it is perfectly correct usage to refer to any heavenly visitor as an angel. So when Joseph Smith, reviewing the past in “a brief relation” to a stranger, passes over the first vision as his “first visitation of angels” he is being both correct and evasive. Remember that this was some years before he was finally “induced” to come out with a public statement about the first vision; . . . (*Improvement Era*, November 1961, page 868)

On page 866 of the same article, Dr. Nibley admits that Joseph Smith’s use of the word “angels” was “ambiguous,” and that the editors of the *Deseret News* ran the “risk of a misunderstanding” by using this term. He does not, however, tell the reader that this “ambiguous” term has been deleted in modern editions of the *History of the Church*. Paul Cheesman does not try to deal with this problem in his thesis. He quotes the statement Joseph Smith made concerning his First Vision, but his quote is taken from the *History of the Church*, and he does not say anything concerning the change which has been made in it. It would appear that the Mormon writers are unwilling to face this problem.

Now that we are able to examine “Joseph Smith’s Manuscript History,” Book A-1, we not only find that the words “first visitation of Angels” are correct, but we also find that the entire statement was originally written in the third person singular. Below is a comparison of this reference as it appears in the manuscript with the way that it reads today in the *History of the Church*.

| MANUSCRIPT HISTORY  | HISTORY OF THE CHURCH  |
|---|--|
| <b>He</b> (Smith) commenced and gave him a brief relation of <b>his</b> experience while in <b>his</b> youthful days, say from the age of six years up to the time <b>he</b> received <b>the first visitation of angels</b> which was when <b>he</b> was about 14 years old. (“Joseph Smith’s Manuscript History,” Book A-1, November 14, 1835) | I gave him a brief relation of <b>my</b> experience while in <b>my</b> juvenile years, say from six years old up to the time <b>I</b> received <b>my first vision</b> , which was when <b>I</b> was about fourteen years old; . . . ( <i>History of the Church</i> , Vol. 2, page 312) |

That this reference was originally written in the third person singular and contained the word “angels” is confirmed by Dean C. Jessee of the Church Historian’s Office:

. . . Erastus Holmes . . . was given a brief relation of his experience while in his youthful days, say from the age of six up to the time he received the first visitation of Angels which was when he was about 14 years old. (*Brigham Young University Studies*, Spring 1969, page 286)

## First History

In the early years of the Mormon Church it was taught that the first vision Joseph Smith had was in 1823, when he was seventeen years of age, and that the personage who appeared was an angel (not God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ) who told him about the Book of Mormon. Oliver Cowdery, who was one



of the witnesses to the Book of Mormon and the first Church historian, wrote a history of the Church which was published in the *Messenger and Advocate*. This history shows that the story of the visit of the Father and the Son was not taught to the Mormon people. Francis W. Kirkham, in his book *A New Witness For Christ in America*, Vol. 1, page 17, says: "The first published consecutive account of the origin of the Church began in the October, 1834, issue of the *Messenger and Advocate*. It consists of eight letters written by Oliver Cowdery to W.W. Phelps. This account is very important as Oliver Cowdery claims in a letter published in the October, 1834, issue, but dated September 7, 1834, that Joseph Smith assisted him in the writing of the letters."

The Mormon writer Hyrum L. Andrus states that the *Messenger and Advocate* was "the official Church organ between 1834 and 1837" (*God, Man and the Universe*, Salt Lake City, 1968, page 48). In the *Messenger and Advocate*, Vol. 1, page 13, the following statement was made concerning this history:

... we have thought that a full history of the rise of the church of the Latter Day Saints, and the most interesting parts of its progress, to the present time, would be worthy the perusal of the Saints. . . .

That our narrative may be correct, and particularly the introduction, it is proper to inform our patrons, that our brother J. Smith jr. has offered to assist us. Indeed, there are many items connected with the fore part of this subject that render his labor indispensable. With his labor and with authentic documents now in our possession, we hope to render this a pleasing and agreeable narrative, well worth the examination of the Saints.

On page 42 the reader was promised that this history would contain a correct account of the events that had transpired:

Since, then, our opposers have been thus kind to introduce our cause before the public, it is no more than just that a correct account should be given; and since they have invariably sought to cast a shade over the truth, and hinder its influence from gaining ascendancy, it is also proper that it should be vindicated, by laying before the world a correct statement of events as they have transpired from time to time. . . .

You will recollect that I informed you, . . . this history would necessarily embrace the life and character of our esteemed friend and brother, J. Smith Jr. one of the presidents of this church, and for information on that part of the subject, I refer you to his communication . . . I shall, therefore, pass over that, till I come to the 15th year of his life. . . . One Mr. Lane, a presiding Elder of the Methodist church, visited Palmyra, and vicinity. Elder Lane was a tallented man . . . 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, . . . in common with others, our brother's mind became awakened. . . . his mother, one sister, and two of his natural brothers, were persuaded to unite with the Presbyterians. . . .

In the February 1835 issue of the *Messenger and Advocate*, Oliver Cowdery continued the history. He stated, however, that there had been a typographical error and that the revival had really occurred in 1823:

You will recollect that I mentioned the time of a religious excitement, in Palmyra and vicinity to have been in the 15th year of our brother J. Smith Jr.'s age — that was an error in the type — it should have been in the 17th. — You will please remember this correction, as it will be necessary for the full understanding of what will follow in time. This would bring the date down to the year 1823.

. . . while this excitement continued, he continued to call upon the Lord in secret for a full manifestation of divine approbation, and for, to him, the all important information, if a Supreme being did exist, to have an assurance that he was accepted of him . . .

On the evening of the 21st of September, 1823, previous to retiring to rest, our brother's mind was unusually wrought up on the subject which had so long agitated his mind — his heart was drawn out in fervent prayer, . . . While continuing in prayer for a manifestation in some way that his sins were forgiven; endeavoring to exercise faith in the scriptures, on a sudden a light like that of day, only of a purer and far more glorious appearance and brightness, burst into the room. — . . . and in a moment a personage stood before him . . . he heard him declare himself to be a messenger sent by commandment of the Lord, to deliver a special message, and to witness to him that his sins were forgiven, . . . (*Messenger and Advocate*, Vol. 1, pages 78-79)

Several things should be noted concerning this history. First, that it claimed to be a "correct account." Second, that Joseph Smith assisted in the writing of this history. Third, that the date of the religious excitement in Palmyra was 1823. Fourth, that Joseph Smith desired to know at this time "if a Supreme being did exist." Fifth, that a "messenger sent by commandment of the Lord" appeared to him and told him that his sins were forgiven.

Mormon writers seem to be somewhat divided concerning this history. Richard L. Bushman states:

The first evidence he [Wesley P. Walters] offers is not Joseph's account but Oliver Cowdery's. . . .

The argument falters in two spots. The first is in Oliver's trustworthiness as a witness to these events. He did not experience them himself. All of his evidence is hearsay, and the consequent flaws are evident. . . . The first vision itself is skipped entirely. . . . Even Mr. Walters must agree that Oliver errs on the dates. In one letter he says these events occurred in Joseph's fifteenth year. In the next, claiming a typographical error, Oliver places them in the seventeenth year which would be from December 1821 to December 1822. . . . Probably the individual details are accurate enough; the whole narrative need not be discarded because of a few obvious flaws. But he misses on the chronology, sticking together pieces that do not belong. Mr. Lane did indeed leave his mark on Palmyra as Oliver could have learned from the residents, but he was not necessarily the revival preacher who affected Joseph. . . .

The second flaw in the argument is Mr. Walters' belief that Oliver's confusion, however serious, was no greater than Joseph's — that Oliver's account is "virtually Joseph's own personal narrative." That is a large assumption to make when the only evidence is Oliver's claim that "Joseph Smith, Jr., has offered to assist us." . . . In 1835, a year after the Cowdery letters were printed, Joseph said on two occasions that his first vision took place when he was about

fourteen. Had Joseph carefully edited Oliver's account, the error would not have passed. The account was Oliver's, not Joseph's, . . ." (*Dialogue*, Spring 1969, pages 84-86)

Mr. Bushman does not seem completely sure of his position, for in footnote 11 on page 93 of his article he suggests that Joseph Smith may be responsible for suppressing the story of the First Vision:

It may be that Joseph corrected Oliver only after the letters appeared. One reading of the letters, a conjectural one like Mr. Walters' reconstruction at the end of his essay, would hold that Joseph stopped Oliver after he read in print the December letter telling of the revival in Joseph's fifteenth year. It sounded like Oliver was going on to relate the story of the vision which Joseph still held back for fear of misunderstandings. Joseph may also have seen other flaws in the account. At any rate, in the next letter Oliver changed the time of the story from Joseph's fifteenth to his seventeenth year and hurried on to the visit of Moroni.

The Mormon writer F. L. Stewart makes this statement concerning the history written by Cowdery:

The brief history written by Oliver Cowdery in a series of letters appearing in the *Latter Day Saints Messenger and Advocate* in 1834 and 1835, began an account of the first vision by stating that when Joseph was in his fifteenth year there was religious excitement in his home town. This would be the correct age and circumstances of the first vision as disclosed by Joseph Smith to the public at a later date. Before Cowdery's narrative could continue, however, upon instructions from Joseph, this account was changed in a later letter to state that the correct age was seventeen and the story of the visitation of the Angel Moroni, occurring when Joseph was that age, was then given.

The reason that the account of the first vision was not made public at that time seems to have been that Joseph did not believe it to be the proper time to disclose the information to the non-Mormon world. (*Exploding the Myth About Joseph Smith, The Mormon Prophet*, by F. L. Stewart, 1967, pages 21-22)

Dr. Hugh Nibley, of the BYU, suggests that Joseph Smith may not have given Oliver Cowdery a "full account" of the First Vision and that this may account for the confusion:

If William Smith and Oliver Cowdery give confusing accounts of the first vision, we must remember that the Prophet knew from the first that those men were not to be trusted with too much information. . . . Were such men to be trusted with a full account of the first vision before it was officially given to the world? (*Improvement Era*, November 1961, pages 868-869)

This explanation for Oliver Cowdery's silence concerning the First Vision is not reasonable; if Oliver Cowdery was so unreliable, why was he chosen to be one of the three witnesses to the Book of Mormon? Could it be possible that Joseph Smith would not trust Oliver Cowdery, the first Church historian, with the true history of the Church? Actually, Joseph Smith trusted Oliver with some of his most important secrets. The Mormon writer Max H. Parkin stated:

“... the Prophet testified ‘that Oliver Cowdery had been his bosom friend, therefore he entrusted him with many things.’” (“Conflict at Kirtland,” Master’s thesis, BYU, Max H. Parkin, 1966, page 166)

Dr. Richard L. Anderson, of the Brigham Young University, seems to disagree with Dr. Nibley. He claims that Oliver Cowdery was well aware of Joseph Smith’s early account of the First Vision (i.e., the “Strange” account), but feels that it was left out “for a reason”:

Since Oliver Cowdery and William Smith narrated early Church history without mentioning the First Vision, it has been assumed that their silence proves that the event did not occur. Both associate Joseph Smith’s revival investigations with 1823 instead of 1820, but in each case there is an apparent reason for this procedure that is consistent with the reality of the First Vision. Cowdery made the first public attempt to narrate pre-1830 Church history in letters to the 1834-35 *Messenger and Advocate*. It is incorrect to say that he wrote without an awareness of the First Vision. It may be that the reason for leaving it out is ambiguous, but, as shown in this issue by Dean Jessee, the initial manuscript history of the First Vision was entered in official Church records at least two years before Cowdery’s history. When he stated that he would utilize “authentic documents now in our possession,” it is virtually certain that he was alluding to the 1831-32 account. . . . Essential dependence upon the 1831-32 account is also minimized by the personal availability of Joseph Smith for consultation, a point which the editor stresses at the beginning of his letters and demonstrates by direct quotes in their progress. But at two points where the Prophet’s personal experiences are narrated, identical phrases or structural similarities betray Cowdery’s use of the earlier document.

... Both accounts refer to the angel’s original warning in identical words: the Prophet was directed to obtain the plates with “an eye single to the glory of God.” Both accounts record the same question of frustration: “Why can I not obtain this book?” And the answer of the angel is identical in each: “You have not kept the commandments of the Lord.”

