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GRAPPLING WITH THE PAST

LDS Church's New Statements on Gospel Topics

Since its founding in 1830 by Joseph Smith, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (originally titled the Church of Christ) has struggled with its public image. Charges of fraud related to Smith's money-digging and magic practices were a stumbling block to many from the very beginning.¹ In subsequent years his visions, new and changing scriptures, secret polygamy, racism, the political kingdom of God and temple rituals added to the flow of criticism towards Joseph Smith and the Mormons.

After Smith's death, Brigham Young, the second prophet of the LDS Church, proved to be just as controversial. His sermons on Adam-god, racism, blood atonement, the political kingdom of God and plural marriage led to extensive criticism in the eastern newspapers and various books.² Also, the 1857 Mountain Meadows Massacre and the U.S. government's legal battles to end polygamy kept Mormonism in the press for years. However, after LDS Apostle Reed Smoot was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1903 his right to be seated was challenged because of the Mormons' defiance of the United States' laws, especially regarding polygamy in Utah, which led to a four-year investigation of the LDS Church by the Senate.³ Subsequently, the LDS

Church embarked on a new course of currying favor with the outside world. As the sermons of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young faded into the past the LDS Church entered a new period of public relations to reshape its image into one of patriotism, family values and clean living.

When Fawn Brodie published her landmark biography of Joseph Smith, *No Man Knows My History*,⁴ in 1945 she reopened the old wounds of the LDS Church's troubled past. Her biography was followed by dozens of books challenging Mormonism. But it would take the invention of the Internet for those issues to become known worldwide. In our Fall 2013 newsletter, *Apostasy in Sweden*,⁵ we related the experience of a number of LDS members who, through the Internet, became aware of the challenges to LDS truth claims. This led to visits to Sweden by LDS apostles and historians, between 2005 and 2010, to calm the troubled members.

The major questions raised in these meetings centered around the following issues: Why are there



Young Joseph praying in the grove.

varying First Vision accounts? Did Smith use a magic stone to translate the Book of Mormon? Why did Joseph Smith lie about polygamy and polyandry? Why doesn't the Book of Abraham translation match the papyri? Why censor church history? Should members know all the truth? When was the priesthood restored? Why were blacks denied priesthood until 1978? What about bad

1 E. D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, (Painesville, Ohio, 1834).

2 T. B. H. Stenhouse, *Rocky Mountain Saints*, (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1873).

3 Michael Harold Paulos, *The Mormon Church on Trial: Transcripts of the Reed Smoot Hearings*, (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2007); Helen Whitney, dir., *The Mormons*, (PBS, 2007), online at www.pbs.org

4 Fawn Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, (New York: Knopf, 1945); updated in 1971.

5 "Apostasy in Sweden," *Salt Lake City Messenger*, (October 2013), no. 121; online at www.utlm.org

temple experiences? Why did Brigham Young preach on personal Blood Atonement? Did Brigham Young teach false doctrine when he preached that Adam is our God? Why didn't the LDS leaders discern that Mark Hofmann was selling them forged documents in the 1980's?

Without compelling answers to the members' questions the discontent grew. Today Mormons around the world seem to be stumbling across the same issues and are troubled by the lack of candid answers from the LDS Church.⁶

Evidently, in response to this growing body of questioning members, Dieter F. Uchtdorf, of the LDS First Presidency, gave the following comments at the October 2013 LDS General Conference:

Some struggle with unanswered questions about things that have been done or said in the past. **We openly acknowledge** that in nearly 200 years of Church history—along with an uninterrupted line of inspired, honorable, and divine events—**there have been some things said and done that could cause people to question.** . . .

And, to be perfectly frank, **there have been times when members or leaders in the Church have simply made mistakes. There may have been things said or done that were not in harmony with our values, principles, or doctrine.** . . .

Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters—my dear friends—please, **first doubt your doubts** before you doubt your faith.⁷

What Uchtdorf seems to miss is that the problems of Mormonism's past are so troubling and clearly documented, that one's testimony must be re-evaluated. Internet search engines like Google provide instant access to the original sources, causing many to lose faith in Mormonism.

GOSPEL TOPICS

It appears that the LDS Church is now embarking on a project to provide answers to these issues on its official web page, under the heading "Gospel Topics."⁸ On January 17, 2014, the Provo *Daily Herald* reported:

Over the past few months, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has released more complete and detailed information on **doctrinal beliefs, practices and historical events** of the church than at any other time

in its history. **Blacks and the priesthood, polygamy and the translation of The Book of Mormon** are topics discussed in recent months. It is all part of a special [Gospel] Topics Project by the church to help members, media and others have a more defined and **complete understanding** of the church and its beliefs. . . . "Some of our members are surprised by our history," [Church historian Elder Steven E.] Snow said. "We want them to go to a place with **accuracy.**"⁹

While Mr. Snow indicates that these new articles will provide the members with accurate information, we found them to be somewhat superficial, admitting a few problems but generally skimming over the more troubling aspects.

Book of Mormon

Two new articles have been posted on *Gospel Topics* relating to the Book of Mormon. The first article, "Book of Mormon Translation," deals with the translation process. Joseph Smith explained that special instruments resembling large spectacles, called either "interpreters" or the "Urim and Thummim," were preserved with the ancient plates to aid the future translator in his task.¹⁰ The article tells of Joseph Smith using both instruments:

The other instrument, which Joseph Smith discovered in the ground years before he retrieved the gold plates, was a **small oval stone, or "seer stone."** As a young man during the 1820s, Joseph Smith, like others in his day, used a seer stone to look for lost objects and **buried treasure.** As Joseph grew to understand his prophetic calling, he learned that he could use this stone for the higher purpose of translating scripture.¹¹

Missing from the article is a description of how the "seer stone" was used. Those who witnessed the process described how Smith would put the stone in his hat, pulling it close to his face, and then as the words appeared on the stone he would read them to his scribe, while the plates were either covered by a cloth or hidden in the woods.¹² Evidently, Smith didn't even look at the ancient plates to accomplish his translation.

Why would God carefully preserve the plates and the divine "interpreters," mentioned in the Book of Mormon, as a translation tool, when a magic stone found in a neighbors well, and then placed in a hat, worked just as well?¹³

6 Laurie Goodstein, "Some Mormons Search the Web and Find Doubt," *New York Times* (July 20, 2013).

7 Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "Come, Join with Us," *The Ensign*, (November 2013).

8 "Gospel Topics," www.lds.org

9 "LDS Church Working on Online Topics Project," *Daily Herald*, (January 17, 2014).

10 *Pearl of Great Price*, Joseph Smith—History 1:35.

11 "Book of Mormon Translation," www.lds.org

12 *Salt Lake City Messenger* (November 2011), no. 117.

13 *Salt Lake City Messenger* (October 2013), no. 121.

The other article, “Book of Mormon and DNA Studies,”¹⁴ was equally misleading. DNA studies show that the Native Americans descend from tribes in Siberia, and are not Semitic. Yet, since the days of Joseph Smith the leaders of the LDS Church have repeatedly stated that the Native Americans are the descendents of the Book of Mormon people, Hebrews who migrated to the Americas at approximately 600 BC.¹⁵

Race and the Priesthood

The article “Race and the Priesthood” attempts to define the age-old ban on blacks from the LDS priesthood as merely a misdirected “practice” without addressing the fundamental teachings in LDS scripture that gave rise to it. In tracing the history of this ban the article points the finger at Brigham Young (the second president of the LDS Church) while exonerating Joseph Smith, implying that Smith must not have had any such racist intentions since he ordained a few black men to the priesthood. However, the article conveniently fails to explain just how limited their priesthood ordinations were since those same black men were not allowed to participate in the temple endowment ceremony in Nauvoo, Illinois. Without those rituals these men would not be eternally sealed to their mates and could not follow the same path as the other LDS men on their eternal progression to godhood.

But whether the ban is said to originate with Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, or any other church leaders, the fundamental basis for it is still rooted in LDS scripture,¹⁶ which is why the church’s stance for decades was to say that it was simply God’s will, as typified by their First Presidency’s 1969 statement:

Our living prophet, President David O. McKay, has said, “The seeming discrimination by the Church toward the Negro is not something which originated with man; **but goes back into the beginning with God . . .**”¹⁷

If the priesthood ban did not come from God but was merely a misguided practice of Brigham Young and his successors, why was a revelation from God needed to officially end the ban in 1978?¹⁸

14 “Book of Mormon and DNA Studies,” www.lds.org

15 Simon Southerton, *Losing a Lost Tribe: Native Americans, DNA, and the Mormon Church*, (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004); *Salt Lake City Messenger* (November 2004), no. 103, online at utlm.org

16 “Racial Statements,” online at utlm.org

17 “First Presidency Statement,” www.blacklds.org

18 For a more detailed response to this topic, see the article “Blacks and the Priesthood” produced by the Institute for Religious Research online at www.mit.irr.org; also *Salt Lake City Messenger* (April 2012), no. 118.

Plural Marriage and Families in Early Utah

The LDS article “Plural Marriage and Families in Early Utah” deals with the 1890 Manifesto, in which the church promised the U.S. government that it would no longer condone the practice of plural marriage among its members. The article concedes that there were still some plural marriages performed after the Manifesto but from this brief acknowledgment readers can hardly appreciate just how complex and prevalent the practice continued to be.

Historian B. Carmon Hardy lists the names of 220 LDS men, including apostles, stake presidents and bishops, who took plural wives after the Manifesto. For example, Hardy noted that some of these marriages were performed by LDS apostles: “Apostles John Henry Smith and John W. Taylor sealed several couples in polygamy during a trip through Arizona in the late 1890’s.”¹⁹ All of which shows a willful disobedience on the part of the LDS Church toward the United States government.²⁰

Another one of their recent posts, “Becoming Like God,” will be discussed in a later issue of our *Messenger*. While each of these topics deserves a fuller treatment, due to space, we will focus on their article relating to Joseph Smith’s 1820 vision.