... added to these is a precise sequence of events that indicates that Cowdery composed his sketch of Joseph’s first religious investigations with the 1831-32 manuscript history before him: . . .

If Oliver Cowdery demonstrably followed the 1831-32 document in rehearsing the background of the First Vision, why didn’t he report the full event as found in that history? . . . By date and verbal dependence, it is known that Cowdery had access to the 1831-32 document, which described two different prayers and two responding visions. Because the logical Cowdery presented differing prayer situations but an answer to only one of them, it must be assumed that he left out reference to the First Vision for a reason.

It is hard to avoid the impression that the second elder was corrected by Joseph Smith and exercised his editorial privilege of saving face. The installment of December 1834, in which the First Vision background was given, dated the “excitement raised on the subject of religion” in the “15th year” of the Prophet’s life, . . . Pleading “an error in the type,” the editor said that the above events happened “in the 17th” year of Joseph Smith’s life. . . .

Since Cowdery knew of the First Vision and began to describe its circumstances, his failure to continue implies a correction. One might envision a reprimand for giving public details of a sacred experience, though that is inconsistent with Joseph Smith's open description of the event for the Jewish minister Joshua some months afterward. . . . The absence of the First Vision in these circumstances is an accident of presentation never rectified because the letter-presentation of early history was terminated some months afterward. (*Brigham Young University Studies*, Spring 1969, pages 393-398)

It is rather obvious that Mormon writers do not know how to deal with this early history. Joseph Fielding Smith, who is Church Historian and a member of the First Presidency, uses this history to try to prove where the Hill Cumorah is located. He claims that this history was written under the "personal supervision" of Joseph Smith:

The quibbler might say that this statement from Oliver Cowdery is merely the opinion of Oliver Cowdery and not the expression of the Prophet Joseph Smith. It should be remembered that these letters in which these statements are made were written at the Prophet's request and under his personal supervision. Surely, under these circumstances, he would not have permitted an error of this kind to creep into the record without correction. . . .

Later, during the Nauvoo period of the Church, and again under the direction of the Prophet Joseph Smith, these same letters by Oliver Cowdery, were published in the *Times and Seasons*, without any thought of correction. . . . (*Doctrines of Salvation*, Vol. 3, page 236)

The Mormon historian B. H. Roberts made the following statement concerning the Cowdery letters:

Joseph Smith's association with Cowdery in the production of these letters make them, as to the facts involved, practically the personal narrative of Joseph Smith. (*Comprehensive History of the Church*, Vol. 1, page 78)

## Too Many Stories

Prior to the time Paul Cheesman wrote his thesis at Brigham Young University, Mormon writers were emphatically proclaiming that Joseph Smith "told but one story" of the First Vision. The Mormon Apostle, John A. Widtsoe stated:

The earliest available written account of the First Vision dates from 1838 when Joseph Smith began to write the history of the Church. (*Joseph Smith—Seeker After Truth*, page 19)

We may never know if John A. Widtsoe knew of the two "strange" accounts of the vision which were written prior to 1838, but one thing is certain: some of the Mormon leaders did know that the account written in 1838 was not the only one in the Historian's Office. In other words, certain leaders deliberately suppressed this information.

Now that these "strange" accounts have been printed and widely circulated, Mormon apologists are forced to admit their existence and authenticity. Dr. Richard L. Anderson, of the Brigham Young University, has gone a step further, however.

He not only acknowledges the authenticity of the “strange” accounts, but he also classifies them as “official accounts of the First Vision from the Prophet”:

Before one can prove that Joseph Smith contradicts history, he must be sure of what Joseph Smith claimed. There are four official accounts of the First Vision from the Prophet. The three manuscript texts are printed in Dean Jessee’s article in this issue. As he shows, their dates of composition are 1831-32, 1835, and 1838. This 1838 account was published as the “History of Joseph Smith” in 1842. The fourth account is Joseph Smith’s “Wentworth Letter,” also published in 1842. (*Brigham Young University Studies*, Spring 1969, page 374)

Dr. Anderson even goes so far as to state that “The most striking insight into the earliest religious experiences of the Prophet comes from the 1831-32 manuscript history” (*Brigham Young University Studies*, Spring 1969, page 375).

The Mormon newspaper, *Deseret News*, has recently admitted the authenticity of the “strange” accounts, but it is made to appear that they are a new discovery:

Dean C. Jessee, a staff member at the Church historian’s office in Salt Lake City, searched through documents of the Church historian’s library concerning events of the 1820s. He located and analyzed three early accounts of Joseph Smith’s first vision dictated by the Prophet himself.

Through other historical approaches and techniques, he has determined the dates, sources, and records of these accounts. Published in the *BYU Studies* with his report are photographic reproductions of these early accounts in the handwriting of the Prophet’s personal scribes. (*Deseret News*, Church Section, May, 3 1969, page 15)

This article gives the impression that Dean C. Jessee discovered the “strange” accounts. Actually, for many years some Mormon leaders have been aware of the fact that the printed account was not the only account written by Joseph Smith. The interview which LaMar Petersen had with Levi Edgar Young in 1953 makes this very clear:

His curiosity was excited when reading in Roberts’ *Doc. History* reference to “documents from which these writings were compiled.” Asked to see them. Told to get higher permission. Obtained that permission. Examined documents. Written, he thought, about 1837 or 1838. Was told not to copy or tell what they contained. Said it was a “strange” account of the First Vision. Was put back in vault. Remains unused, unknown.

The reader will also remember that we printed the first “strange” account in 1965, and that the other account appeared in *Dialogue* in 1966.

The Church has suppressed these documents for over 130 years, but now Mormon apologists are trying to make it appear that they are proud of them. Dr. Truman G. Madsen, of the Brigham Young University, claims that the harmony of these documents is impressive:

Now that we have copies of the three early manuscript accounts of the First Vision bound in this single volume, we are impressed with their harmony considering the very different circumstances of their writing: (1) the 1831-32

manuscript is apparently an attempt to get it on record; (2) the 1835 account relates a spontaneous interview between the Prophet and a Jewish minister, recorded by his scribe “as nearly as follows;” and (3) the 1838 record was written to answer “the many reports” circulating as far west as Missouri which the Prophet said were designed to militate against the character of the Church. (*Brigham Young University Studies*, Spring 1969, page 240)

Richard L. Bushman admits that there are some variations in the story, but he states:

The reasons for reshaping the story usually have to do with changes in immediate circumstances. We know that Joseph suffered from attacks on his character around 1834. As he told Oliver Cowdery when the letters on Joseph’s early experiences were about to be published, enemies had blown up his honest confession of guilt into an admission of outrageous crimes. Small wonder that afterward he played down his prayer for forgiveness in accounts of the vision. . . . One would expect variations in the simplest and truest story. (*Dialogue*, Spring 1969, page 83)

On page 91 of the same article Dr. Bushman states:

As I suggested at the first, there are bound to be variations in the reports of any event, simply because the narrator emphasizes one portion or another of the story. Simple slips may account for other differences. In the 1831 story, for example, Joseph places the first vision in his sixteenth year instead of his fifteenth, a mistake I for one can easily excuse considering how I always have to stop to calculate just how old one is in his fifteenth year.

While it is true that it would have been easy for Joseph Smith to have made a few mistakes in relating the vision, we must agree with Wesley P. Walters when he states:

The matter is far deeper than a mere lapse of memory as to dating, for it enters into the very fabric of the story itself. (*Dialogue*, Spring 1969, page 70)

We would, of course, expect some variations in any story, but we feel that there are so many variations in Joseph Smith’s story and they are of such a nature that they make it impossible to believe.

In the first written account Joseph Smith stated that only one personage appeared to him. The second account says there were many, and the third account says there were two.

## Not Concerned?

When Lauritz G. Petersen, Research Supervisor at the Church Historian’s Office, was asked concerning the different accounts of the First Vision he wrote a letter in which he stated:

We are not concerned really with which of the two Versions of the First Vision is right. . . . Personally I would take the version which the Prophet Joseph Smith gave himself when he stated that he saw two personages. Regardless whether he saw one or two the fact remains that Jesus Christ is mentioned in both of them.

It is obvious from this statement that Mormon apologists are beginning to retreat from the idea that God the Father appeared to Joseph Smith. This is actually a very important matter, for Mormon leaders have used this vision as evidence for their doctrine of a plurality of gods. They have stated that this vision proves that God and Christ are two distinct personages and that they both have a body. They use this vision to prove that God Himself is only an exalted man. George Q. Cannon, who was a member of the First Presidency of the Mormon Church, made this statement in 1883:

There was no man scarcely upon the earth that had a true conception of God; the densest ignorance prevailed; . . . But all this was swept away in one moment by the appearance of the Almighty Himself—by the appearance of God, the Father, and His Son Jesus Christ, to the boy Joseph, . . . In one moment all this darkness disappeared, and once more there was a man found on the earth, embodied in the flesh, who had seen God, . . . This revelation dissipated all misconceptions and all false ideas, and removed the uncertainty that had existed respecting these matters. The Father came accompanied by the Son, thus showing that there were two personages of the Godhead, . . . Joseph saw that the Father had a form; that He had a head; that He had arms; that He had limbs; that He had feet; that He had a face and a tongue . . .

Now, it was meant that this knowledge should be restored first of all. . . . There can be no faith that is not built upon a true conception of God our Father. Therefore, before even angels came, He came Himself, accompanied by His Son, and revealed Himself once more to man upon the earth. (*Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 24, pages 371-372)

The Mormon Apostle LeGrand Richards states:

This was the prophet's first vision. From this we learn among other truths, that God the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ, are separate and distinct personages, and that man is literally created in the image of God. (*A Marvelous Work And A Wonder*, 1966, page 12)

Joseph Fielding Smith, who is the Mormon Church Historian, made this statement concerning Joseph Smith's vision:

Joseph Smith's Great Honor. — There is no account in history or revelation extant, where ever before both the Father and the Son appeared in the presence of mortal man in glory. (*Essentials in Church History*, pages 46-47)

The Mormon Apostle John A. Widtsoe made this statement:

It was an extraordinary experience. Never before had God the Father and God the Son appeared to mortal man. (*Joseph Smith—Seeker After Truth*, Salt Lake City, 1951, page 4)

John A. Widtsoe also stated:

The First Vision was a challenge to the religious vagaries of the day. It shattered many a false doctrine taught throughout the centuries, . . .

A few, and a very few, had conceived God to be a person, not merely a personage. This view had ordinarily been laid aside, since it made God more



nearly like man in body and powers. Men had held up their hands in horror at an anthropomorphic God, . . .

The First Vision clarified this whole matter. It set these philosophic guesses at rest. It answered the centuries' old query about the nature of God. The Father and the Son had appeared to Joseph as persons, like men on earth in form. They spoke to him as persons. . . .

From the early days of Christianity, the erroneous doctrine of the nature of God had led to other equally false conclusions. . . . Christian philosophers, departing from the simple truth in Christ's teachings, began to ask if there could be more than one God. Out of their thinking came the conception that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, the Godhead, were One, a unity. . . .

This false doctrine was laid low by the First Vision. Two personages, the Father and the Son, stood before Joseph. The Father asked the Son to deliver the message to the boy. There was no mingling of personalities in the vision. Each of the personages was an individual member of the Godhead. Each one separately took part in the vision. (*Joseph Smith—Seeker After Truth*, pages 5-7)

Actually, the fact that the first written account of the First Vision only mentioned one personage is consistent with what Joseph Smith believed about God at that time. The Book of Mormon, which was first published in 1830, taught that there was but one God:

And now Abinadi said unto them: I would that ye should understand that God himself shall come down among the children of men, and shall redeem his people. And because he dwelleth in flesh he shall be called the Son of God, and having subjected the flesh to the will of the Father, being the Father and the Son— . . . And thus the flesh becoming subject to the Spirit, or the Son to the Father, being one God, . . . (Book of Mormon, Mosiah 15:1, 2, 5)

The Book of Mormon tells of a visitation of the Father and the Son to the “brother of Jared.” The Father and the Son mentioned, however, are not two separate personages. Only one personage appears, and this personage says:

Behold, I am he who was prepared from the foundation of the world to redeem my people. Behold, I am Jesus Christ. I am the Father and the Son. In me shall all mankind have light, and that eternally, even they who shall believe on my name; and they shall become my sons and my daughters. (Book of Mormon, Ether 3:14)

The Book of Mormon clearly teaches that God the Father is a spirit. The first edition of the *Doctrine and Covenants*, likewise, contained a reference which stated that God was a Spirit:

. . . the Father being a personage of spirit, glory, and power, possessing all perfection and fullness, the Son, . . . a personage of tabernacle, . . . (*Doctrine and Covenants*, 1835 ed. page 53)

Since this statement was published in 1835, it would appear that Joseph Smith did not believe that God the Father had a body at the time he wrote his first account of the vision in the “wilderness.” Toward the end of his life, however, Joseph Smith changed his mind and decided that God was just an exalted man. In 1844 he stated:

First, God himself, who sits enthroned in yonder heavens, is a man like unto one of yourselves, that is the great secret . . . God himself; the Father of us all dwelt on an earth the same as Jesus Christ himself did, . . . you have got to learn how to be gods yourselves; . . . No man can learn you more than what I have told you. (*Times and Seasons*, Vol. 5, pages 613-614)

Since Joseph Smith had changed his mind concerning the Godhead, he evidently decided to change his story concerning the First Vision.

## Source of Confusion

In 1855 Brigham Young gave a sermon in which he denied that the Lord came to Joseph Smith in the First Vision:

But as it was in the days of our Savior, so was it in the advent of this new dispensation. It was not in accordance with the notions, traditions, and pre-conceived ideas of the American people. The messenger did not come to an eminent divine of any of the so called orthodoxy, he did not adopt their interpretations of the Holy Scriptures. The Lord did not come with the armies of heaven, in power and great glory, nor send His messengers panoplied with aught else than the truth of heaven, to communicate to the meek the lowly, and the youth of humble origin, the sincere enquirer after the knowledge of God. But he did send his angel to this same obscure person, Joseph Smith jun., who afterwards became a Prophet, Seer, and Revelator, and informed him that he should not join any of the religious sects of the day, for they were all wrong; that they were following the precepts of men instead of the Lord Jesus; . . . (*Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 2, page 171)

Many other confusing statements about the First Vision were made by Mormon leaders after Joseph Smith's death (see our *Case Against Mormonism*, Vol. 1, pages 119-128). Now that we have Joseph Smith's first dictated accounts we are able to understand why they were in such a state of confusion. Wesley P. Walters states:

. . . the shift from an angel to Christ, then to angels, and finally to two personages introduced such haziness that even the Mormon leaders appeared confused as to the nature of the story itself. (*Dialogue*, Spring 1969, page 73)

The Mormon writer Richard L. Bushman admits that members of the Mormon Church may not have understood that the Father and the Son appeared to Joseph Smith:

Until 1838, in accounts for non-Church members he called the beings in the first vision personages or angels, covering the fact that he claimed to see the Father and the Son. Only in the private narrations for his history written in 1831 and 1838 did he frankly say the Lord had come to him. As Mr. Walters rightly points out, some Church members in the early years may have been unaware of the actual identity of the heavenly visitors. (*Dialogue*, Spring 1969, page 84)

It is interesting to note that even Joseph Smith's own brother, William Smith, said that it was an angel that first appeared to him:

In 1822 and 1823, the people in our neighborhood were very much stirred up with regard to religious matters by the preaching of a Mr. Lane, an Elder of the Methodist Church, and celebrated throughout the country as a "great revival preacher." . . . Joseph, then about seventeen years of age, had become seriously inclined; . . .

At length he determined to call upon the Lord until he should get a manifestation from him. He accordingly went out into the woods and falling upon his knees called for a long time upon the Lord for wisdom and knowledge. While engaged in prayer a light appeared in the heavens, and descended until it rested upon the trees where he was. It appeared like fire. But to his great astonishment, did not burn the trees. An angel then appeared to him and conversed with him upon many things. He told him that none of the sects were right; but that if he was faithful in keeping the commandments he should receive, the (end of page 8) true way should be made known to him; . . .

The next day I was at work in the field together with Joseph and my eldest brother Alvin. Joseph looked pale and unwell, . . . and sat down by the fence, when the angel again appeared to him, . . . (*William Smith on Mormonism*, Lamoni, Iowa, 1883, as quoted in *A New Witness For Christ In America*, Francis W. Kirkham, Vol. 2, pages 414-415)

On June 8, 1884, William Smith stated:

It will be remembered that just before the angel appeared to Joseph, there was an unusual revival in the neighborhood. . . . My mother attended those meetings, and being much concerned about the spiritual welfare of the family, she persuaded them to attend the meetings. Finally my mother, one sister, my brothers Samuel and Hyrum became Presbyterians. Joseph and myself did not join; I had not sown all my wild oats. . . . it was at the suggestion of the Rev. M—, that my brother asked of God. He said, "Ask of God." . . . Accordingly he went and bowed in prayer to God. While he was engaged in prayer, he saw a pillar of fire descending. Saw it reach the top of the trees. He was overcome, became, unconscious, did not know how long he remained in this condition, but when he came to himself, the great light was about him, and he was told by the personage whom he saw descend with the light, not to join any of the churches. . . . You should remember Joseph was but about eighteen years old at this time, too young to be a deceiver. (*The Saints Herald*, Vol. 31, No. 40, page 643)

Richard L. Anderson, of Brigham Young University, makes this comment concerning William Smith's statements:

One cannot be certain that Joseph Smith told his vision of 1820 to young William—or that the boy would have been receptive to such a religious experience, . . . In 1823 Joseph stood before the family and probably recounted both experiences on the same occasion. It is likely that the two experiences merged in William's mind because he first heard them together. William relates all the elements of the visions described separately by his brother and mother, but he telescopes every detail into a single experience. (*Brigham Young University Studies*, Spring 1969, pages 399-400)

## An Evolving Story

J. Rueben Clark, who was a member of the First Presidency, made this statement:

No teacher who does not have a real testimony of the truth of the Gospel as revealed to and believed by the Latter-day Saints, and a testimony of the Sonship and Messiahship of Jesus, and of the divine mission of Joseph Smith—including in all its reality the First Vision—has any place in the Church school system. If there be any such, and I hope and pray there are none, he should at once resign; if the Commissioner knows of any such and he does not resign, the Commissioner should request his resignation. The First Presidency expect this pruning to be made. (*Improvement Era*, September 1938, as quoted in “The Social Psychological Basis of Mormon New-Orthodoxy,” Master’s thesis, Owen Kendall White, Jr., University of Utah, June 1967, page 162)

Thus we see that to be in good standing a Mormon must believe in Joseph Smith’s First Vision. David O. McKay, President of the Mormon Church, has stated that the First Vision is the very “foundation of this church.” Paul R. Cheesman has stated that the Mormon Church “must stand or fall on the authenticity of the First Vision and the appearance of the Angel Moroni.” John A. Widtsoe stated:

The story of the First Vision need only to be studied from original sources to assure the seeker not only of its truth, but also of the time of its occurrence. (*Joseph Smith-Seeker After Truth*, page 26)

When we examine the original sources, however, we find that the First Vision story rests upon a very sandy foundation.

Dr. Hugh Nibley, of the Brigham Young University, once criticized anti-Mormon writers for omitting the words “This is my beloved Son” when giving Joseph Smith’s story. If Hugh Nibley had read Joseph Smith’s first account of the vision, perhaps he would not have been so eager to criticize others, for Joseph Smith not only omitted the “all-important” words, but he also left God the Father completely out of the vision.

The second account by Joseph Smith also did not contain the “all-important” words; in fact, it contained words which seem to show that it was not the Father and the Son.

An examination of the first published history of the church makes matters even worse, for it does not even mention the First Vision. Moreover, Oliver Cowdery claimed that in 1823 Joseph Smith did not even know “if a supreme being did exist.” Certainly, if Joseph Smith had seen the Father and the Son in 1820, he would know in 1823 that a Supreme Being did exist!

Besides all this, falsification has been found in the *History of the Church*. We have found that Joseph Smith told Erastus Holmes about his “first visitation of angels,” but later Mormon historians have altered this to read: “my first vision.”

We have also found that Joseph Smith’s brief history which he related to “Joshua the Jewish Minister” (more than 800 words) has been deleted without any indication.

How can anyone believe in the authenticity of Joseph Smith’s First Vision when there is so much evidence against it?

Those who argue that the “strange” accounts of the first vision can be harmonized with Joseph Smith’s printed account might do well to read a speech given by S. Dilworth Young, of the First Council of the Seventy. This speech was given sometime before the “strange” accounts became known to the public. We quote the following from this speech:

I cannot remember the time when I have not heard the story, . . . concerning the coming of the Father and the Son to the Prophet Joseph Smith. . . .

I am concerned however with one item which has recently been called to my attention on this matter. There appears to be going about our communities some writing to the effect that the Prophet Joseph Smith evolved his doctrine from what might have been a vision, in which he is supposed to have said that he saw an angel, instead of the Father and Son. According to this theory, by the time he was inspired to write the occurrence in 1838, he had come to the conclusion that there were two beings.

This rather shocked me. I can see no reason why the Prophet, with his brilliant mind, would have failed to remember in sharp relief every detail of that eventful day. I can remember quite vividly that in 1915 I had a mere dream, and while the dream was prophetic in its nature, it was not startling. It has been long since fulfilled, but I can remember every detail of it as sharply and clearly as though it had happened yesterday. How then could any man conceive that the Prophet, receiving such a vision as he received, would not remember it and would fail to write it clearly, distinctly, and accurately? (*Improvement Era*, June 1957, page 436)

Now that we have the “strange” accounts we find that the First Vision story did evolve. The story was changed from one personage to two, and Joseph Smith once referred to the vision as a “visitation of Angels.”

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## PART TWO

### The Revival

Joseph Smith claimed that just before he received his First Vision there was a great revival in his neighborhood:

Some time in the second year after our removal to Manchester, there was in the place where we lived an unusual excitement on the subject of religion. 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 amongst the people, . . .

I was at this time in my fifteenth year. My father's family was proselyted to the Presbyterian faith, and four of them joined that church, namely, my mother Lucy, my brothers Hyrum, Samuel, Harrisen, and my sister Sophronia.

During this time of great excitement my mind was called up to serious reflection . . . So in accordance with this my determination, to ask of God, 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. (*Times and Seasons*, Vol. 3, pages 727-728)

In 1967 the Utah Christian Tract Society published Wesley P. Walters' study, *New Light on Mormon Origins From The Palmyra (N.Y.) Revival*. In the forward to this work, Mr. Walters states:

Mormons account for the origin of their movement by quoting from a narrative written by their prophet Joseph Smith, Jr. in 1838. In this account he claims that a revival broke out in the Palmyra, New York area in 1820 . . .

Information which we have recently uncovered conclusively proves that the revival did not occur until the fall of 1824 and that no revival occurred between 1819 and 1823 in the Palmyra vicinity.

On pages 5, 8, 11 and 12 of the same pamphlet we find these statements by Wesley Walters:

However, the point at which one might most conclusively test the accuracy of Smith's story has never been adequately explored. A vision, by its inward, personal nature, does not lend itself to historical investigation. A revival is a different matter, especially one such as Joseph Smith describes, in which "great

multitudes” were said to have joined the various churches involved. Such a revival does not pass from the scene without leaving some traces in the records and publications of the period. In this study we wish to show by the contemporary records that the revival, which Smith claimed occurred in 1820, did not occur until the fall of 1824. We also show that in 1820 there was no revival in any of the churches in Palmyra or its vicinity. In short, our investigation shows that the statement of Joseph Smith, Jr. can not be true when he claims that he was stirred up by an 1820 revival to make his inquiry in the grove near his home.

....  
An even more surprising confirmation that this revival occurred in 1824 and not in 1820 has just recently come to light. While searching through some dusty volumes of early Methodist literature at a near-by Methodist college, imagine our surprise and elation when we stumbled upon Rev. George Lane’s own personal account of the Palmyra revival. It was written, not at some years distance from the event as the Mormon accounts all were, but while the revival was still in progress and was printed a few months later. Lane’s account gives us not only the year, 1824, but even the month and date. . . .

By September 1825 the results of the revival for Palmyra had become a matter of record. The Presbyterian church reported 99 admitted on examination and the Baptist had received 94 by baptism, while the Methodist circuit showed an increase of 208.