FIRST VISION ACCOUNTS

Joseph Smith’s First Vision was emphasized as the foundation of the LDS Church by President Gordon B. Hinckley at the October 1998 Conference of the LDS Church:

“Our **entire case** as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints rests on the **validity of this glorious First Vision**. . . . Nothing on which we base our doctrine, nothing we teach, nothing we live by is of greater importance than **this initial declaration**. I submit that if Joseph Smith talked with God the Father and His Beloved Son, then all else of which he spoke is true. This is the hinge on which turns the gate that leads to the path of salvation and eternal life.” (*The Ensign*, November 1998, pp. 70-71)

Given the importance the LDS Church places on Smith’s First Vision, the new LDS article, “Joseph Smith’s First Vision Accounts,” is certainly a welcome step toward full disclosure. The article provides links to the major documents relating to Smith’s vision.²¹

19 B. Carmon Hardy, *Solemn Covenant: The Mormon Polygamous Passage*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), p. 182.

20 *Solemn Covenant*: Appendix II; also *Salt Lake City Messenger* (January 1988), no. 66, online at utlm.org

21 “First Vision Accounts,” www.lds.org

However, upon reading the various accounts one is faced with a number of inconsistencies.

The LDS article states, “Joseph Smith testified repeatedly that he experienced a remarkable vision of God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ.” Granted, he repeatedly spoke of visions, but not necessarily of the Father and Son. As we will show in this article, the story evolved over the years.

Part of the LDS canon is the “Joseph Smith—History,” located at the back of the *Pearl of Great Price*. This section includes Joseph Smith’s first published account of a vision he claimed to have had in 1820. This account was composed in 1838, then printed in the *Times and Seasons*, a Mormon newspaper, in 1842, and finally canonized in 1880 as part of the *Pearl of Great Price*.

In it Smith related that when he was fourteen there was a revival in his neighborhood causing “an unusual excitement on the subject of religion. It commenced with the Methodists, but soon became general among all the sects in that region . . . and great multitudes united themselves to the different religious parties.” Smith went on to relate that due to this revival his mother, sister and two brothers joined the Presbyterians, while he favored the Methodists. “My mind at times was greatly excited, the cry and tumult were so great and incessant. The Presbyterians were most decided against the Baptists and Methodists . . .”

Consequently, in the spring of 1820 he went into the woods to seek God’s direction on which church to join. When he knelt to pray, “I was seized upon by some power which entirely overcame me,” his tongue was bound, he was overcome by “thick darkness” and feared for his life. Then “a pillar of light” appeared over his head, expelling the darkness, and two beings, “whose brightness and glory defy all description,” appeared above his head. “One of them spake unto me, calling me by name and said, pointing to the other—This is My Beloved Son, Hear Him!” After composing himself, Smith asked the personages

which of all the sects was right (for at this time it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong)—and which I should join. I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong and **the Personage** who addressed me said that **all their creeds were an abomination in his sight**; that those professors were all corrupt; that they draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me, they teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof²²

22 Joseph Smith—History 1, *Pearl of Great Price*, LDS Church 2013.

When young Smith returned home he said to his mother, “I have learned for myself that Presbyterianism is not true.” A few days later he related his experience to the local Methodist minister, who berated him for making such a claim. Smith claimed that he shared his experience with others, which “excited a great deal of prejudice against me among professors of religion, and was the cause of great persecution, which continued to increase; . . . all united to persecute me. . . . However, it was nevertheless a fact that I had beheld a vision . . .”²³

Yet history does not seem to support Smith’s story.

CHALLENGING THE FIRST VISION

Fawn Brodie, writing in 1945, pointed out that there were no contemporary accounts of Smith’s 1820 vision until Orson Pratt published his pamphlet “Remarkable Visions” in 1840.²⁴ LDS historian James B. Allen frankly admitted that the story of the First Vision “was *not* given general circulation in the 1830’s.” Dr. Allen also admitted that “none of the available contemporary writings about Joseph Smith in the 1830’s, none of the publications of the Church in that decade, . . . mentions the story of the first vision. . . .” Dr. Allen went on to state that in the 1830’s “the general membership of the Church knew little, if anything, about it.”²⁵

While there were a few mentions of the First Vision in literature during Brigham Young’s lifetime, they seem to have had little impact on how the Mormons presented their message. Other than one article by Orson Pratt in 1849, they did not appeal to this 1820 experience to establish the LDS doctrine of God and Jesus being totally separate deities with physical bodies until after 1880.

Research regarding Smith’s visions entered a new era in 1965 when Paul Cheesman finished his BYU Master’s thesis, *An Analysis of the Accounts Relating Joseph Smith’s Early Visions*, which contained the long suppressed 1832 account of Smith’s First Vision, wherein only Christ appears. We then published this account in our booklet, *Joseph Smith’s Strange Account*

23 Joseph Smith—History 1:20-25

24 Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, 1945 ed., p. 24.

25 James B. Allen, “The Significance of Joseph Smith’s ‘First Vision’ in Mormon Thought,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* (Autumn 1966), p. 33.

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of the *First Vision*. Another important challenge to the First Vision story came in 1967 when Rev. Wesley P. Walters published his booklet “New Light on Mormon Origins From the Palmyra, N.Y. Revival” in which he challenged Smith’s story regarding a revival in Smith’s neighborhood in 1820.²⁶ Beginning in the 1960’s the church has occasionally published articles trying to correlate the various First Vision accounts, however, the average Mormon seems to have remained uninformed on the issue.

While the new Gospel Topics article “First Vision Accounts”²⁷ does reference Joseph Smith’s various narratives of the event, it glosses over the contradictions. The article states, “Joseph shared and documented the First Vision, as it came to be known, **on multiple occasions.**” However, this might leave the reader with the impression that it was an oft told story. Actually, while Joseph Smith had mentioned the vision on a few occasions, the first published account was not until 1840, twenty years after the event, by LDS Apostle Orson Pratt, in a pamphlet published in Scotland.²⁸ The next published account was one written by Joseph Smith and printed in the LDS newspaper *Times and Seasons* in 1842. This account would later be canonized in the *Pearl of Great Price*. With only two published accounts by 1842, most Mormons would not have been familiar with the story.

CONTRADICTIONS

A few basic contradictions among the accounts include the following: According to the 1832 account Smith had already concluded that all churches were wrong before entering the grove to pray, but the official account claims it is the heavenly visitors who first inform him of that. Also it does not mention a demonic presence at the start of the experience, yet later accounts do. In the 1832 account only Jesus was said to have appeared, but in later versions it was either angels or the Father and Son. The early accounts mention Smith was seeking forgiveness for his sins, whereas later accounts stress his desire to know which Christian denomination was accepted by God. According to various accounts Smith had his First Vision in 1820, 1821, or 1823. Additionally, in the official account Smith claimed that the neighborhood

26 This research was later expanded in *Inventing Mormonism: Tradition and the Historical Record*, by H. Michael Marquardt and Wesley P. Walters, (Salt Lake City: Smith Research Associates, 1994), chapter two. H. Michael Marquardt has now expanded this research under the title *The Rise of Mormonism: 1816-1844*.

27 “First Vision Accounts,” www.lds.org

28 Orson Pratt, *An Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions*, (Scotland, 1840); online at www.signaturebookslibrary.org

revival occurred in 1820, while historical records indicate a revival date between 1824-1825.

Most of the accounts of the First Vision prior to 1875 described the appearance of either one or more angels, but rarely God and Jesus.²⁹

President Gordon B. Hinckley declared that the First Vision was the greatest revelation of God that man has ever experienced:

I hope with all my heart that each member of this Church will read the story of the Prophet Joseph Smith, read the story of the **First Vision . . . cultivate within your hearts a testimony of the truth of that marvelous experience, when the Father and the Son appeared to the boy Joseph. There’s no other event in all recorded history that compares with it, not even at the baptism of the Savior. . . . He had an understanding of the Father and the Son that no other man had really ever experienced.**³⁰

However, if this vision really was so fundamental to Joseph Smith’s understanding of the nature and identity of God as a physical being one wonders why he did not use it as the basis for promoting such a revolutionary theology, a theology that flew in the face of the Bible and centuries of established Christian doctrine.

Indeed, when Smith gave his clearest teaching on the nature of God in his famous 1844 sermon (known as the King Follett Discourse), in which he refuted the orthodox belief of God as a spirit, and emphatically taught that God has a physical body of flesh and bone, he did not appeal to his First Vision as the source of this knowledge.³¹

EVOLVING FIRST VISION STORY

Below is a timeline analyzing the evolving LDS concept of God and the First Vision.

1820 — While Smith gave this date to his First Vision story years after the event, there is no contemporary documentation that Joseph Smith told anyone of a vision that year. Also, there is no record of a revival involving the Methodists, Baptists and Presbyterians, as described

29 “First Vision,” www.utlm.org

30 “Testimony of the First Vision,” Gordon B. Hinckley, *Deseret News*, Church News, (July 1, 2006), p. 2.

31 The King Follett sermon is reproduced on the official LDS web site, www.lds.org; also in *The Ensign*, (April and May 1971), online at www.lds.org

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in Smith's 1842 account published in the *Pearl of Great Price*. According to the records of those churches, each of them showed either losses or only modest gains of a handful of people, not the massive numbers expected from a revival.³²

1822 — Joseph Smith found a magical stone while digging a well, which he later used in both money-digging and translating the Book of Mormon.

1823 — Allegedly, an angel appeared in Joseph's bedroom on September 21, 1823, to tell him of an ancient record engraved on metal plates and buried in a nearby hill, recounting God's dealings with the forefathers of the Native Americans. He was not yet allowed to retrieve the plates, but was to meet the angel each year on September 22nd until God saw fit to deliver the plates into Smith's hands for translation. There are no contemporary accounts of Smith telling people of this vision. It would be several years before anyone mentions this event.

Two months later Joseph's brother Alvin died a tragic death. The date of Alvin's death becomes important in establishing the date of the revival that Smith said led to his prayer in the woods close to his home.

1824-25 — A large revival took place in the Palmyra area involving the Methodists, Presbyterians and Baptists. This revival, rather than one Smith claimed to have occurred in 1820, seems to fit the description given by Smith in his 1842 account. One of the participants at the revival was Mr. Lane of the Methodist Church, who came to the area in 1824 but was not there in 1820.³³ Records show that approximately 300 people joined the three churches as a result of the revival. Joseph's mother, two brothers and sister joined the Presbyterians at this time.³⁴ Joseph's mother, Lucy Smith, later wrote that the large revival happened after Alvin's death. Smith's father would not attend the revival because one of the ministers had earlier spoken at Alvin's funeral and had inferred that Alvin was in hell since he had never been baptized.