....  
When we turn to the year 1820, however, the “great multitudes” are conspicuously missing. The Presbyterian Church in Palmyra certainly experienced no awakening that year. Rev. James Hotchkiss’s history records revivals for that church as occurring in the years 1817, 1824, 1829, etc., but nothing for the year 1820. The records of Presbytery and Synod give the same picture. . . . Since these reports always rejoice at any sign of a revival in the churches, it is inconceivable that a great awakening had occurred in their Palmyra congregation and gone completely unnoticed.

The Baptist Church records also show clearly that they had no revival in 1820, for the Palmyra congregation gained only 5 by baptism, while the neighboring Baptist churches of Lyons, Canandaigua and Farmington showed net losses of 4, 5 and 9 respectively. . . .

The Methodist figures, though referring to the entire circuit, give the same results, for they show net losses of 23 for 1819, 6 for 1820 and 40 for 1821. This hardly fits Joseph Smith’s description of “great multitudes” being added to the churches of the area. In fact, the Mormon Prophet could hardly have picked a poorer year in which to place his revival, so far as the Methodists were concerned. (*New Light On Mormon Origins*, pages 5, 8, 11, 12)

Mormon scholars became very concerned when they saw Wesley P. Walters’ study. They were so disturbed, in fact, that a team was sent back east to do research concerning the First Vision and other matters dealing with the history of the Mormon Church in New York. James B. Allen and Leonard J. Arrington state:

In the fall of 1967 a small group of Mormon historians met in Salt Lake City to discuss the problems involved in writing the history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. They were concerned with the history of the Church and its background in New York from 1820 to 1830, . . .

The five men formed themselves into an organization called "Mormon Origins in New York," with Truman G. Madsen, director of the Institute of Mormon Studies at Brigham Young University, as chairman or director. (*Brigham Young University Studies*, Spring 1969, page 241)

Richard L. Bushman, who was on the committee headed by Truman G. Madsen, made these interesting statements regarding Mr. Walters' work:

The Reverend Mr. Walters' article on the first vision raised quite a stir among Mormon scholars when an early version circulated about a year and a half ago. . . . Mr. Walters' purpose, like that of many of his predecessors, was to discredit Joseph Smith's account of the first vision and all that depended on it. But the style of his attack was both refreshing and disconcerting. In the first place, it was free of the obvious rancor characteristic of anti-Mormon writers . . . They cannot resist twisting the knife. Mr. Walters, by contrast, sticks to his facts. . . .

The article also set us back because Mr. Walters took an entirely new track and followed it with admirable care. . . . he . . . concentrated on a brand-new question: Were there revivals in 1819-20 in the vicinity of Palmyra as Joseph said? Everyone up until now had assumed that of course there were. Walters said no, and the sources of his answer were impressive. They stood apart from the biased materials on which most anti-Mormon work is based. They were contemporaneous with the event, and they were right to the point. Our consternation was a genuine compliment to the quality of Mr. Walters' work.

While Mr. Walters has put us on the spot for the moment, in the long run Mormon scholarship will benefit from his attack. Not only was there an immediate effort to answer the question of an 1819 revival, but Mormon historians asked themselves how many other questions about our early history remain unasked as well as unanswered. Not long after we saw his essay, a committee on "Mormon History in New York" sent a group of scholars east for special research. The results of the first year's efforts will soon be published in *Brigham Young University Studies*, and presumably like investigations will continue. Without wholly intending it, Mr. Walters may have done as much to advance the cause of Mormon history within the Church as anyone in recent years.

Meanwhile, of course, we have to assess the damage he has done to Joseph's story of the first vision. (*Dialogue*, Spring 1969, pages 82-83)

Although the scholars who went east "scoured libraries, studied newspapers, and sought to find private individuals who might uncover hitherto unknown source materials" (*Brigham Young University Studies*, Spring 1969, page 242) they were unable to find evidence of a revival in Palmyra in 1820. In their article, "Mormon Origins in New York," James B. Allen and Leonard J. Arrington report:

What evidence do we have, other than the word of Joseph Smith, that there was "an unusual excitement on the subject of religion" in the vicinity of Palmyra in 1820? Up to this point little such evidence has been uncovered, and Walters challenged the story in the article referred to above. Milton Backman, however, has discovered interesting new material which he presents in his important article on the historical setting of the First Vision. (*Brigham Young University Studies*, Spring 1969, page 272)



Richard L. Anderson, of the Brigham Young University, makes some rather strange statements with regard to Joseph Smith's account of the revival:

If years of religious activity are summarized in the short sentences of abbreviated accounts, did Joseph Smith's 1838 history really intend to portray all revival events as happening just before his vision? In that narrative the Prophet identifies the "unusual excitement" as beginning "in the second year after our removal to Manchester," but the outcome may move considerably beyond this sequence. Beginning in the Smith's area, revival spread through "that region of country," then to the "whole district of country." Even though Joseph alludes to himself as fifteen then, it is possible that "this time of great excitement" may refer to the entire period of revivals in his youth, with special reference to excesses, irrespective of chronology. . . . There is no reason why Joseph Smith might not have viewed the intense 1824-25 Palmyra revivals as part of a period beginning earlier than his vision. (*Brigham Young University Studies*, Spring 1969, pages 375-376)

On page 374 of the same article, Dr. Anderson states:

First, revivals are not described in any other account but the 1838 history. Apparently the Prophet was not primarily concerned with them, for he did not constantly emphasize them as central to his personal experience.

While it is true that the "strange" account and the account Joseph Smith gave to Joshua do not mention a revival, the published account does, and this is the one which the Mormon people accept as scripture.

In his article, "Awakenings in the Burned-over District: New Light on the Historical Setting of the First Vision," Milton V. Backman, Jr., seems unable to provide evidence that there was a revival in Palmyra. He indicates, however, that Joseph Smith may have heard or read of revivals in other portions of the state:

Although membership records provide one indication of religious activity in a community, occasionally an unusual religious excitement occurred in a neighborhood without resulting in an immediate increase in church membership. Periodically, there was a renewal of religious fervor among church members. Sometimes many seekers were converted to the basic teachings of Christianity but postponed uniting with one of the religious societies located near their homes, and some converts never discovered what they regarded as God's true church. Some "outpourings of the Spirit" have vanished from mankind's memory because a contemporary failed to record the "extension of the power of godliness" or because the primary source was not preserved.

. . . A careful reading of the Prophet's account indicates that the great increase in membership occurred in "the whole district of country," meaning possibly western New York or eastern western New York and not necessarily Palmyra, Farmington, or just the neighborhood where he lives. Joseph undoubtedly learned that many revivals were occurring in New York in 1819 and 1820. Accounts of the most impressive and productive religious quickenings were widely circulated by preachers, traveling merchants and newspapers. In the summer and early fall of 1820, for example, descriptive accounts of awakenings occur ring in central

and upstate New York were published in the *Palmyra Register*, a paper which according to Orsamus Turner the Smith family obtained regularly. The June 7, 1820, issue carried a brief report of “Great Revivals in Religion” in the eastern part of the state. This revival was more fully reported on in a later issue. (*Brigham Young University Studies*, Spring 1969, pages 315-316)

Dr. Backman cites three issues of the *Palmyra Register*—i.e., June 7, 1820; August 16, 1820; and September 13, 1820. The reader will note that these are the same issues that we cited in *The Case Against Mormonism*, Vol. I, page 113:

In briefly looking over the *Palmyra Register* we have found no evidence of a revival in Palmyra in 1820. The issue for June 7, 1820 tells of a revival in the towns of Stillwater, Malta, Ballston, Schenectady, Amsterdam and Galway, but no mention is made of Palmyra or Manchester. The issue for August 16, 1820 tells of a revival in Homer, New York, but again there is no mention of a local revival. The issue of September 13, 1820 also speaks of revivals in cities in New York, but there is no mention of any revivals in Palmyra or Manchester.

Wesley P. Walters cites one other reference, *Palmyra Register*, October 4, 1820, but it is concerning a revival in Bloominggrove, New York.

We feel that it is very significant that the Mormon research team has been unable to find any reference to a local revival in the *Palmyra Register*. The fact that the *Palmyra Register* devoted space to revivals that occurred in other parts of the state and did not mention any local revival seems to prove that there was no revival in Palmyra. Richard L. Bushman makes these comments concerning this matter:

Mr. Walters’ main argument is that no revival occurred in Palmyra itself. But even that fact cannot be established absolutely. It is a negative claim and depends on negative evidence, which is always tenuous. Mr. Walters relies on the absence of revival reports, but just because someone failed to write a report of an event does not mean it did not occur. . . . lots of things happen that are never recorded. “An unusual excitement on the subject of religion,” all that Joseph claims for the place where he lived (the “great multitudes” were joining the churches in “the whole district of country”), might have been passed over in the national religious press covering as it did countless small towns. The news included in the Palmyra paper depended on the taste and inclinations of the editor. We know that he failed to report a Methodist camp meeting in June 1820 because a report of the death of a local citizen incidentally mentioned his attendance at a camp meeting the day before his death. The point is that although we think a revival should have been recorded, there are many reasons why it could have been missed. We cannot know for sure that an event did not occur unless reliable witnesses on the scene say no, and thus far Mr. Walters has found none such to testify. (*Dialogue*, Spring 1969, page 87)

Notice that Professor Bushman states that the editor of the *Palmyra Register* failed to report a “Methodist camp meeting.” Actually, there was no reason for the newspaper to report an ordinary camp meeting. While a revival could start at a camp meeting, the fact that one was held does not mean there was a revival. Milton V. Backman, Jr., of the Brigham Young University, admits that camp meetings among the Methodists were a common thing in Joseph Smith’s day:

Since there were no Methodist meetinghouses in the towns of Palmyra and Farmington prior to 1823, Methodists residing in the neighborhood where Joseph lived worshipped in the homes of the settlers, in school buildings, and in and near the beautiful virgin groves. . . .

One of the most effective missionary programs adopted by the Methodists to promulgate their faith was the camp meeting. . . . the Methodists in western New York conducted more camp meetings in the early nineteenth century than did members of any other denomination. These meetings were usually held on the edge of a beautiful grove of trees or in a small clearing in the midst of a forest. . . .

In the neighborhood where Joseph lived, camp meetings and other services conducted by Methodists were held so frequently at the time of the First Vision that notices of such gatherings seldom appeared in the local newspapers except when an unusual event occurred in connection with a particular meeting. In June 1820, the *Palmyra Register* reported on a Methodist camp meeting in the vicinity of Palmyra because an Irishman, James Couser, died the day after attending the gathering at which he became intoxicated. (*Brigham Young University Studies*, Spring 1969, pages 305, 306, 309)

That camp meetings were held in Palmyra really proves nothing, and the fact that a man died after getting drunk at a camp meeting could hardly be used as evidence of a revival. It would appear, then, that the Mormon research team has found no evidence of a revival in Palmyra.

Richard L. Bushman states that "Mr. Walters relies on the absence of reports in newspapers and general histories to reach his conclusion of no revivals" (*Dialogue*, Spring 1969, pages 89-90). Wesley P. Walters, however, shows that the denominational magazines would have mentioned a revival if one had actually occurred:

Another significant lack of information concerning an 1820 revival lies in the area of the religious press. The denominational magazines of that day were full of reports of revivals, some even devoting separate sections to them. These publications carried more than a dozen glowing reports of the revival that occurred at Palmyra in the winter of 1816-17. Likewise, the 1824-25 revival is covered in a number of reports. These magazines, however, while busily engaged in reporting revivals during the 1819 to 1821 period, contain not a single mention of any revival taking place in the Palmyra area during this time. It is unbelievable that every one of the denominations which Joseph Smith depicts as affected by an 1820 revival could have completely overlooked the event. Even the Palmyra newspaper, while reporting revivals at several places in the state, has no mention whatever of any revival in Palmyra or vicinity either in 1819 or 1820. The only reasonable explanation for this massive silence is that no revival occurred in the Palmyra area in 1820. (*Dialogue*, Spring 1969, page 67)

Richard Bushman claims that Mr. Walters is judging by a wrong standard:

In assessing Mr. Walters' second line of reasoning, the inferior size of the 1819-20 revivals, two considerations must be kept in mind. The first is that the revivals of 1824 were not the standard for people in 1819. In his article,

Mr. Walters tells us first of the hundreds converted in the later years and then goes back to 1819 to show how insipid by comparison. . . . Without knowing anything greater, did the excitement of 1819 strike him as unusual? Did the reports of conversions in the surrounding area sound like great multitudes joining the churches? Remember that he was just developing personal religious concerns and, judging by the 1831-32 narrative of the first vision, was sensitive to religious sincerity and hypocrisy. Would reports of awakenings and conversions, however modest by comparison to later revivals, have registered with this sensitized man as unusual and great? (*Dialogue*, Spring 1969, page 88)

In rebuttal Mr. Walters makes this statement:

. . . he mistakenly suggests that “the revivals of 1824 were not the standard for the people in 1819.” Actually, the Palmyra Presbyterian Church received more converts in their 1817 revival (“126 have been hopefully born again, and 106 added”) than they did in the 1824 revival (99 added). Most of the people who lived through this 1817 revival were still living in 1819 and in 1824, Joseph’s own family to name just one example. (*Dialogue*, Spring 1969, pages 95-96)

## Lane And Stockton

According to the first history of the church published in the *Messenger and Advocate*, in 1834-35, a Methodist minister by the name of Lane participated in the revival in Palmyra:

One Mr. Lane, a presiding Elder of the Methodist church, visited Palmyra, and vicinity. . . . 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. (*Messenger and Advocate*, Vol. 1, page 42, December 1834)

The Mormon historian B. H. Roberts claimed that both Rev. Lane and Rev. Stockton were present at the revival, which he claims occurred in the spring of 1820:

In the spring of 1820 the ministers of the several churches in and about Palmyra decided upon a “union revival,” in order to “convert the unconverted.” The Presbyterians, Methodists and Baptists were the sects represented, and the Reverend Mr. Stockton of the Presbyterian church was the leading spirit of the movement, and chairman of the meetings. . . . The Reverend Mr. Stockton, however, insisted that the work done was largely Presbyterian work as he had been a dominating influence in the movement, and presided at the meetings. The Reverend Mr. Lane of the Methodist church preached a sermon on the subject, “What church shall I join?” He quoted the golden text of James --

The text made a deep impression on the mind of the Prophet. (*A Comprehensive History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, B. H. Roberts, 1930, Vol. 1, pages 51-53)

Wesley P. Walters shows that this could not have occurred in 1820 as B. H. Roberts maintained:

The records, however, of both the Presbyterian and Methodist churches, to which Mr. Stockton and Mr. Lane respectively belonged, make it clear that neither of these men were assigned to the Paymyra [*sic*] area until 1824. Rev. Benjamin B. Stockton from March 4, 1818 until June 30, 1822 was serving as pastor of the church at Skaneateles, N.Y. While he did visit Palmyra for a speech to the youth missionary society in October 1822, the Palmyra newspaper still describes him as "Rev. Stockton of Skaneateles." The earliest contemporary reference to his ministering in the Palmyra area is in connection with a wedding November 26, 1823, just a week after Alvin Smith's death. Following this date there are several references to his performing some service there, but he was not installed as pastor of the Presbyterian Church until February 18, 1824. It is in this latter year, 1824, that Rev. James Hotchkiss, in cataloging the revivals that occurred in the churches of Geneva Presbytery, writes, under the heading of the Palmyra church, that a "copious shower of grace passed over this region in 1824, under the labors of Mr. Stockton, and a large number were gathered into the church, some of whom are now pillars in Christ's house."

In the summer of 1819 Rev. Lane, whom Mormon writers have correctly identified as Rev. George Lane, was assigned to serve the Susquehanna District in central Pennsylvania, over 150 miles from Palmyra. He served this area for 5 years and not until July of 1824 did he receive an appointment to serve as Presiding Elder of the Ontario District in which Palmyra is located. This post he held only until January of 1825 when ill health in his family forced him to leave the ministry for a while. Any revival, therefore, in which both Lane and Stockton shared, as the accounts of Oliver Cowdery and William Smith both indicate, has to fall in the latter half of the year 1824, and not in the year 1820. (*New Light on Mormon Origins from the Palmyra (N.Y.) Revival*, Wesley P. Walters, 1967, pages 7-8)

The Mormon writer Larry C. Porter has made a study concerning Rev. George Lane. His research tends to confirm Wesley Walters' study:

For eight days, July 1, 1819 to July 8, 1819, George Lane was in attendance at the annual Genesee Conference at Vienna, New York (now Phelps), some fifteen miles southeast of the Smith farm at Manchester. . . .

From July 1819 to July 1823, Lane served as supervising elder of the Susquehanna District. During the interval from July 1823 to July 1824, his appointment was the Wyoming circuit. In July 1824 he was once more assigned as a presiding elder, this time, however, to the Ontario District. . . . For an entire year, then, July 1824 to July 1825, Lane presided over the district within the confines of which the Smith family resided (Manchester was probably on the Ontario circuit). (*Brigham Young University Studies*, Spring 1969, pages 335-336)

The Mormon writers James B. Allen and Leonard J. Arrington frankly admit that the Mormon historian B. H. Roberts was in error, but they feel there is a "possibility" that Lane passed through the vicinity of Palmyra:

Are we Mormons willing to admit that some of our writers have made mistakes in trying to reconcile conflicting accounts of Joseph Smith's early experience? A case in point is B. H. Roberts' description of the setting for Joseph Smith's First Vision. Roberts based his conclusion upon an attempted correlation

of the accounts of Joseph Smith, William Smith, and Oliver Cowdery. He said that it was in 1820 that a certain Reverend Lane so affected Joseph Smith by his preaching that he was induced to utter the prayer which resulted in that First Vision. . . . It is probable that Roberts came to his conclusion because the revival described by Cowdery seemed similar to the 1820 religious excitement later described by Joseph Smith. Clearing up the confusion of dates does not seem as important here as a frank recognition that there is such confusion. The inconsistencies in early sources do not affect the credibility of Joseph Smith, but our failure to discuss them perpetuates the myth that Mormon writers are not willing “to face the facts.”

. . . Larry Porter, in his fine essay in this issue, effectively challenges some of Walters’ inferences by showing the possibility that Lane may have passed through the Palmyra vicinity in 1820. But more research is needed before a final conclusion can be reached. (*Brigham Young University Studies*, Spring 1969, pages 271-272)

Wesley P. Walters makes this statement concerning this matter:

Except for Elder Lane’s brief presence at the 1819 meeting that appointed him to serve in Pennsylvania, there seems to be no evidence whatever that he even came near the Palmyra area during the 1819-20 period. Since the assigned fields of labor, for both Lane and Stockton, were so far from Palmyra, any revival in which both of these men shared must fall in the latter half of the year 1824, and not in the year 1820. (*Dialogue*, Spring 1969, pages 63-64)

The Mormon writer Richard L. Anderson seems to be willing to concede that Lane did not minister in Palmyra in 1820:

As shown by Larry Porter’s accompanying article, this Methodist leader had no Palmyra ministry until several years after 1819-20. (*Brigham Young University Studies*, Spring 1969, page 398)

Mormon writers now find themselves in an embarrassing position regarding Reverend Lane. Before Walters’ work appeared they had tried to show that Lane was involved in the revival. Hyrum Andrus, for instance, made this statement:

It was during this contest that a Methodist minister, Reverend Lane, preached a sermon on “What church shall I join?” He admonished the people to ask God, using the text, “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.” . . . The first person to whom he related his vision, outside of the Smith family, was probably the before-mentioned Reverend Lane. (*Joseph Smith, the Man and the Seer*, Salt Lake City, 1965, pages 65, 67)

The Mormon historian B. H. Roberts claimed that “Reverend Mr. Lane” was “at least the most active minister of the Methodist persuasion in the revival” and that it was “he who had preached the sermon on ‘What church shall I join,’ and had used James 1:5 as his text” (*Comprehensive History of the Church*, Vol. 1, page 56, footnote 10). The Mormon Apostle John A. Widtsoe emphatically maintained that George Lane was ministering in Palmyra when Joseph Smith had his First Vision:

The preacher to whom he told his story was Reverend George Lane, who was the leader of the Palmyra revival and who had quoted the saying from James, which had so deeply affected the lad.

It is only reasonable to suppose that Reverend Lane told others of Joseph's story. (*Joseph Smith—Seeker After Truth*, Salt Lake City, 1951, pages 16-17)

On page 22 of the same book, the Apostle Widtsoe claimed that Oliver Cowdery confirmed the date of Reverend Lane's work in Palmyra:

Oliver Cowdery in his letters confirms the story of Reverend Lane and the date of his work in Palmyra.

Actually, Oliver Cowdery did not confirm the date as 1820. Instead, he insisted that the correct date should be 1823:

You will recollect that I mentioned the time of a religious excitement, in Palmyra and vicinity to have been in the 15th year of our brother J. Smith Jr's. age—that was an error in the type—it should have been in the 17th. —You will please remember this correction, as it will be necessary for the full understanding of what will follow in time. This would bring the date down to the year 1823. (*Messenger and Advocate*, Vol. 1, page 78)

In footnote 10 on page 22 of his book, the Apostle Widtsoe stated:

Reverend Lane himself confirms the dates of the revival. It was in 1820, not 1823.

Notice that John A. Widtsoe gives no source for this statement. Now that Mormon writers are beginning to admit that Lane "had no Palmyra ministry until several years after 1819-20" (*Brigham Young University Studies*, Spring 1969, page 398), they are casting a shadow of doubt upon the honesty of the Apostle Widtsoe. When Wesley P. Walters wrote the LDS Church Historian's Office asking for documentation of the Apostle Widtsoe's statement, he received a letter from Lauritz G. Petersen, Assistant Librarian. In this letter Lauritz Petersen stated:

The letter that you sent to Mr. Earl Olson was handed to me to answer. I checked all the footnotes or found the footno[t]es for Mr. Widtsoe's book on Joseph Smith.

The reference made by Mr. Widtsoe on page 22, n. 10 could not be verified. I asked Mr. Widtsoe not to insert it in the book, but he did anyway. (Letter from Lauritz G. Petersen, Assist. Church Librarian, to Wesley P. Walters, December 7, 1966)

## **Moving the Revival**

Before Mr. Walters' study appeared Mormon writers taught that the revival occurred right in Palmyra, but since the Mormon research team has been unable to find evidence of a revival in Palmyra Mormon apologists are now beginning to forsake Palmyra and search elsewhere for a revival. Lauritz G. Petersen, Research Supervisor at the Church Historian's Office, made these statements in a letter dated November 1, 1968:

Now let me ask you a question. Where was the revival? In Palmyra? He doesn't mention a revival at all. He mentions an unusual excitement [*sic*] in the "Whole district of country." Could an excitement [*sic*] be caused by a revival somewhere near the area? He doesn't mention being to a revival. If there was a revival somewhere outside of Palmyra and the news of it had already excited the village, would or could it be possible that the Smith family have travelled there to sell root beer and cakes? (Letter from Lauritz G. Petersen, November 1, 1968)

Although it is true that Joseph Smith does not use the word "Palmyra," his description makes it very clear that he was referring to this area. He states that there "was in the place where we lived an unusual excitement on the subject of religion" (*History of the Church*, Vol. 1, page 2). Wesley P. Walters explains that the Smiths lived in the vicinity of Palmyra, though they were in the Manchester township:

Although the Smiths lived just across the county line in Manchester township, they really were a part of the Palmyra vicinity, living only two miles from the center of that village, while they were over five miles from the village of Manchester. (*Dialogue*, Spring 1969, page 80)

In 1843 Joseph Smith told a reporter that the revival occurred right in his "neighborhood":

There was a reformation among the different religious denominations in the neighborhood where I lived, and I became serious, and was desirous to know what church to join. (*New York Spectator*, September 23, 1843, as quoted in *Joseph Smith the Prophet*, by Preston Nibley, pages 30-31)

Since Joseph Smith said that the revival occurred in "the neighborhood where I lived," we feel that he must have been referring to Palmyra. Furthermore, the first printed "history of the rise of the church" published in the *Messenger and Advocate*—the official church organ—in 1834-35 plainly stated that the revival was in "Palmyra, and vicinity" (*Messenger and Advocate*, Vol. 1, page 42). According to the Mormon historian, Joseph Fielding Smith, this history was "written at the Prophet's request and under his personal supervision." (*Doctrines of Salvation*, Vol. 3, page 236) The Mormon historian, B. H. Roberts definitely stated that the revival was in "Palmyra" (*Comprehensive History of the Church*, Vol. 1, page 35). On page 51 of the same volume Mr. Roberts claims that the "churches in and about Palmyra decided upon a 'union revival,' in order to 'convert the unconverted.'"