Writing in 1851, Orsamus Turner, a former resident of Palmyra, New York, recollected that Joseph had caught "a spark of Methodism in the camp meeting, away down in the woods, on the Vienna road, he was a very passable exhorter in evening meetings."³⁵ An exhorter would have

addressed the people at the meeting after the preacher had finished his message, giving further encouragement to follow the minister's instruction.

Supposedly Smith would have met the angel again in September of 1825, but was still not able to recover the plates.

Shortly after the annual visit from the angel, Joseph and his father left Manchester, New York, and traveled across the state to Harmony, Pennsylvania, to work for Josiah Stowell, as he searched for a lost silver mine.³⁶ Joseph is often portrayed as merely being a laborer, hired to help dig for the treasure. However, Martin Harris, one of the witnesses to the Book of Mormon, stated that Smith was hired due to his special powers:

Joseph had had this stone for some time. There was a company there in that neighborhood, who were digging for money supposed to have been hidden by the ancients. Of this company were old Mr. Stowel—I think his name was Josiah—also old Mr. Beman, also Samuel Lawrence, George Proper, Joseph Smith, jr., and his father, and his brother Hiram [Hyrum] Smith. They dug for money in Palmyra, Manchester, also in Pennsylvania, and other places. When Joseph found this stone, there was a company digging in Harmony, Pa., and **they took Joseph to look in the stone for them**, and he did so for a while, and then he told them the enchantment was so strong that he could not see, and they gave it up. There he became acquainted with his future wife, the daughter of old Mr. Isaac Hale, where he boarded. He afterwards returned to Pennsylvania again, and married his wife, taking her off to old Mr. Stowel's, because her people would not consent to the marriage. She was of age, Joseph was not.³⁷

Lucy Smith, Joseph Smith's mother, also wrote that Stowell sought out Joseph specifically "on account of having heard that he possessed certain keys, by which he could discern things invisible to the natural eye."³⁸ Thus we see that Stowell was actually hiring Smith for his magical powers. In anticipation of finding a treasure, the Smiths signed an agreement with several other men to divide the spoils, each to receive a percentage of the treasure. While boarding with Isaac Hale, one of the men named in the treasure agreement, Smith met his future wife, Emma Hale, Isaac's daughter.³⁹

1826 — In March Joseph Smith, the "glass looker," was arrested in Bainbridge, New York, and charged with

32 Rev. Wesley Walters, *The Palmyra Revival & Mormon Origins*, (Mormonism Research Ministry, 2012), pp. 17-20.

33 Marquardt and Walters, *Inventing Mormonism*, pp. 19-21.

34 Walters, *The Palmyra Revival*, p. 16; Marquardt and Walters, *Inventing Mormonism*, chapter 2.

35 Dan Vogel, ed. *Early Mormon Documents*, vol. 3, (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2000), p. 50.

36 Joseph Smith—History 1:56-57, *Pearl of Great Price*.

37 Tiffany's Monthly, NY (August 1859), pp. 164-165.

38 Lavina Fielding Anderson, ed. *Lucy's Book: A Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith's Family Memoir*, (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2001), p. 360.

39 Marquardt and Walters, *Inventing Mormonism*, pp. 68-75.

being “a disorderly person and an impostor.”⁴⁰ Wesley Walters and Michael Marquardt observed:

While Joseph Smith was working for Josiah Stowell, he was brought before a court on charges sworn against him by a nephew of Josiah Stowell, Peter G. Bridgman (or Bridgeman). Apparently Bridgman became concerned that his uncle’s money was being spent in the pursuit of elusive treasure.⁴¹

Smith’s defense was that he was not an impostor, but truly had a gift to look at his stone in his hat and discern the location of buried treasure, “but of late had pretty much given it up on account its injuring his health, especially his eyes—made them sore.”⁴² After spending two nights in custody and appearing before the judge, he was evidently allowed to escape.

Smith may have had his money-digging adventures in mind when he later wrote in his history about his youth:

I was left to all kinds of temptations, and mingling with all kinds of society, I frequently fell into many foolish errors and displayed the weakness of youth and the corruption of human nature, which I am sorry to say led me into divers temptations, to the gratification of many appetites offensive in the sight of God.⁴³

1827 — In January Joseph eloped with Emma Hale. Isaac Hale, Emma’s father, had objected to Joseph courting his daughter due to his lack of a respectable job and his treasure seeking. Even though Mr. Hale had earlier been involved in money-digging, he had become disillusioned with the project. After Smith married his daughter, Mr. Hale stated that Joseph promised him “that he had given up what he called ‘glass looking’ and that he expected to work hard for a living.” It was only after Joseph and Emma moved to Hale’s property that he “was informed they had brought a wonderful book of Plates down with them.”⁴⁴

1828 — Joseph applied for membership in the Methodist Church (of which Emma was a member) in June of 1828. This may have been triggered by grief over the death

40 Wesley P. Walters, *Joseph Smith’s Bainbridge, N.Y. Court Trials & From the Occult to Cult With Joseph Smith, Jr.* (Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 1977).

41 Marquardt and Walters, *Inventing Mormonism*, p. 70.

42 Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Joseph Smith and Money-Digging*, (Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 1970), p. 21

43 *Times and Seasons*, vol. 3 , p. 749.

44 Dan Vogel, ed. *Early Mormon Documents*, vol. 4, (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), pp. 284-286.

of the Smith’s first child shortly after birth. However, Joseph Lewis, Emma’s cousin, objected to Smith’s name being added to the church rolls on the grounds of Smith’s magic and money-digging:

I [Joseph Lewis], with Joshua McKune, a local preacher at that time, I think in June, 1828, heard on Saturday, that Joe Smith had joined the church on Wednesday afternoon, (as it was customary in those days to have circuit preaching at my father’s house on week-day). **We thought it was a disgrace to the church to have a practicing necromancer, a dealer in enchantments and bleeding ghosts, in it.** So on Sunday we went to father’s, the place of meeting that day, and got there in season to see Smith and talked with him some time in father’s shop before the meeting. Told him that his occupation, habits, and moral character were at variance with the discipline, that his name would be a disgrace to the church, that there should have been recantation, confession and at least promised reformation—that he could that day publicly ask that his name be stricken from the class book, or stand an investigation. He chose the former, and did that very day make the request that his name be taken off the class book.⁴⁵

If God had instructed Smith in 1820 not to join any church, why was he seeking to join the Methodist Church in 1828?⁴⁶

Mr. Lewis also asserted that Joseph Smith had told him

that **by a dream** he was informed that at such a place in a certain hill, in an iron box, were some gold plates with curious engravings, which he must get and translate, and write a book. . . . In all this narrative, there was not one word about “visions of God,” or of angels, or heavenly revelations. All his [Joseph Smith’s] information was by **that dream**, and that bleeding ghost. **The heavenly visions and messages of angels, etc., contained in Mormon books, were after-thoughts, revised to order.**⁴⁷

In September Joseph was finally able to take the ancient plates home and began his translation.

1830 — The Book of Mormon was published in March of 1830, having been financed by Martin Harris, one of the three witnesses to the book. Smith’s new scripture does not contain any teaching that God the Father has a physical body, only the Son.⁴⁸

45 *The Amboy Journal*, (June 11, 1879), p. 1; also *Early Mormon Documents*, vol. 4, pp. 309-310.

46 Wesley P. Walters, “The Mormon Prophet Attempts to Join the Methodist,” online at www.utlm.org

47 *The Amboy Journal*, (April 30, 1879); also *Early Mormon Documents*, vol. 4, pp. 303-305.

48 Book of Mormon, Ether 3:16-21.

Shortly after the publication of the Book of Mormon, Smith formed the Church of Christ, then in 1834 it was renamed the Church of the Latter-day Saints, and in 1838 it was given its current name, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Evidence that the early Mormon teachings on the godhead were fairly typical of the day can be seen in the testimony of the three witnesses, at the front of the Book of Mormon: “And the honor be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost, **which is one God.**”

This same concept is repeated in the text of the Book of Mormon:

2 Nephi 31:21—And now, behold, this is the doctrine of Christ, and the only and true doctrine of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, **which is one God**, without end.

Mormon 7:7 speaks of those in heaven singing endless praise “unto the Father, and unto the Son, and unto the Holy Ghost, which are one God.”

In 3 Nephi 11:27 the resurrected Jesus instructs the Nephites “verily I say unto you, that the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost are one; and I am in the Father, and the Father in me, and the Father and I are one.”

Contrary to current LDS teachings on the Godhead, the Father and Son are described as the same person. The title page of the Book of Mormon reads: “to the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that **JESUS is the CHRIST, the ETERNAL GOD**, manifesting himself unto all nations.”

In Ether 3:14 we read: “Behold, I am Jesus Christ. **I am the Father and the Son.**”

In Mosiah 15:1-3 we read 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**—The Father, because he was conceived by the power of God; and the Son, because of the flesh; thus becoming the Father and Son. And **they are one God, yea, the very Eternal Father** of heaven and of earth.

The Book of Mormon also teaches that God is a spirit and never mentions that the Father has a physical body. In Alma 18:28 Ammon instructs the king that the “Great Spirit” is “God.” Later in the story a man named Aaron informs another king of the “Great Spirit” who is “God” (Alma 22:8-11).

Thus we see that the doctrine of God in the Book of Mormon contradicts Joseph Smith’s teaching that the Father has a body of flesh and bone and is totally separate from the Son.

Towards the end of 1830 Joseph Smith began working on his *Inspired Revision of the Bible* and changed verses to make the Father and Son one. For instance, Luke 10:22 of the King James version states “no man knoweth who the Son is, but the Father; and who the Father is, but the Son, and he to whom the Son will reveal him.” However, Smith changed this to read:

. . . no man knoweth that **the Son is the Father, and the Father is the Son**, but him to whom the Son will reveal it. (Luke 10:23)⁴⁹

This hardly seems like a change one would make if ten years earlier the Father and Son had appeared to Smith as two separate individuals.