Since Mormon apologists have been unable to prove that the revival took place in Palmyra, they have tried to find reasons why Joseph Smith would have been in another city. Notice that Lauritz Petersen suggested that the Smith family "may have travelled" to another area to sell root beer and cakes. It is interesting to note that the Mormon historian B. H. Roberts has condemned this idea. In fact, he claimed that it was a "falsehood" invented by the enemies of the church:

The second charge against the Smiths is that while at Palmyra "they opened a small shop" and sold cakes, pies, root beer and the like; and that on certain public occasions the elder Smith sold such wares in the streets from a handcart. . . . Inquiry among descendants of the Smith family, and wide knowledge of



that which is published in relation to them, besides access to letters and papers and personal journals that have never been published, bearing upon their lives and character, fails to disclose any scrap of evidence that the Smiths at Palmyra or elsewhere ever engaged in or followed any such petty employment as is here described; . . . in all the fifteen separate and independent affidavits collected in Palmyra in 1833 by Hurlburt, and in the affidavit signed conjointly by 68 people of Palmyra and vicinity, derogatory to the Smiths, not a syllable is uttered respecting the “cake and beer shop,” or the “peddling” of such wares in the street on public occasions mentioned with such pomp of circumstance by Pomeroy Tucker. The silence of all the affidavits collected in 1833, and of all the anti-“Mormon” writers up to Tucker in 1867, throws strong suspicions of improbability upon his pretended statement of fact. Malice invented the story, and sectarian prejudice accepted the falsehood for truth. (*Comprehensive History of the Church*, Vol. 1, pages 44-46)

Although B. H. Roberts called this story a “falsehood,” a number of Mormon writers have now turned to it in order to defend the First Vision. Richard L. Anderson, of the Brigham Young University, made this statement:

Tucker is particular with regard to the Smiths’ arrival in 1816 and removal to the pioneer homestead in Manchester in 1818, and he has a fairly accurate knowledge of their physical and financial arrangements, evidently quite independent of the already published details of Lucy Smith. There is no reason to question the picture of the refreshment shop of the Smiths in Palmyra, which catered to holiday crowds. Even after the move to Manchester, there was “the continued business of peddling cake and beer in the village on days of public doings.” Tucker remembers Joseph in particular “as a clerk” in such selling. This activity, somewhat attested in contemporary sources, provides a practical reason for camp meeting attendance. . . . It appears to be the Smiths’ business and Joseph’s special charge to be present at such public events in the vicinity. (*Brigham Young University Studies*, Spring 1969, page 383)

The Mormon writer Richard L. Bushman also accepts this story:

Was everything beyond Palmyra village alien territory, news of which they did not associate with their own place? Or did their psychological environs extend farther? Remember that they sold cakes and beer at gatherings of various sorts and that the boys had to range about for work to supplement their scanty farm income. Joseph went to Pennsylvania for employment when he was in his early twenties. If the older sons followed a similar pattern, the Smith family would keep up with events over a rather broad territory. Fifteen or twenty miles would not take them into foreign parts. All this must be taken into account when judging dimensions of the district they called their own. (*Dialogue*, Spring 1969, pages 87-88)

Since Reverend Lane was present at Conference meetings held in Vienna (now known as Phelps) in July, 1819, Mormon writers are now suggesting that Joseph Smith may have attended meetings held in Vienna. The Mormon writer Larry C. Porter states:

Whether or not Joseph attended some of these meetings cannot be determined from any records presently available, but the opportunity cannot

be denied—if only to sell confectioneries. To think that the Smiths would not have heard of the gathering is hardly believable. (*Brigham Young University Studies*, Spring 1969, page 330)

Milton V. Backman, Jr., of the BYU, states:

It is not unreasonable, therefore, to assume that Joseph Smith might have attended meetings convoked by ministers of this conference held immediately before, during, or shortly after the deliberations which took place in Phelps; and it might have been in connection with this event that Joseph Smith turned his attention to organized religion.

A contemporary of Joseph Smith, Orsamus Turner, concluded that the Mormon Prophet became excited about religion while he was attending a camp meeting held “away down in the woods, on the Vienna road,” a road that led from Phelps village. This report of Joseph’s catching a “spark of Methodist fire” while attending a camp meeting near Phelps, has been repeated by several town and county historians and interpreted as a meeting held in and near Phelps and in Oaks Corners, a small community located southeast of Phelps village in the town of Phelps. (*Brigham Young University Studies*, Spring 1969, pages 308-309)

Wesley P. Walters shows that the reference about Joseph Smith “catching a spark of Methodism in the camp meeting away down in the woods on the Vienna road” probably applies to a Methodist camp ground which was located on the Vienna road just out of Palmyra and not to a camp meeting held in the town of Vienna:

... a passing reference to Joseph’s “catching a spark of Methodism in the camp meeting away down in the woods on the Vienna road is assumed to show that he actually attended revival meetings at Vienna, some fifteen miles from his home. The most natural reference of this quotation, however, is to the Methodist camp grounds a mile from Palmyra, in the wooded area adjoining the Methodist chapel on the Vienna road. (*Dialogue*, Spring 1969, page 69)

It is interesting to note that the Mormon writer Willard Bean accepted the reference to “the Vienna road,” but he said nothing about Joseph going to the town of Vienna: “But while the family resided in the village, Joseph had attended the Methodist meetings in the grove on Vienna Street, and joined a class of boy probationers, . . .” (*A.B.C. History of Palmyra and the Beginning of “Mormonism,”* Palmyra, N.Y., 1938, page 23).

Wesley Walters states that the village of Vienna was “some fifteen miles from the Smith home.” The Mormon writer Larry C. Porter states that Rev. Lane was at Vienna and that this placed him “within a fifteen mile vicinity of Manchester . . .” (*Brigham Young University Studies*, Spring 1969, page 330). Richard L. Anderson states that the Vienna road runs “diagonally between Palmyra and Vienna (now Phelps), about a dozen air miles away” (*Brigham Young University Studies*, Spring 1969, page 379). Richard L. Bushman, however, states that Vienna was “next door to Palmyra” (*Dialogue*, Spring 1969, page 89). Wesley P. Walters makes this statement in rebuttal:

To help enlarge Smith’s “psychological environs” Dr. Bushman tries psychologically reducing the distances involved, speaking of Oaks Corners (18 miles from the Smith home) and Vienna (15 mi.) as “next door,” Junius

(25 mi.) as “just east of Vienna,” and the Lyons circuit, the closest point of which was about 10 miles away, as “very close to the Smith house.” In a day when most travel was by foot or by horse and wagon, when experiments with canal transportation carried 100 persons 4 miles an hour, equal to a stage in bad weather (*Palmyra Register*, Nov. 5, 1819, II, 3), it is certainly not accurate to speak of towns 15 miles or farther away as “next door.” . . . For example, if someone said, “There was a bank failure in the place where we lived and I lost all my money,” who would conclude he was talking about a bank in a town 25 miles away, especially if there was a bank in the very town where he lived? This is the character of Joseph’s story. The excitement was near enough to his home for him to feel the pressure to join the local Methodist Church, just as members of his family had joined the local Presbyterian Church. It was local enough that Smith could observe the Methodists, Baptists and Presbyterians scrambling for converts, take note of the “great love” the converts “expressed at the time of their conversion,” and see them “file off, some to one party, and some to another.” . . . It was local enough that he could claim to have personally told his vision story to the same minister who had shared in the awakening. It was right there “among the different religious denominations in the neighborhood where I lived,” as he says elsewhere. That’s how near “near” is in Joseph’s story. How by any stretch of the imagination can all this activity be transferred to a location 15 to 25 miles or more from the Smith home? (*Dialogue*, Spring 1969, pages 96-97)

The Mormon writer William E. Berrett makes this statement concerning travel in Joseph Smith’s day:

We climb into our automobiles and speed from place to place, fifty or sixty miles in an hour, while the finest carriage of Joseph’s period covered less than half that distance in a day. . . . at that time the few roads the region boasted were narrow, crooked, and unsurfaced; veritable bog holes in the spring of the year or after heavy rains. At times travel ceased altogether. (*The Restored Church*, page 17)

However this may be, Mormon writers would like us to believe that Joseph Smith attended a revival at Vienna. Hyrum Andrus states:

Abner Chase, an influential Methodist minister who was present at the Vienna Conference, stated that it “was followed by a glorious revival of the work of God among both preachers and people.” (*God, Man and the Universe*, 1968, page 39)

Wesley P. Walters makes this comment concerning this matter:

. . . when Reverend Abner Chase speaks of the spiritual decline which existed at the time of the 1819 Conference being “followed by a glorious revival,” it is assumed that he meant that this revival broke out at Vienna immediately following the Conference. When Mr. Chase mentioned this revival, he added that he planned to speak of it “more particularly” further on in his narrative. After carrying his recollections through the years 1820 and 1821, however, his book ends abruptly before coming to the revival period, which from his earlier writings is known to be the 1824-25 period. (*Dialogue*, Spring 1969, pages 68-69)

Mormon writers are not only trying to move the location of the revival from Palmyra to Vienna, but they are also trying to change the date of the revival. In the

past it was taught that the revival occurred in 1820. Joseph Smith stated that he was in his “fifteenth year” at the time of the excitement. (*History of the Church*, Vol. 1, p. 3) Also, that he had his First Vision “early in the spring of eighteen hundred and twenty.” The Mormon historian B. H. Roberts dated the revival in the “spring of 1820.” (*Comprehensive History of the Church*, Vol. 1, p. 51) The Mormon Apostle John A. Widtsoe stated: “Palmyra, a village in western New York State, near his home, was swept in the winter and spring of 1820 by a religious revival.” (*Joseph Smith-Seeker After Truth*, p. 1) Many other references could be cited, but these are enough to illustrate that the Mormon leaders used to teach that the revival occurred in 1820. That they are trying to revise this date is obvious from Richard L. Bushman’s answer to Mr. Walters:

While Mr. Walters has put us on the spot for the moment, in the long run Mormon scholarship will benefit from his attack. Not only was there an immediate effort to answer the question of an 1819 revival, but Mormon historians asked themselves how many other questions about our early history remain unasked as well as unanswered. (*Dialogue*, Spring 1969, page 83)

In his book, *Joseph Smith—the Man and the Seer*, Hyrum L. Andrus stated:

In the spring of 1820, when he was a lad of fourteen, there came a religious awakening in certain parts of the country, particularly in the state of New York . . . (*Joseph Smith—the Man and the Seer*, 1965, page 63)

In his latest book, however, Hyrum Andrus speaks of the revival as “the revival of 1819-1820” (*God, Man and the Universe*, 1968, page 42), and on page 41 of the same book we find this statement:

Joseph Smith evidently attended the Methodist revival meetings in the woods near Vienna, in the summer of 1819.

Although Dr. Andrus still maintains that the revival came to Palmyra, it is plain to see that he is trying to explain away the fact that the churches in Palmyra did not increase in membership as they would have if a revival had actually occurred:

There were some features about the revival of 1819-1820 which caused it to end on a negative note, particularly in the area of Manchester and Palmyra, . . . Joseph Smith wrote that “great multitudes united themselves to the different religious parties, which created no small stir and division amongst the people.” This does not necessarily mean that they became members of the existing churches. . . . The revival of 1819-1820 was an abortive affair that failed to produce many positive results for the existing churches. It was an emotional upsurge that ended on a negative note. (*God, Man, and the Universe*, pp. 42-43)

Wesley P. Walters makes this interesting observation in regard to this argument:

A second approach maintains that the revival was at some distance from the area where the Smiths lived, that it caused considerable stir in their immediate neighborhood, but ended “on a negative note.” It consequently left no visible traces either in the local or denominational papers of 1820 or in terms of

substantial membership gains for the churches of the Palmyra and Manchester area. . . . The point of the Prophet's story is not that there were revivals occurring throughout the state that year—for this was true every year. His point was that "an unusual excitement" was going on right there "in the place where we lived." Multitudes of his neighbors became "converts" and "united" with the various churches of his community, and it was this situation that led him to ask "which I should join." . . .