1831 — Lucy Smith, Joseph’s mother, wrote to her brother Solomon Mack, Jr., about the coming forth of the Book of Mormon and the establishing of the true church, but made no mention of God appearing to her son in 1820. Instead, she began Joseph’s story with the angel telling of the hidden record:

He [God] has now commenced this work. he hath sent forth a revelation in these last days, & this revelation is called the book of Mormon, . . . **Perhaps you will enquire how this revelation come forth.** it has been hid up in the earth four=teen hundred years, & was placed there by Moro[ni] one of the Nephites; it was engraven upon plates which have the appearance of gold . . . **Joseph after repenting of his sins and humbling himself before God was visited by an holy Angel** whose countenance was as lightning and whose garments were white above all whiteness and gave unto him commandments which inspired him from on high. and gave unto him by the means of which was before prepared that he should translate his book . . .⁵⁰

That same year Alexander Campbell, the famous preacher of the Restoration Movement, printed a criticism of Joseph Smith and his Book of Mormon, but made no mention of Smith claiming an appearance of God to start his work.⁵¹

49 King James Bible, Luke 10:22, footnote 22b, printed by the LDS Church, 1979; also *Joseph Smith’s “New Translation” of the Bible*, (Herald House, 1970).

50 “Lucy Smith to Solomon Mack, Jr., 6 January 1831,” Dan Vogel, ed. *Early Mormon Documents*, vol. 1, (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996), pp. 215-216 .

51 “An analysis of the book of Mormon with an examination of its internal and external evidences, and a refutation of its pretenses to divine authority,” by Alexander Campbell, the *Millennial Harbinger*, Bethany, Virginia February 7th, 1831: “Numerous have been the imposters among christians since the great apostacy began; . . . Since the Millennium and the evils of sectarianism have been the

1832 — Smith started working on the first draft of his history in 1832.⁵² In his handwritten account he related that he was fifteen (in his “sixteenth year”) when he had his first vision and that he had already concluded that all the churches were wrong:

. . . which led me to searching the scriptures . . . **thus from the age of twelve years to fifteen** I pondered many things in my heart . . . my mind become exceedingly distressed for I become convicted of my sins and by searching the scriptures I found that man <mankind> did not come unto the Lord but that they had **apostatized** from the true and living faith and there was **no society or denomination** that built upon the gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the new testament . . .

Yet this contradicts his 1842 account, where he said that prior to his vision **“it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong.”**⁵³

Also absent from the 1832 account is any admonition to not join any existing church. He then discussed the appearance of Christ, but nothing was said about God the Father:

. . . while in <the> attitude of **calling upon the Lord <in the 16th year of my age>** a pillar of fire light above the brightness of the sun at noon day come down from above and rested upon me and I was filled with the spirit of god and the <Lord> opened the heavens upon me and **I saw the Lord** and he spake unto me saying Joseph <my son> thy sins are forgiven thee. go thy <way> walk in my statutes and keep my commandments **behold I am the Lord of glory I was crucified for the world** that all those who believe on my name may have Eternal life . . .⁵⁴

If this vision happened when Smith was 15 it would place the vision in the Spring of 1821, not a year earlier, since he wouldn’t have turned 15 until December of 1820.

subjects of much speaking and writing, impostures have been numerous . . . But we shall proceed to notice the most recent and the most impudent delusion which has appeared in our time. The people that have received this imposture are called, THE MORMONITES. I have just examined their bible, and will first notice its contents. It is called the ‘Book of Mormon’, an account written by the hand of Mormon upon plates . . .”

52 Photo of Joseph Smith’s 1832 First Vision, online at www.utlm.org

53 *Pearl of Great Price*, Joseph Smith—History 1:18

54 Joseph Smith’s handwritten account of his First Vision is in the Joseph Smith Papers, online at <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/history-circa-summer-1832>. The arrow bracketed words <.> indicate that they were written above the line.

This account is silent about the presence of a demonic force just prior to the vision. The sinister element doesn’t enter the story until 1835 and is expanded in the official 1842 account:

I kneeled down and began to offer up the desires of my heart to God. I had scarcely done so, when immediately I was seized upon by some power which entirely overcame me, and had such an astonishing influence over me as to bind my tongue so that I could not speak. Thick darkness gathered around me, and it seemed to me for a time as if I were doomed to sudden destruction.

But, exerting all my powers to call upon God to deliver me out of the power of this enemy which had seized upon me, and at the very moment when I was ready to sink into despair and abandon myself to destruction . . . I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head, above the brightness of the sun, which descended gradually until it fell upon me. It no sooner appeared than I found myself delivered from the enemy which held me bound.⁵⁵

Another problem with his 1842 version, is that he claimed he experienced great persecution for telling people of his first vision:

I soon found, however, that my telling the story had excited a great deal of prejudice against me among professors of religion, and was the cause of **great persecution, . . . men of high standing would take notice sufficient to excite the public mind against me, and create a bitter persecution; and this was common among all the sects—all united to persecute me.**⁵⁶

Yet there is no evidence that anyone had heard of this experience until after he started his church in 1830. Since others had related similar heavenly visits it is doubtful that Smith’s vision described in this 1832 account would have caused much of a stir.

For instance, in 1816 a minister by the name of Elias Smith (no relation to Joseph Smith) recounted his conversion to Christianity. Notice how similar it is to Joseph Smith’s first account:

. . . I went into the woods . . . a light appeared from heaven. . . . My mind seemed to rise in that light to the throne of God and the Lamb. . . . The Lamb once slain appeared to my understanding, and while viewing him, I felt such love to him as I never felt to any thing earthly. . . . It is not possible for me to tell how long I remained in that situation . . .⁵⁷

55 *Pearl of Great Price*, Joseph Smith—History 1:15-17.

56 *Pearl of Great Price*, Joseph Smith—History 1:22.

57 Elias Smith, *The Life, Conversion, Preaching, Travels, and Sufferings of Elias Smith*, (Portsmouth, N.H., 1816), pp. 58-59.

Alexander Campbell wrote the following on March 1, 1824, concerning a “revival in the state of New York”:

Enthusiasm flourishes. . . . This man was regenerated when asleep, by a vision of the night. That man heard a voice in the woods, saying, “Thy sins be forgiven thee.” A third saw his Savior descending to the tops of the trees at noon day.⁵⁸

Asa Wild claimed to have a revelation which is very similar to the story Joseph Smith published in 1842. It was printed in the *Wayne Sentinel* (the paper to which Joseph Smith’s family apparently subscribed) on October 22, 1823:

It seemed as if my mind . . . was struck motionless, as well as into nothing, before the awful and glorious majesty of the Great Jehovah. He then spake . . . He also told me, that every denomination of professing christians had become extremely corrupt. . . .⁵⁹

Joseph Smith’s 1832 revelation, *Doctrine and Covenants* 84:20-22, stated that “without the ordinances thereof, and the authority of the priesthood” no one can “see the face of God.” According to this revelation Smith could not have seen God in 1820 since he made no claim to priesthood at that time.

1833 — In an 1833 interview, Willard Chase, the man who hired the Smiths to dig a well in 1822, said he had known the Smiths since 1820. “At that time, they were engaged in the money digging business, which they followed until the latter part of season of 1827.” Mr. Chase went on to state that in 1827 Joseph Smith, Sen. told him about the angel appearing to young Joseph several years earlier to tell him of the plates. Yet Chase makes no mention of Smith claiming a vision of God and Jesus in 1820.⁶⁰

Joseph Smith’s revelations were printed in *A Book of Commandments for the Government of the Church of Christ*. However, there is no material dealing with Smith’s claim of an 1820 vision.

1834 — E. D. Howe’s exposé, *Mormonism Unveiled*, was published toward the end of 1834, which contained statements by various neighbors and acquaintances of the Smiths, yet it is silent about Joseph claiming a vision in 1820. Mr. Howe did not attack Smith on a claim of seeing God and Jesus in 1820, but on Smith’s money-digging and his new scripture, the Book of Mormon.

That same year Oliver Cowdery, one of the three witnesses to the Book of Mormon, with the help of

Joseph Smith, published the first history of Mormonism in the LDS paper *Messenger and Advocate*, starting in 1834 and continuing into 1835.⁶¹

However, Cowdery did not mention any vision in 1820, but began Smith’s story with an account of a revival in the Palmyra area when Smith was in his 15th year (age 14).⁶² But further on Cowdery corrected Smith’s age, stating Smith would have been in his 17th year (16) not his 15th year (14) and placed both the revival and the angel vision in 1823.⁶³

According to Cowdery’s account, following the 1823 religious excitement Smith prayed to know “**if a Supreme being did exist**, to have an assurance that he was accepted of him.” Smith’s prayer was answered on September 21, 1823, when a “messenger” appeared to him in his bedroom “to deliver a special message, and to witness to him **that his sins were forgiven**, and that his prayers were heard.”⁶⁴

If Smith had already seen God and Jesus in 1820 why would he later pray in 1823 to know if God existed? And why wouldn’t Oliver Cowdery start with Smith’s earlier 1820 vision if Smith often shared the story?

It should also be remembered that the records during this period of Mormonism show a fairly standard Trinitarian view of the godhead. Their baptismal prayer ended with the phrase “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and the Holy Ghost.” Their sacrament prayer starts, “O God the Eternal Father, we ask thee in the name of thy Son Jesus Christ, to bless and sanctify this wine to the souls of all those who drink of it.”⁶⁵

1835 — A larger compilation of Smith’s revelations was published under the title *Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of the Latter Day Saints*. The preface states “We deem it to be unnecessary to entertain you with a lengthy preface to the following volume, but merely to say, that it contains in short, **the leading items of the religion which we have professed to believe.**” Again, there is no mention of an 1820 vision or God having a body of flesh and bone. In fact, it taught just the opposite.

The first part of the 1835 *Doctrine and Covenants* was the “Lectures on Faith,” which were a series of seven lectures delivered to the elders of the LDS Church in Kirtland, Ohio, to establish them in correct doctrine. Yet these lessons fail to present the view of God currently held by the LDS Church. These lectures were printed in every edition of the *Doctrine and Covenants* until 1921.

61 *Messenger and Advocate*, vol. 1, (Kirtland, OH, 1834-1835).

62 *Messenger and Advocate*, vol. 1, (December 1834), p. 42

63 *Ibid.*, p. 78.

64 *Messenger and Advocate*, vol. 1, p. 78.

65 *Book of Commandments*, (1833), pp. 53-54.