It is further suggested by those who approach the problem by this method that when Joseph spoke of great multitudes "uniting with the different religious parties," he did not necessarily mean that they joined the various churches, but rather that they split up into little cliques which merely took sides in a general controversy. To put such a construction on the word "parties" is to fail to notice that the Prophet uses this very term to refer to the various denominations. In the "war of words" among Presbyterians, Baptists, and Methodists, Joseph speaks of the denominations as "endeavoring to establish their own tenets and disapprove all others" and this leads him to ask, "Who of all these parties are right?" Even members of his own family had been "proselyted" to the Presbyterian faith, while "converts" flocked off to the different parties. That these converts actually joined the churches of Palmyra and vicinity is made clear when the Cowdery-Smith account states that "large additions were made to the Methodists, Presbyterian and Baptist churches." To suggest that these multitudes merely aligned themselves with various feuding groups and that consequently the revival was "abortive" and ended "on a negative note" is to completely miss one of the main points of Joseph's narrative. The entire thrust of his story is that right there where he lived multitudes were joining the various churches, but with so much conflict in their tenets he was at a loss which one to join himself. The year 1820, however, was not the period when any great multitudes were joining the churches of Palmyra and vicinity. It is not until the revival of 1824-25 that we find a situation that matches the conditions described in this official first vision story. (*Dialogue*, Spring 1969, pages 68-70)

In trying to explain the lack of evidence for a revival in Palmyra, Richard L. Bushman states:

The second consideration is that admissions to membership do not necessarily measure the intensity of a revival. . . . There might be an unusual excitement about a religion and only a few people actually qualify for admission. High admissions are a good sign of a revival; absence of admissions does not necessarily mean no religious excitement. . . . The "great multitudes" joining churches occurred in "the whole district of country." The excitement may have been an awakening or a prospect of a revival, not a shower of grace itself with the resulting increase in memberships and reports in the national religious press. (*Dialogue*, Spring 1969, page 88)

Professor Bushman goes so far as to state that Joseph Smith may have been influenced by newspaper accounts of revivals in other parts of New York:

Did 1819 and 1820 seem like big years with "great multitudes" joining the churches in the "whole district of country"? Doubtless this was an important year for religion in New York as a whole and up state particularly. All of the major

denominations reported large increases. . . . Some of this news filtered through to the Smiths via the *Palmyra Register* which was publishing accounts with such extravagant statements as “the face of the country has been wonderfully changed of late” with reckonings of church admissions to back up the excitement. Believing for a moment that four members of the Smith family had joined a church themselves that year as Joseph said, we can understand how reports like these would have registered and very possibly left the impression that great multitudes were uniting with various religious parties. . . . At best, critics of Joseph’s story can claim that there was not enough excitement close enough to Palmyra to satisfy them. But again that all depends on how near is near and big is big. I doubt very much that historical inquiry will ever settle that question to the satisfaction of all. (*Dialogue*, Spring 1969, pages 90-91)

Richard L. Anderson claims that Wesley P. Walters’ work is “largely irrelevant” because the revival which Joseph Smith speaks of “must be seen in a rural setting”:

To recapitulate, the reality of the First Vision has recently been challenged on the ground that no revivals are found in the village of Palmyra in the years immediately surrounding Joseph Smith’s date of 1820. But a study of the leading non-Mormon recollection of the Prophet’s early religious investigation makes this line of investigation irrelevant. Orsamus Turner, printer’s apprentice in Palmyra until about 1820, recalled young Joseph’s “catching a spark of Methodism in the camp meeting, away down in the woods . . .” Thus the “religious excitement” that the Prophet identifies as preceding his First Vision must be seen in a rural setting, what a contemporary minister of the Genesee Conference termed “forest gatherings.” . . .

A careful study of the quality of recollection found in the writings of William Smith and Oliver Cowdery render them not prime sources for the First Vision itself. This means in essence that recent challenges to the Prophet’s first religious experience have set up the problem with improper sources and have attempted a solution by studying only one type of revival in an unduly restricted locality. . . . Though scornful of Mormon claims and preoccupied with money-digging gossip, Orsamus Turner and Pomeroy Tucker agree that Joseph Smith loosely affiliated with Methodism but shortly announced a negative evaluation of all Christian churches. (*Brigham Young University Studies*, Spring 1969, pages 403-404)

It is interesting to see how Dr. Anderson discredits the first printed history of the Church and builds his new theory on anti-Mormon sources. The Mormon historian B. H. Roberts once stated that Pomeroy Tucker “perhaps has written the most prejudiced account of the Prophet’s boyhood days, . . .” (*Comprehensive History of the Church*, Vol. 1, page 37). On page 45 of the same volume, Tucker is called a “vender of idle tales.” On the other hand, Roberts made this statement concerning the first published history which Dr. Anderson discredits: “Joseph Smith’s association with Cowdery in the production of these letters make them, as to the facts involved practically the personal narrative of Joseph Smith” (*Comprehensive History of the Church*, Vol. 1, page 78).

It is possible, of course, that Joseph Smith did catch “a spark of Methodism” on the Vienna road, but Wesley P. Walters has shown that the “most natural reference

of this quotation, however, is to the Methodist camp grounds a mile from Palmyra, in the wooded area adjoining the Methodist chapel on the Vienna road.”

Milton V. Backman, Jr., has provided a very interesting chart with his article (see *Brigham Young University Studies*, Spring 1969, pages 312-13). He has marked “towns or villages where there were reports of ‘unusual religious excitement’ and/or significant increases in church membership in 1819-1820” with black dots, and he uses half dots to show “Towns or villages located near the Smith farm where there were reports of ‘prospects of revivals’ in 1819-1820.” He has used triangles to show “other landmarks of New York.”

The most interesting thing about this chart is that Dr. Backman has marked the town of Palmyra with a triangle. This, of course, indicates that he was unable to find any “reports of ‘unusual religious excitement’ and/or significant increases in church membership in 1819-1820” in Palmyra.

Dr. Backman has marked with full dots only two villages within a radius of ten miles of the Smith farm. As we examine the evidence, however, even these villages do not qualify for the revival Joseph Smith described.

The first village marked is Manchester (Farmington) which is about five miles from the Smith farm. Dr. Backman’s reason for marking this is that 22 members were added to the Baptist Church in 1819:

Evidence that Baptists in the region of country where Joseph lived prospered from the religious stirrings is found in the membership reports of the Baptist Church of Farmington[,] located a few miles south of the Smith farm. Baptist Church membership figures indicate that twenty-two converts were added to this congregation in 1819, which was a significant growth for a church consisting of only 87 members in 1818. (*Brigham Young University Studies*, Spring 1969, page 314)

Richard L. Bushman also uses these figures in his reply to Walters:

The Baptist church in Farmington (Manchester), just five miles away, baptized twenty-two in 1819, a sizable number in a congregation consisting of eighty-seven members in 1818. (*Dialogue*, Spring 1969, page 89)

Wesley P. Walters shows, however, that most of these 22 members were added before the end of May in 1819, and therefore could have nothing to do with the revival Joseph Smith wrote about:

The only bright note in this drab picture seems to be in the Church of Farmington, located in the village of Manchester, during the spring of 1819. By the end of May, 14 had been received on profession of faith (see the pastor’s letter in *Western New York Baptist Magazine* [August 1819], II, 342; and cf. their Record Book for 1819 at the American Baptist Historical Society), and by September 8 more were added[,] totaling the 22 reported above. This could hardly be called “great multitudes” and it was followed by a net loss of 9 in 1820. In fact, the total number received by baptism from September 1804 to May 1828 was only 94, as many as the Palmyra church added in just a few months during the 1824-2[5] revival (cf. *Minutes of the Ontario Baptist Association* [1871], p. 14). Even if we couple the 22 of Farmington with the 38 gained in 1820 by the Phelps Presbyterian[,] 13 miles to the east, and assume that the Methodists had some

success following their 1819 conference at Vienna, this still falls short of the revival Joseph describes, and his narrative would have to be changed to read, “it commenced with the Baptists.” (*Dialogue*, Spring 1969, page 77)

Milton V. Backman, Jr., himself admits that Joseph Smith claimed “that the Methodists initiated the religious excitement which took place in the neighborhood where he lived during the months preceding the First Vision” (*Brigham Young University Studies*, Spring 1969, page 303). Thus it is plain to see that the addition of 22 members to the Baptist Church of Farmington in 1819 cannot be used to support Joseph Smith’s story of the revival.

The other village within the 10 mile radius which is marked on Dr. Backman’s chart with a full dot is Victor. In his article, however, he doesn’t furnish any evidence nor does he even speak of Victor. Mormon scholars apparently thought that they had found evidence of a revival in Victor in 1820-21, but Wesley Walters shows that the date of the revival there was 1830-31:

Some might shift the setting to Victor, 15 miles southwest of Joseph’s home, since it is credited with 100 Methodist converts in “a revival in the win[t]er of 1820-21, conducted by Reverends Philo Woodworth, Daniel Anderson, and Thomas Carlton” (*History of Ontario County*, N.Y. [1876], p. 203). The date, however, should read 1830-31—first since this was the only year all three ministers were assigned to the “Victor and Mendon” circuit, and the membership reported as 277 in 1830 increased to 600 by the summer of 1831 (*Minutes of the Annual Conferences*, II, 72, 73, 111). Secondly, P. Woodworth was not received into the Genesee Conference on trial until 1826, while Anderson and Carlton were not admitted until 1829 (*Minutes*, I, 501; II, 30). Finally, Mr. Carlton was only twelve in 1820 and did not even become a member of the Methodist Church until 1825 (Matthew Simpson, *Cyclopaedia of Methodism* [1878], p. 167). Except for a Daniel Anderson received in 1825 by the Illinois Conference, these are the only early Methodist ministers bearing these names (see “Alphabetical List of Preachers’ Names” in the back of Nathan Bangs, *A History of the Methodist Episcopal Church* [1853], IV, 2, 3, 8-10, 42). (*Dialogue*, Spring 1969, page 79)

It would appear, then, that there is no evidence of a revival within a ten mile radius of the Smith farm. Joseph Smith’s statement that there was “in the place where we lived an unusual excitement on the subject of religion” has therefore been proven untrue.

## A Changing Story

Before Wesley P. Walters’ work appeared, Mormon writers claimed to have a great deal of evidence to prove that the revival occurred in Palmyra in 1820. Preston Nibley, who later became Assistant Church Historian, claimed there were several accounts of the revival:

There are several accounts of the religious revival which took place at Palmyra in the spring of 1820. (*Joseph Smith the Prophet*, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1944, page 21)

Preston Nibley offers three accounts to prove that there was a revival “in Palmyra in the Spring of 1820” (See *Joseph Smith the Prophet*, pages 21-26). One of the accounts is the one published by Joseph Smith in the *Times and Seasons*.



Another is a statement by Joseph Smith's brother, William. Preston Nibley quotes from an interview which a "Brother Briggs" had with William Smith:

"What caused Joseph to ask for guidance as to what church he ought to join?" asked Bro. Briggs. William answered as follows:

"Why there was a joint revival in the neighborhood between the Baptists, Methodists and Presbyterians and they had succeeded in stirring up quite a feeling, and after the meeting the question arose which church should have the converts. Rev. Stockton was the president of the meeting and suggested that it was their meeting and under their care and they had a church there and they ought to join the Presbyterians, but as father did not like Rev. Stockton very well, our folks hesitated . . ." (*Joseph Smith the Prophet*, pages 23-24)

If Preston Nibley had quoted the paragraph just before, it would have overthrown his argument that the revival occurred in the spring of 1820. This paragraph, which was published in the *Deseret News*, January 20, 1894, read as follows:

"Hyrum, Samuel, Katharine and mother were members of the Presbyterian church. My father would not join. He did not like it because a Rev. Stockton had preached my brother's funeral sermon and intimated very strongly that he had gone to hell, for Alvin was not a church member, but he was a good boy and my father did not like it."

Notice that William Smith tells that his father would not join the Presbyterian church because Reverend Stockton had intimated that Alvin "had gone to hell." Now, since Alvin did not die until 1823, this would mean that the revival could not have started before 1823. Thus we see that when the statement is taken in context it proves that the revival did not occur in the spring of 1820.

Mormon writers now seem to be divided as to the value of William Smith's statements regarding the revival. Marvin S. Hill wrote:

William Smith, the Prophet's brother, related how the 1820 revival had sharply divided the community and left the convert in a state of confusion. (*Brigham Young University Studies*, Spring 1969, page 361)

James B. Allen and Leonard J. Arrington, on the other hand, make this statement:

In the original sources, however, neither Cowdery nor William Smith mentions the 1820 vision specifically. Both of them place the Reverend Lane in the vicinity of Palmyra in 1823, relating him to the background of the visions that announced the Book of Mormon. (*Brigham Young University Studies*, Spring 1969, page 271)

Preston Nibley's only other evidence for a revival in 1820 is taken from a book written by Willard Bean, a Mormon writer. Mr. Nibley states:

I shall reproduce first the account as related in *The Beginning of Mormonism*.

"In the year 1819 a sort of religious awakening started in Massachusetts, gradually moving down the eastern seaboard, gathering momentum as it spread, . . . After reaching New York it spread to the rural districts upstate, reaching Palmyra and vicinity in the spring of 1820. It appears that Rev. Jesse Townsend,

a young Yale graduate, but recently set apart for the ministry and assigned to the pastorate of the new Presbyterian Church of Palmyra, was the first in these parts to catch the religious fervor, and accordingly started a revival. He was soon joined by the Presbyterian minister of East Palmyra, closely followed by the Baptist minister and two Methodist ministers of Palmyra.

"The revival started the latter part of April, before the rural people could get onto their land to begin spring plowing, which gave the farmers a chance to attend the meetings. Even business and professional men neglected their work and all but shut up shop. By the first of May, the revival was well under way with scores of people confessing religion, and each new convert becoming a self-appointed missionary to solicit friend and neighbor. The prevailing question among people of the neighborhood was, 'What shall I do to be saved?'"

"... The revival had been even more successful than the ministers had anticipated. I quote from the *Religious Advocate* of Rochester: 'More than 200 souls have become hopeful subjects of divine grace in Palmyra, Macedon, Manchester, Lyons and Ontario since the late revival commenced. This is a powerful work. It is among young as well as old people. Many are ready to exclaim — 'What hath God wrought?' It is the Lord's doing and it is marvelous in our eyes. The cry is yet from many, 'Come over and help us. . . . Such intelligence must be pleasing to every child of God who rightly estimates the value of immortal souls, and wishes well to the cause of Zion.'

"A week later (from the same publication) . . . 'It may be added that in Palmyra and Macedon, including Methodist, Presbyterian and Baptist churches, more than 400 have already confessed that the Lord is good. The work is still progressing. In neighboring towns, the number is great and still increasing. Glory be to God on high; and on earth peace and good will to all men.'

"During the second week in May the revival began to show signs of breaking up, and the many converts were solicited by the different preachers to join their respective churches." (*Joseph Smith the Prophet*, Preston Nibley, Salt Lake City, 1944, pages 21-22)

Upon first examination it would appear that this is definite proof that there was a revival in Palmyra and Manchester in 1820. A more careful check, however, reveals that these references from the *Religious Advocate* do not refer to a revival in 1820, but rather to one in 1825.

Wesley P. Walters shows that the quotation from the *Religious Advocate* of Rochester could not have appeared in that publication in 1820 because "the *Religious Advocate* did not begin publication at Rochester until about 1825, . . ." (*Dialogue*, Spring 1969, page 67). In footnote 51 in the same article Mr. Walters states:

The *Religious Advocate* began publication in 1822 at Saratoga Springs, N.Y., moving to Rochester about October 1824.

This means that the quotations from the *Religious Advocate* of Rochester could not have appeared before the 1824-25 Palmyra revival. That they did not appear until 1825 is verified by the fact that both references were printed in the *Wayne Sentinel* under the date of March 2, 1825. In other words, these references have been used to support the date of 1820 for a revival, when in reality they have to do with a revival that was taking place in 1825. On the next page is a comparison

which proves that the references are the same ones which appeared in the *Wayne Sentinel* in 1825.

| Purported 1820 References   | Wayne Sentinel - 1825  |
|---|--|
| I quote from the “ <i>Religious Advocate</i> ” of Rochester: “More than 200 souls have become hopeful subjects of divine grace in Palmyra, Macedon, Manchester, Lyons and Ontario since the late revival commenced. This is a powerful work. It is among young as well as old people. Many are ready to exclaim — ‘What hath God wrought?’ It is the Lord’s doing and it is marvelous in our eyes. The cry is yet from many ‘Come over and help us. . . . Such intelligence must be pleasing to every child of God who rightly estimates the value of immortal souls, and wishes well to the cause of Zion.’ ( <i>Joseph Smith the Prophet</i> , pp. 21-22) | The Revival. — The <i>Religious Advocate</i> published at Rochester, contains the following account as just received from Ontario: — “More than two hundred souls have become the hopeful subjects of divine grace in Palmyra, Macedon, Manchester, Phelps, Lyons, and Ontario, since the late revival commenced. — This is a powerful work; it is among old and young, but mostly among young people. Many are ready to exclaim, ‘what hath God wrought!’ It is the Lord’s doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes. The cry is yet from various parts, ‘come over and help us.’ There are large and attentive congregations in every part, who hear as for their lives. Such intelligence must be pleasing to every child of God, who rightly estimate the value of immortal souls, and wishes well to the cause of Zion!” ( <i>Wayne Sentinel</i> , March 2, 1825) |
| A week later (from the same publication) . . . “It may be added that in Palmyra and Macedon, including Methodist, Presbyterian and Baptist churches, more than 400 have already confessed that the Lord is good. The work is still progressing. In neighboring towns, the number is great and still increasing. Glory be to God on high; and on earth peace and good will to all men.” ( <i>Joseph Smith the Prophet</i> , p. 22)   | Religious. — An article in the <i>Religious Advocate</i> gives the pleasg fact that a revival of religion had taken place in the towns of Palmyra, Macedon, Manchester, Phelps, Lyons and Ontario, and that more 200 souls had become hopeful subjects of Divine Grace &c. It may be added, that in Palmyra and Macedon, including Methodist, Presbyterian and Baptist Churches, more than 400 have already testified that the Lord is good. The work is still progressing. In the neighboring towns, the number is great and fast increasing. Glory be to God on high; and on earth, peace and good will to all men. ( <i>Wayne Sentinel</i> , March 2, 1825)   |

Mormon writers were apparently so hard pressed to prove there was a revival in Palmyra in 1820 that they used material concerning the 1825 revival to try to prove there was a revival in 1820. In the quotation Preston Nibley takes from Willard Bean’s book it talks of “Jesse Townsend, a young Yale graduate,” starting the revival. Wesley P. Walters makes these comments concerning Bean’s account:

Bean, a Mormon and one-time sparring partner of Jack Dempsey, has put together an account that Mormon writers are still appealing to. According to Mr. Bean, a revival did break out in “the spring of 1820,” sparked under the ministry of

Reverend Jesse Townsend, whom he describes as “a young Yale graduate, but recently set apart for the ministry.” “The revival started the latter part of April” and by the first of May was well under way. Bean adds an account from “the *Religious Advocate* of Rochester” to show how extensive the awakening was. All this sounds very authentic until one begins to examine the story more closely. Jesse Townsend was not a “young Yale graduate” in 1820, since he was fifty-four years old and thirty years had expired since his graduation from Yale. He was not “recently set apart for the ministry” for he had been ordained in 1792. Instead of sparking a revival in Palmyra in the spring of 1820,” he was in reality on his way west, arriving near Hillsboro, Illinois, May 25, 1820. Furthermore, the *Religious Advocate* did not begin publication at Rochester until about 1825, and the account which Mr. Bean quotes from that journal is the same one which appeared in the Palmyra newspaper in March of 1825 in reference to the 1824-25 revival. We do not believe that this avenue of approach will yield any fruitful results. (*Dialogue*, Spring 1969, pages 67-68)

The Mormon writer Pearson H. Corbett evidently used Bean’s account in his book, *Hyrum Smith—Patriarch*:

The snows melted very fast in the spring of 1820; but the season, except for its precipitance, seemed much like any other. Nature burst forth in abundance. . . .

The Smith family had heard through friends who were members of the several congregations then established in Palmyra that there would soon be an outdoor religious revival.

Hyrum had brought word that there would be a revival lasting all day in a certain wooded section not far from the Smith farm. Whenever their work permitted, members of the Smith family and their friends attended.

The Reverend Jesse Townsend, a young Yale graduate recently assigned to the Palmyra Presbyterian pastorate, had been the first to catch the religious fervor, and it was he who had started the present revival. He had been joined by his colleague, another Presbyterian minister of East Palmyra, and they were soon joined by the local Baptist minister and two Methodist ministers of the same place. . . . By the beginning of the second week in May, when many had to leave the revival to plant their crops, there had been two hundred conversions among those who had attended from Palmyra, Macedon, Manchester, Ontario, and Lyons; and by the end of that week over four hundred had confessed, . . . While those of the northern region were not as violent as the revivals of the south, there was manifest at Palmyra considerable agitation and emotional fervor. (*Hyrum Smith—Patriarch*, Salt Lake City, 1963, pages 17-19)

The Mormon Apostle Gordon B. Hinckley has written a book entitled, *Truth Restored*. This book was reprinted by the Church in 1969 and has a beautiful representation of Joseph Smith’s First Vision on the cover. Unfortunately, however, the references which were written concerning the 1824-25 revival are still used as though they applied to the 1820 revival:

In 1820 it reached western New York. The ministers of the various denominations united in their efforts, and many conversions were made among the scattered settlers. One week a Rochester paper noted: “More than two hundred souls have

become hopeful subjects of divine grace in Palmyra, Macedon, Manchester, Lyons, and Ontario since the late revival commenced.” The week following it was able to report “that in Palmyra and Macedon . . . more than four hundred souls have already confessed that the Lord is good.” (*Truth Restored*, Salt Lake City, 1969, page 2)

It will be interesting to see whether the Mormon leaders will continue to use these references now that it is obvious that their own research team has been unable to verify them. If these references had really been written concerning the 1820 revival they would have furnished the strongest type of evidence possible. They would, in fact, have proved that a revival occurred in Palmyra in 1820. As it is, however, we can show that they appeared in the *Wayne Sentinel* on March 2, 1825, and had absolutely nothing to do with a revival in 1820.

The Mormon newspaper, *Deseret News*, recently published this statement:

Despite claims by Mormon history critics, new findings by a team of professional researchers in the eastern United States show at the time of Joseph Smith’s first vision there were religious awakenings going on in western New York as close as 11 miles from the Smith home in Palmyra, N.Y. (*Deseret News*, Church Section, May 3, 1969, page 15)

It is, of course, a well known fact that “religious awakenings” were going on in New York, but the important question is whether there was a revival in Palmyra and vicinity in 1820, as Joseph Smith stated. The fact that Mormon apologists are now trying to move the revival out of Palmyra is very significant. We feel, however, that they will have to move the revival further than 11 miles to match Joseph Smith’s description of its intensity, and the further they move the revival the more difficult it becomes to reconcile Joseph Smith’s statement that the revival occurred in “the place where we lived.”

It would appear, then, that all evidence for a revival in Palmyra and vicinity has fallen, and that Wesley P. Walters’ work has been vindicated. All that the Mormon research team have been able to do is to confirm his original findings. We must agree with Walters when he states:

Joseph made his great mistake when he tried to alter the course of history by moving a whole revival back some 4 years. This defect places his entire movement upon a crumbling foundation. For our part we agree that “life is too short to follow something false, when we can follow what is true” (Richard Evans). We urge all to find in Christ alone “the way, the truth and the life.” (*The Case Against Mormonism*, Vol. 1, pages 114-115)

The reader will find additional information concerning the First Vision in our *Case Against Mormonism*, Vol. 1.

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