58 *The Christian Baptist*, vol. 1, pp. 148-149.

59 *Wayne Sentinel*, Palmyra, New York, (October 22, 1823).

60 *Early Mormon Documents*, vol. 2, pp. 65-66.

Lecture five made the distinction that the Father is “a personage of **spirit**” while the Son is “a personage of **tabernacle**.”⁶⁶ This would contradict the current LDS teaching that God the Father has a physical “tabernacle” as well as Jesus. The lecture goes on to explain that there are two personages in the godhead, with the Holy Ghost being the mind of the two.⁶⁷

In light of these lessons it is obvious that Joseph Smith was not teaching people that he saw God the Father in 1820 as a distinct being of flesh and bone.

According to Joseph Smith’s journal, on November 9, 1835, he was visited by “Joshua the Jewish minister,” later identified as Robert Matthias, to whom Smith recounted some of his early life:

being wrought up in my mind, respecting the subject of religion and looking at the different systems taught the children of men . . . I retired to the silent grove and bow[e]d down before the Lord, . . . I made a fruitless attempt to p[r]ay, my tounge seemed to be swollen in my mouth, so that I could not utter, I heard a noise behind me like some person walking towards me, I strove again to pray, but could not, the noise of walking seemed to draw nearer, I sprung up on my feet, . . . I kneeled again my mouth was opened . . . and I called on the Lord in mighty prayer . . . a personage appeared in the midst of the 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 unto me that Jesus Christ is the Son of God; <and I saw many angels in this vision>** I was about 14 years old when I received this first communication; When I was about 17 years old I saw **another vision of angels** in the night . . .⁶⁸

If the being had actually been Jesus one would not expect him to give testimony of himself. And since this was followed by the claim of seeing “many angels” it appears that Smith was not identifying the being as Jesus, but as an angel.

Several days later, on November 14, 1835, Smith gave another account of his early life to Erastus Holmes:

I commenced and gave him a brief relation of my experience while in my juvenile years, say from 6 years old up to the time **I received the first visitation of Angels which was when I was about 14. years old** and also the visitations that I received afterward, concerning the book of Mormon, . . .⁶⁹

66 *Doctrine and Covenants*, (1835), Lectures on Faith, Section V, p. 53.

67 *Ibid.*, pp. 53, 55.

68 Dean C. Jessee, ed. *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), pp. 104-105. Words in brackets indicate the words were written above the line.

69 Jessee, *Personal Writings*, pp. 112-113.

This November 14th account of angels reinforces the assessment of the November 9th account as being angels as well, not God and Christ.

1837 — At this point Joseph Smith seems to be making a greater distinction between the Father and Son. Thus in the second edition of the Book of Mormon the phrase “the son of” was added to several verses to distinguish between the Father and Son. One of the most significant changes was made in 1 Nephi 13:40 where it originally stated that the purpose of the Nephite record was to make known that “the Lamb of God is the Eternal Father and the Savior” (Book of Mormon, 1830 edition, page 32). But in 1837 it was changed to read “the Lamb of God is **the Son of** the Eternal Father, and the Savior” (Book of Mormon, 1 Nephi 13:40).

Another important change was made in 1 Nephi 11:18. In the 1830 edition, page 25, it read “Behold, the virgin which thou seest, is the **mother of God**, after the manner of the flesh.” In modern editions it has been changed to read, “Behold, the virgin whom thou seest is the **mother of the Son of God**, after the manner of the flesh.”

1838 — Joseph Smith commenced dictating a new account of his history, which would be printed in the 1842 LDS newspaper, the *Times and Seasons*, and would later become the official account printed in the *Pearl of Great Price*.

In this account we see the purpose of the vision shift from seeking forgiveness of sins to determining which church to join. Smith mentions “an unusual excitement on the subject of religion” which soon spread to “all the sects in the region of country.” After hearing the competing arguments Joseph concluded that since each group understood the Bible differently his only recourse was to seek a direct answer from God. When the two heavenly beings appeared Smith inquired “which of all the sects was right, that I might know which to join.” However, this account mentions nothing about seeking a forgiveness of sins, as stated in earlier versions.⁷⁰

While this First Vision account is similar to the one given in 1835 to Robert Matthias, Smith now claims that the first personage introduced the second personage with the words “This is My Beloved Son, Hear Him!” This seems to mark the point at which Smith switched from claiming the visit of angels to an appearance of the Father and Son. But even in this account he is not making the point that they have physical bodies.

70 *Pearl of Great Price*, Joseph Smith—History 1:12-19.

1840 — LDS apostle Orson Pratt published *A[n] Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions* in Scotland. He related that when Smith was “about fourteen or fifteen years old” he was praying in the woods when “immediately his mind was caught away, from the natural objects with which he was surrounded; and he was enwrapped in a **heavenly vision**, and saw **two glorious personages who exactly resembled each other**.” Smith was then given the assurance that his sins were forgiven and instructed to not join any of the existing churches.

It is very similar to Smith’s 1842 account. While the vision implies that the heavenly messengers were the Father and Son, they were not specifically named. Also, seeing them in a “vision” does not demand a literal understanding that they were two physical beings standing before him.

1841 — When Joseph’s younger brother, William, was interviewed about the beginnings of Mormonism by James Murdock in 1841, he started with the angel appearing in 1823. Murdock gave this summary:

In the year 1816 or 1817, the whole [Smith] family removed to the State of New York . . . They were in rather low circumstances, and followed farming. About the year **1823**, there was a revival of religion in that region, and Joseph was one of several hopeful converts . . . Joseph hesitated between the different denominations. While his mind was perplexed with this subject, he prayed for divine direction; and afterwards was awaked one night by an extraordinary vision. The glory of the Lord filled the chamber with a dazzling light, and **a glorious angel** appeared to him, conversed with him, and told him that he was a chosen vessel unto the Lord to make known true religion.⁷¹

1842 — In the March 1, 1842, issue of the *Times and Seasons* Joseph Smith printed his letter to John Wentworth, editor of the *Chicago Democrat*, in which he recounted his vision of “two glorious personages.”⁷²

A similar letter (with some revisions) was published by Daniel Rupp in 1844 in a book called *An Original History of the Religious Denominations at Present Existing in the United States*.

In the next issue of the *Times and Seasons* Joseph Smith published his official account of his early life, which would eventually be canonized in LDS scriptures.⁷³

71 “William Smith Interview with James Murdock, 18 April 1841,” *Early Mormon Documents*, vol. 1 p. 478.

72 Joseph Smith Papers, Church History, March 1, 1842; online at <http://josephsmithpapers.org>

73 *Times and Seasons*, Nauvoo, Ill., (March 15, 1842), vol. 3, no. 10, pp. 727-728, 748-749, 753.

According to this account, when he was in his 15th year (age 14) his mother, sister, and two brothers joined the Presbyterian Church due to a revival in the neighborhood. The revival started with the Methodists and soon spread to the Presbyterians and Baptists.

Joseph went into the grove to ask God which church to join “for at this time it had never entered my heart that all were wrong.” Two beings appeared. One spoke, pointed to the other being and said “This is my beloved Son, hear him.”

He was told to join none of the churches “for they were all wrong . . . all their creeds were an abomination in his sight; . . .”

This is also the first that we read of him being persecuted for telling people of his first vision. Yet the early critics of Joseph Smith, such as E. D. Howe and Alexander Campbell, fail to mention his claim of an 1820 vision.

While this account mentions the appearance of God and Jesus, there is no evidence that people understood this in a literal sense. Without any instruction to the contrary, people would not have understood this account to mean that God had a physical body. In light of the previous twelve years of Smith teaching God is a spirit, they would have presumably understood this account as a vision, not an actual physical appearance of God and Jesus.

Interestingly, that same issue of the paper contained part of the Book of Abraham, where Smith introduced a plurality of gods into the Genesis creation account:

And then the Lord said, let us go down; and they went down at the beginning, and they organized and formed, (that is, the Gods,) the heavens and the earth. . . . And they said, the Gods, let there be light, and there was light.⁷⁴

Six months later, in the September 15, 1842, issue of the *Times and Seasons*, Joseph Smith wrote about his view of the godhead:

We believe in three Gods. . . . no odds whether there be two, three, or “Gods many.” **The Father, and the Son are persons of Tabernacle**; and the Holy Ghost a spirit.⁷⁵

This view is in conflict with the earlier 1835 teaching in the *Lectures on Faith* where the Father is described as a personage of spirit, while the Son is a personage of tabernacle. From this point on Smith paints a much clearer picture of the Father being a totally separate god from Jesus.

1843 — On April 2nd Smith instructed the Mormons in Ramus, Illinois: “The **Father has a body of flesh**

74 *Times and Seasons* (March 15, 1842), vol. 3, p. 720.

75 *Times and Seasons* (September 15, 1842), vol. 3, p. 926.

and bones as tangible as man's; the Son also; but the Holy Ghost has not a body of flesh and bones, but is a personage of Spirit" [D&C sec. 130:22].

If Joseph Smith had been teaching from the founding of the LDS Church that God had a physical body, why was there a need for this revelation?

An example of how Mormons understood the vision is seen in Levi Richards' journal for June 11, 1843. Richards recorded hearing Smith tell of his first vision, but gives no year for the vision and says nothing about God and Christ appearing:

Pres. J. Smith bore testimony to the same— saying that when he was a youth he began to think about these these things but could not find out which of all the sects were right— he went into the grove & enquired of the Lord which of all the sects were right— re received for answer that none of them were right, that they were all wrong, & that the Everlasting coven[n]t was broken= he said he understo ood the fulness of the Gospel from beginning to end— & could Teach it & also the order of the priesthood in all its ram ifications= Earth & hell had opposed him & tryed to destroy him— but they had not done it= & they <never would>⁷⁶

1844— Joseph Smith's most famous sermon on the nature of God, often referred to as the King Follett Discourse, was delivered at the April 7 LDS General Conference:

God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens! That is the great secret. **If the veil were rent today, and the great God who holds this world in its orbit, and who upholds all worlds and all things by His power, was to make himself visible,—I say, if you were to see him today, you would see him like a man in form**—like yourselves in all the person, image, and very form as a man; . . . it is necessary we should understand the character and being of God and how He came to be so; for I am going to tell you how God came to be God. We have imagined and supposed that God was God from all eternity. I will refute that idea, and take away the veil, so that you may see. . . . He was once a man like us; yea, that God himself, the Father of us all, dwelt on an earth, the same as Jesus Christ Himself did; . . .⁷⁷

This would have been a logical place to make reference to his own experience of seeing the Father and Son as two separate Gods in 1820, but Smith makes no appeal to his First Vision.

⁷⁶ Journal of Levi Richards, (June 11, 1843), online at <http://josephsmithpapers.org>

⁷⁷ Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, vol. 6, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1975), ch. 19, p. 305; also see *Ensign*, (April & May, 1971).

On May 24th, Alexander Neibaur, a German convert to Mormonism, recorded in his journal the following account given by Joseph Smith:

Br Joseph tolt us the first call he had . . . went into the Wood to pray kneelt himself down his tongue was closet cleavet to his roof— could utter not a word, felt easier after a while= saw a fire towards heaven came near & nearer **saw a personage** in the fire light complexion blue eyes a piece of white cloth drawn over his shoulders his right arm bear after a w[h]ile **a other person** came to the side of the first Mr Smith then asked must I join the Methodist Church= No= they are not my People, th all have gone astray there is none that doeth good no not one, but **this is my Beloved son** harken ye him, the fire drew nigher Rested upon the tree enveloped him⁷⁸

While this account does not give a date for the vision, it does make it clear that the two personages were God and Christ. However, in this account it is the Father who delivers the message, not Jesus.

Two months later, on June 7, the one and only issue of the *Nauvoo Expositor* was printed by former leaders in the LDS movement. After pleading privately with Smith to give up plural marriage, they now went public with their charges of Smith being a fallen prophet. Besides their objections to plural marriage and political issues, they charged Smith with teaching false doctrine:

Among the many items of **false doctrine** that are taught the Church, is the doctrine of **many Gods**, one of the most direful in its effects that has characterized the world for many centuries. We know not what to call it other than **blasphemy**, for it is most unquestionably, speaking of God in an impious and irreverent manner. **It is contended that there are innumerable gods as much above the God that presides over this universe, as he is above us**; . . . and now, O Lord! shall we set still and be silent, while thy name is thus blasphemed, and thine Honor, power and glory, brought into disrepute? See Isaiah c 43, v 10; 44, 6-8; 45, 5, 6, 21, 22; . . .⁷⁹

Obviously throughout the history of the movement Smith had not been teaching that there was a plurality of gods. Otherwise, his top leaders would have had no reason to raise the issue in the *Nauvoo Expositor* in 1844.

In response to the *Nauvoo Expositor*, on June 16, Smith delivered another sermon on the nature of God:

Now, you know that of late some malicious and corrupt men have sprung up and apostatized from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and they

⁷⁸ Journal of Alexander Neibaur, (May 24, 1844), online at <http://josephsmithpapers.org>

⁷⁹ *Nauvoo Expositor*, Nauvoo Illinois, (June 7, 1844); excerpts online at www.utlm.org

declare that the Prophet believes in a **plurality of Gods**, and, lo and behold! we have discovered a very great secret, they cry—"The Prophet says there are many Gods, and this proves that he has fallen." . . . I will preach on the plurality of Gods. . . . **I have always declared God to be a distinct personage, Jesus Christ a separate and distinct personage** from God the Father, and the Holy Ghost was a distinct personage and a Spirit: and these three constitute three distinct personages and **three gods**.⁸⁰

Again, he did not appeal to his experience in the grove to establish this doctrine. In fact, Smith's teachings through the years do not show that he had always taught God to be a distinct being from Jesus. This seems to be a new teaching in the 1840's, and not preached in the 1830's.

Despite Smith's claims of consistency in the above statement, there is clearly an evolution to his teaching on the nature of the Godhead, which even Mormon scholars recognize. LDS scholar Charles R. Harrell observed:

In March 1839, Joseph first hinted that there may be more than "one God" (D&C 121:28); however, it wasn't until 1842 that he specifically referred to the godhead as consisting of three separate beings who were also "three Gods." He seems to now consider them to be one only in the sense that they "agree as one." In his last public discourse, given June 16, 1844, Joseph repudiated the trinitarian notion of a three-in-one God. "Men say there is one God—the Fa[the]r, Son & the H.G. are only 1 God—it is a strange God anyhow 3 in one & 1 in 3." . . .⁸¹

Joseph Smith made another interesting point in his June 16, 1844, sermon in which he appealed to Revelation 1:6, which says "And hath made us kings and priests unto God and His Father" to prove there was a God above our Heavenly Father. Smith separated "God" from the clause "and His Father":

the apost[les] have disc[ove]red. that there were Gods above—God was the Fa[the]r of our Ld. J.C.—my object was to preach the Scrip--& preach the doctrine **there being a God above the Fa[the]r of our Ld. J.C.**⁸²

Yet this is in direct contradiction to his change in his Inspired Version of the Bible, written in the early 1830's, when he still believed in one God. At that time

he changed the verse to read "and hath made us kings and priests unto God, his Father."⁸³ By dropping the "and" and inserting a comma he made the verse clearly state that it is only referring to Heavenly Father. Thus Smith contradicted his own revision of the Bible to prove there is a God above our Heavenly Father.

Harrell also observed:

Joseph's teachings regarding the members of the godhead appear to have progressed from essentially a trinitarian three-in-one God with a modalistic flavor, to a godhead consisting of "two personages" united by the indwelling Holy Spirit, to a godhead consisting of "three personages," and finally to a godhead consisting of "three Gods."⁸⁴

One of the troubling aspects of Smith's evolving First Vision story is the lack of importance given to it in the historical record. As we have already shown, the LDS Church's current claims of the importance of the First Vision to their understanding of God and Jesus are questionable given how little Smith himself referred to it during his lifetime. LDS scholar James B. Allen observed:

It is worth noting that Joseph Smith himself never used the First Vision to illustrate his own expanded teachings about God. It appears, in fact, that he seldom referred to it at all, except in private conversation, even after it was published.⁸⁵

But a further indication of its lack of importance is how much variation occurs between the details of the different accounts, not just the details of Joseph's age and the revivals of the time but most crucially the identity of the being who was speaking to him in the vision. One would not expect a person to forget whether it was a mere angel or God Almighty when gripped with such a riveting and life-changing experience.

First Vision References After Smith's Death

After Joseph Smith's death the early church leaders continued to teach a plurality of gods. However, they did not appeal to Joseph Smith's First Vision to prove the doctrine. When Smith's earliest vision was mentioned, it was usually associated with an angel, not the Father and Son.

80 Smith, *History of the Church*, vol. 6, pp. 473-474.

81 Charles R. Harrell, "This is My Doctrine:" *The Development of Mormon Theology*, (Greg Kofford Books, 2011), p. 114.

82 Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, comp., *The Words of Joseph Smith*, (Religious Studies Center, BYU, 1980), p. 378.

83 Joseph Smith's "New Translation" of the Bible, (Herald Publishing House, 1970), p. 514.

84 Harrell, "This is My Doctrine," p. 114.

85 James B. Allen, "Emergence of a Fundamental: The Expanding Role of Joseph Smith's First Vision in Mormon Religious Thought," *Journal of Mormon History*, vol. 7, (1980), pp. 51-52.

1845 — The *Latter-Day Saints Millennial Star*, in England, printed an article titled “The Book of Mormon” which included an account of Smith’s First Vision. However, the article places the beginning of Smith’s call to 1823, not 1820:

The late martyred servant of the Lord, Joseph Smith, being much exercised in his mind on the subject of religion, when about the **age of seventeen**, and religious revivals, as they are termed, being the order of the day; . . . he was induced to retire in secret, and making his supplications unto the Lord, ask him for that wisdom which he had promised to give liberally without upbraiding.

The result of his pleadings before the Lord, was the ministration of **an angel** of the Lord, communicating unto him what was necessary for him to know, . . .⁸⁶

Even Lucy Smith, Joseph’s mother, did not mention Joseph’s 1820 vision in her manuscript of the family history. The only revival she mentions is the one following Alvin’s death in 1823.⁸⁷ Evidently, the publisher of her book, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet*, in 1853 inserted the section of Joseph’s 1820 story from the *Times and Seasons*, thus making it appear that Lucy mentions the First Vision. It also makes it appear that there were two revivals, one in 1820 and one following Alvin’s death.

Even though William Smith, Joseph’s younger brother, had earlier told people that Joseph’s First Vision was of an angel in his bedroom, in 1883 he revised his story, noting that Joseph’s vision happened in the woods. However, in both accounts he maintained the event happened in 1823.

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, . . . Joseph, then about **seventeen years of age**, had become seriously inclined, . . . At length he [Joseph Smith] 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 . . . **an angel** then appeared to him and conversed with him upon many things. He told him that none of the sects were right; but that if he was faithful in keeping the commandments he should receive, the true way should be made known to him; that his sins were forgiven, etc.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ *Latter-Day Saints Millennial Star*, (August 15, 1845), vol. 6, p. 69.

⁸⁷ *Early Mormon Documents*, vol. 1, p. 288, note 87.

⁸⁸ “William Smith, on Mormonism, 1883,” *Early Mormon Documents*, vol. 1, pp. 495-496.

Significantly, the two Smith relatives who would have been in the home during Joseph’s teen years did not show any knowledge of an 1820 vision.

1849 — Writing in the *Millennial Star*, an LDS newspaper published in England, Apostle Orson Pratt seems to be the first to appeal specifically to Smith’s vision to demonstrate that the Father and the Son were two distinct persons:

In the first vision which Joseph Smith received in the spring of the year 1820, he being between fourteen and fifteen years of age,) **both the Father and the Son**, while he was praying, appeared unto him. . . . Thus we find that the visions both of the ancient and modern prophets agree, and clearly demonstrate the existence of **two distinct persons—the Father and the Son**.⁸⁹

In spite of Pratt’s statement, most of the leaders continued to refer to the First Vision as one of angels.

1854 — Speaking at LDS General Conference, in Utah, April 6, 1854, Apostle Orson Hyde stated:

Some one may say, “If this work of the last days be true, why did not the Saviour come himself to communicate this intelligence to the world?” Because to **the angels** was committed the power of reaping the earth, and it was committed to none else. (*Journal of Discourses*, vol. 6, p. 335)

1855 — LDS President Brigham Young taught on February 18, 1855:

. . . so it was in the advent of this new dispensation. . . . The messenger did not come to an eminent divine . . . The Lord did not come with the armies of heaven, . . . 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, . . . (*Journal of Discourses*, vol. 2, p. 171)

A few days later Apostle Wilford Woodruff preached:

That same organization and Gospel that Christ died for, and the Apostles spilled their blood to vindicate, is again established in this generation. How did it come? By the ministering of **an holy angel** from God, . . . The **angel** taught Joseph Smith those principles which are necessary for the salvation of the world; . . . He told him the Gospel was not among men, and that there was not a true organization of His kingdom in the world, . . . This man to whom the **angel** appeared obeyed the Gospel; . . . (*Journal of Discourses*, vol. 2, pp. 196-197)

⁸⁹ Orson Pratt, “Are the Father and Son Two Distinct Personages,” *Millennial Star* (October 15, 1849), p. 310.

1857 — LDS Apostle Heber C. Kimball, speaking November 8th, 1857, seemed to be oblivious to any vision where Smith saw God and Christ:

Do you suppose that God in person called upon Joseph Smith, our Prophet? God called upon him; but **God did not come himself** and call, but he sent Peter to do it. Do you not see? He sent Peter and sent Moroni to Joseph, and told him that he had got the plates. (*Journal of Discourses*, vol. 6, p. 29)

1860 — John Hyde, a former Mormon, is a good example of the confusion regarding who appeared to Smith. In his book, *Mormonism: Its Leaders and Designs*, page 199, he related: “1820 . . . April . . . He [Joseph] asserts that **God the Father and Jesus Christ** came to him from the heavens.”

However, on page 240 of his book, he stated “Joseph Smith, born in 1805, sees **an angel** in 1820, who tells him his sins are forgiven.”

1863 — Apostle John Taylor explained in a sermon March 1, 1863:

How did this state of things called Mormonism originate? We read that **an angel** came down and revealed himself to Joseph Smith and manifested unto him in vision the true position of the world in a religious point of view. (*Journal of Discourses*, vol. 10, p. 127)

LDS Apostle George A. Smith, November 15, 1863, preached:

When Joseph Smith was about fourteen or fifteen years old, . . . he went humbly before the Lord and inquired of Him, and the Lord answered his prayer, and revealed to Joseph, **by the ministration of angels**, the true condition of the religious world. When **the holy angel** appeared, Joseph inquired which of all these denominations was right and which he should join, and was told they were all wrong, . . . (*Journal of Discourses*, vol. 12, pp. 333-334)

1864 — One year later, November 15, 1864, Apostle George A. Smith seemed to be describing the vision in a more traditional way:

When the Lord appeared to Joseph Smith and manifested unto him a knowledge pertaining to the coming forth of the Book of Mormon and the work of the last days, Satan came also with his power . . . He [Joseph] thus describes the incident: “In the spring of 1820, . . . I saw a pillar of light . . . **I saw two personages** . . . **“This is my beloved son, hear him.”** . . . just at the time that God was revealing unto his servant Joseph to raise up men to bear testimony of the principles of the

Gospel . . . Satan was at work stirring up the hearts of the children of men . . . (*Journal of Discourses*, vol. 11, pp. 1-2)

1869 — Five years later Apostle Smith again referred to Smith’s First Vision:

He sought the Lord by day and by night, and was enlightened by the vision of **an holy angel**. When this **personage** appeared to him, of his first inquiries was, “Which of the denominations of Christians in the vicinity was right?” (*Journal of Discourses*, (June 20, 1869), vol. 13, pp. 77-78)

Speaking on December 19, 1869, Orson Pratt taught:

By and by an obscure individual, a young man, rose up, and, in the midst of all Christendom, proclaimed the startling news that God had sent **an angel** to him; . . . This young man, some four years afterwards, was visited **again by a holy angel**. (*Journal of Discourses*, vol. 13, pp. 65-66)

1871 — On March 19 Orson Pratt preached:

He [Joseph] went out to pray, being then a little over fourteen years of age, . . . He saw in this light **two glorious personages**, one of whom spoke to him, pointing to the other, saying, **“This is my beloved Son, hear ye him.”** . . . When **these persons** interrogated him to know what he desired, he answered and said, “Lord show me which is the true church.” He was then informed by one of these **personages** that there was no true church upon the face of the whole earth; . . . The vision withdrew; the **personages** attending and the light withdrew. . . he knew that God had manifested himself to him; . . . (*Journal of Discourses*, vol. 14, pp. 140-141)

Although Orson Pratt’s sermon on March 19, 1871, could be interpreted as an appearance of God and Jesus, his sermon on December 10 of that year clearly identified the messengers as angels:

Here was Joseph Smith, a boy, . . . he was only between fourteen and fifteen years of age. . . Would he stand forth and bear testimony that he had seen with his own eyes **a messenger** of light and glory, and that he heard the words of his mouth as they dropped from his lips and had received a message from the Most High, at that early age? And then . . . to have the finger of scorn pointed at him, . . . “No visions in our day, **no angels** come in our day, . . .” and still continue to testify, . . . that God had sent **his angel** from heaven. (*Journal of Discourses*, vol. 14, p. 262)

Yet in all of these sermons no one appealed to the First Vision to establish that God the Father has a body of flesh and bones.

1880 — Joseph Smith’s 1842 First Vision account was canonized as part of the *Pearl of Great Price*, thus giving it doctrinal standing in the church.

James B. Allen notes that the First Vision gained new importance after 1880 in part because the church needed a new focus after years of legal battles regarding polygamy.

The time was ready—made for the outpouring of a new identity with the founding prophet—new reminders to the Saints of what their heritage really was, and of what Joseph Smith’s testimony really meant to them personally. The First Vision was a natural tool for such a purpose, and a new generation of writers could hardly fail to use it.⁹⁰

Further on in the same article, James Allen commented on the growing importance of the vision in LDS literature:

The vision and its attendant uses quickly began to appear in lesson manuals, augmenting the Mormon awareness of its transcendent importance. In 1899 the Young Men’s Mutual Improvement Association used it to demonstrate that it had ushered in the “Dispensation of the Fulness of Times.” The vision was thus replacing the angel in Mormon thought as the implementing factor in the restoration. . . .

At the beginning of the twentieth century the First Vision also took a permanent place in the missionary literature of the Church. . . . The Sacred Grove [in New York] was acquired by the church in this period, and pilgrimages to the grove became sacred experiences for many Mormons. . . . By the beginning of the twentieth century, belief in the First Vision was fundamental to the faith of the Latter-day Saints.⁹¹

CONCLUSION

For the past 100 years the LDS Church has placed paramount importance on the appearance of God and Christ to Joseph Smith in 1820. Speaking in the October 2002 General Conference, President Hinckley declared:

Our whole strength rests on the validity of that [First] vision. It either occurred or it did not occur. If it did not, **then this work is a fraud**. If it did, then it is the most important and wonderful work under the heavens. I knew a so-called intellectual who said the Church was trapped by its own history. My response was that **without**

90 James B. Allen, “Emergence of a Fundamental: The Expanding Role of Joseph Smith’s First Vision in Mormon Religious Thought,” *Journal of Mormon History*, vol. 7, (1980), p. 53.

91 *Ibid.*, pp. 56-57.

that history we have nothing. The truth of that unique, singular, and remarkable event [The First Vision] is the **pivotal substance of our faith**.⁹²

Yet Joseph Smith’s 1820 vision was not the center of the LDS teaching during his lifetime or Brigham Young’s. It is now established that the documents and published records of the 1820’s–1830’s show no knowledge of Smith claiming an appearance of the Father and Son in 1820. While Smith did print one account in 1842, he did not appeal to his vision as proof that God has a body of flesh and bone, an important tenet of LDS theology. It was not until 1880 that the vision took on a major role in the church’s literature.

In recent years LDS scholars have tried to minimize the many inconsistencies among the differing First Vision accounts by emphasizing the core element of Joseph’s having seen SOMETHING in the grove that day. But this misses the important point that if he only saw *something* then he did not receive specific information on the nature of God.

Gordon B. Hinckley, while serving as an apostle, declared: “Either Joseph talked with the Father and the Son, or he did not. If he did not, we are engaged in **blasphemy**.”⁹³

Yes, if Mormonism is not true its doctrine of God would be a great blasphemy.

Smith not only taught that the Father and Son were two separate deities, he also taught that God at one time was a mortal on another earth, overseen by yet a higher deity. When God was a human he went through the same type of life that we are going through, he suffered death, was resurrected, and after eons arrived at the position of a god himself. Preaching in 1844, Joseph Smith declared:

I am going to tell you **how God came to be God**. We have imagined and supposed that God was God from all eternity I will refute that idea, and take away the veil. . . . **he was once a man like us**; yea, that God himself, the Father of all, dwelt on an earth, the same as Jesus Christ himself did, . . . The Scriptures inform us that Jesus said, As the Father hath power in Himself, even so hath the Son power—to do what? Why, what the Father did. The answer is obvious—in a manner to lay down His body and take it up again. Jesus what are you going to do? To lay down my life **as my Father did**, and take it up again. . . . Here, then, is eternal life—to know the only wise and true God; and **you have got to learn how to be Gods yourselves**, and to be kings and priests to God,

92 Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Marvelous Foundation of our Faith,” *Ensign* (November 2002); online at www.lds.org

93 Gordon B. Hinckley, *Conference Reports*, (October 1961), p. 116.

the same as all Gods have done before you, namely, by going from one small degree to another . . .⁹⁴

Joseph Smith's 1820 vision is obviously a later invention and then back-dated to give a more dramatic start for his prophetic career and to introduce a heretical view of God.

Yet when we turn to the Bible for instruction, we find a very different doctrine of God than the one Smith proclaimed the last year of his life. Bill McKeever, of Mormonism Research Ministry, summed it up this way:

The Mormon doctrine of God is not the same as the historic Christian view. It holds that God and man are essentially of the same species, and that God the Father has a body of flesh and bones. He is not uniquely self-

⁹⁴ Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, (Deseret Book, 1977), pp. 345-346. This sermon was also published in the *Ensign*, April and May 1971; online at www.lds.org

existent, transcendent, or eternal. Neither is he truly the creator of all things, for he is one among potentially billions of Gods, and does not even have the ability to create matter. . . .

To the contrary, God says in Isaiah 43:10, "Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me." Psalm 90:2 says of him, "Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God." This is the God Christians worship. Of him we can say, "Who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor? Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen" (Romans 11:34-36).⁹⁵

The God of the Bible is not the god of Joseph Smith.

⁹⁵ Bill McKeever, "God the Father According to Mormonism," Mormonism Research Ministry, online at www.mrm.org

GOSPEL TOPIC ESSAYS: FIXING HISTORY?

By Eric Johnson

www.mrm.org

In what appears to be an attempt to deal with several vital historical issues propogated by the LDS Church throughout the years, the Mormon Church has been producing essays since late 2013 under its "Gospel Topics" section of its lds.org website, attempting to reconcile the facts with what had been taught by earlier leaders and church manuals.

The Reaction of Ganesh Cherian

On February 12, 2014, Ganesh Cherian—who is currently serving as a stake high counselor in Wellington, New Zealand—wrote a very honest blog titled "A Former Bishop's Doctrinal Dilemmas" that expresses his deep concern about the church's attempt at honesty. We encourage you to read in its entirety: <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/kiwimormon/2014/02/a-former-bishops-doctrinal-dilemmas/>

In his blog, Cherian—who was a bishop for five and a half years—referred to an October 2013 general conference talk given by Dieter Uchtdorf, a member of the First Presidency. Cherian wrote:

President Uchtdorf gave an impassioned plea to those who have left the church, admitting mistakes in leadership, and promising a place for those who doubt. Since then it feels like the church has changed. While Uchtdorf's talk seemed extraordinary at the time, in retrospect it feels like it was a preface for that change. Change that is not without its challenges.

Cherian continued:

During this particular lesson one of my fellow high-priests informed us that two friends (a former Bishop, and a Stake President) in England had recently left the church over the 'Race and the Priesthood' essay. As dutiful leaders they had instructed their congregations, referring to the 'the seed of Cain' explanation for withholding the priesthood from Black members of the church until 1978. This recent 'clarification' had apparently undermined their understanding of both revelation and doctrine. Though I haven't left the church, this shift to more transparency is a challenge for me as well. Not because I don't welcome these revisions. They seem very fair and thoroughly researched. But like my fellow high priests, I too used these now discarded explanations and doctrines throughout my leadership to teach – and now I'm left to wonder.

He then referred to the four essays mentioned above (and listed with their links below), explaining:

Each is a challenge to the seemingly authoritative version of our history – and the intention is to release more revisions/explanations by April 2014. Drawing on historical evidence and scholarship these essays go further than any previous official publications issued by the church in contradicting those narratives that good members have long repeated as justifications for our more curious doctrines and practices. And naturally, many are baffled.

Pointing out that during the second week of January, Mormons all over the world studied chapter 1 of *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Fielding Smith* that discussed the “First Vision,” Cherian continued:

But after a careful reading of the new source material it would appear that the First Vision account as we have come to know it, was virtually unheard of for the first decade of the Church’s existence. What we now regard as pivotal to our claim to divine mandate was absent for the first members. Leaving many questions over what those founding Mormons actually believed about the nature of the Godhead, and what caused them to join the church?

The changing of history caused this former bishop to be “perplexed.” He writes,

I have repeated stories to my ward to justify particular church practices. I have given the hard line on church policies and doctrines and have held people accountable. As recently as June I reasoned with a friend that polygamy was needed because there were so many more women than men at the time, an argument that the polygamy essay seems now to repudiate.

Imagine the position this man and so many others in the Mormon Church are in. For years, he followed party lines and repeated the history as he was instructed. Now, because the church is trying to “come clean,” so to speak, by admitting historical problems of its past, there is a problem. Everything that the Mormons were taught before these essays were printed was apparently based on lies or half-truths. This was the crux of the complaint made in 2010 by a group of Swedish Saints.

Let’s allow Cherian by providing the core section of his blog:

All of this has caused me to grapple with my own questions. Is it possible that I have hurt people with doctrines and dogmas that in the light of these essays seem to sit on shaky ground? I understand how essential it is to ‘sustain’ the Brethren but these days I live with a caution that those ideals that I believe today could be dismissed by future First Presidencies. As a Bishop I once performed a wedding for a friend of a friend. The grooms [sic] ex-wife and her girlfriend were guests and as I was seated at their table during the reception we chatted. It became apparent that they had really enjoyed the way I had conducted the ceremony and they asked if I would be willing to be their forthcoming ‘Civil Union’ celebrant. I turned them down explaining that as an officer of the LDS church I wasn’t permitted. I tried to be as sensitive and compassionate as possible and one of the women seemed genuinely understanding of my position but her partner was visibly upset. At the time I felt reassured that I was ‘right,’ and that any distress I had caused

them was totally justified. I even congratulated myself on some level that I was sharing the gospel with them. I look back at that experience with regret. I now wish that I had just reached out and given them both a big hug.

I also question myself regarding how blameless I am in my representation of these doctrines as definitive? Was I complicit in telling stories I suspected were problematic? Could I have made an effort to be more informed? Could I have asked more questions, been more thoughtful, mindful? How did I get to this place where I have cause to wonder about my own, and the church’s integrity?

Today I am reeling from the translation of the ‘Book of Mormon’ essay. Exactly how was I to know that Joseph Smith got the words to the Book of Mormon by burying his head in a hat. How was I to know that a stone he found in a well was instrumental in this process of translation? Every picture, or video I have ever seen has him sitting at a table with the gold plates before him pouring over these ‘curious characters’ by the light of a candle! Was I naive to have faith in this story? Was I wrong to retell this story as a teacher, as a missionary, or as a priesthood leader? What am I now to make of the ‘truth of the matter’ when it speaks neither to my heart nor my soul. What am I to make of a story I find confounding and frankly bizarre?

Again, feel free to read the whole blog in detail, but before we close, we must consider his final words:

But as for me I am left to wonder where I go from here. I am torn. I love my church and credit where I am in my life to years of church service – but I cannot ignore the dishonesty. I feel aggrieved that in attempting to sustain and perpetuate stories of faith, the church has accredited doctrines to God that are simply fictions. Can such a chasm be bridged as President Uchtdorf suggests?

As we file out of class, a fellow high councillor remarks, ‘Isn’t it interesting that today’s challenge to our faith is coming directly from the church?’

Amazing words! Notice that last line again: “Today’s challenge to (the LDS) faith is coming directly from the church”! By attempting to correct the decades of fully documented teaching—shall we call it “indoctrination”—that begins in primary and goes all the way through general conference, the LDS Church is now causing more angst by trying to reconcile its history. As Cherian infers, how can a Latter-day Saint know that what is being taught today won’t be changed tomorrow? This is a bag of worms with a hole on the bottom.

While we’re happy that the leadership is at least attempting to deal with the historical mess, could meddling with past teachings cause an even greater migration from the Mormon Church? ■

LETTERS AND EMAILS

September 2013: would like to thank you for your UTLM web site, it is a great source of information. I am hoping to convince my Mother of the fraudulent and deceptive nature of the Mormon Religion, she has been a member for 40 years. I too was a member, missionary, branch president but came to realise that I was fooling myself, and believing in malicious fairy tales. I have only recently come across your site but it is great.

October 2013: WHY.....why.....do you waste your time, and energy, writing garbage and untruths about Mormons, and the LDS church? This is America . . . everyone is FREE to worship how and who they want. Why are you so consumed by the message of your particular interpretation of “Jesus” that you have to show how wrong someone else’s faith is to justify your own position of belief? It is a smug thing to say, “we have the truth and you don’t!!”

I have been and experienced all types of ‘religions’, and have left because what they offered did not work for me. I just left, I didn’t create a newspaper listing ALLLLLLLLL what was wrong with that particular church.

October 2013: Just lately I found some of your lectures on the internet, so I thought I would send an email. 40 years ago, I was struggling with Mormonism. Your pamphlets, and Fawn Brodies’ book helped me leave. I was raised in the church, and I always knew there was something wrong with Mormonism. Lots of thing really bothered me. But . . . the things I learned from you, Gerald, and Fawn Brodie . . . well I knew absolutely nothing about that stuff at all.

October 2013: I have read your website with interest over the last several years and have also wanted to have a chat with the editors. It seems that there are a lot of strong opinions on this website and I often wonder how much research is actually undertaken in order to compose the results that are currently displayed.

I find it very interesting to note the animosity towards the mormon religion when we certainly do not go out of our way to belit[tle] any of our fellow believers of any religion. There obviously has to be an emotional connection attached to the vicious attack and this would certainly be clouding ones ability to research and portray beliefs accurately.

October 2013: I got to know the LDS Church in the late 70s. But I was baptized in it [in] May of 1980. I took an active part in it since then. I stayed in it for 30 long years. I only left in March 2010, after having read (from cover to cover!) Jerald and Sandra Tanner’s book “The Changing World of Mormonism.” I also read . . . many other books published by former mormons. I have also had access to numberless testimonies by many ex-mormons like us. I have officially resigned the LDS Church this year. I feel happier since I left it. I admit that I felt an emptiness deep inside me, since mormonism occupied many hours of my life, like

my wife’s and children’s. But, the best thing of all is that I eventually learned by myself (with God’s help, I believe) that mormonism isn’t true as they claim.

October 2013: OMG I can’t believe I found you on FB. Fifteen years ago . . . when I was on a LDS mission in California I thought you were the devil! (LOL). You are a saint! God Bless.

November 2013: Just this past year my wife and i have had a troubled heart about the mormon church and some of their beliefs. I have always had questions my whole life, but was taught to have faith in the church and not believe some of the rubbish i hear. Well i happened to stumble across a few websites like . . . yours and others and i listened to them and i was shocked at some of the things i found out about Joseph Smith and the mormon church. I felt betrayed, and confused. I thought to myself how can i have been deceived for 42 years, let alone my parents, siblings. wife. grandparents ect. . . have been deceived also. Then i realized i was under mind control. I was born into it, so i didn’t know any better as did the rest of my family. I am a truth seeker as is my wife. I love the lord Jesus christ. I cannot dispute any of the evidence i have learned about joseph smith and mormonism. It makes too much sense to me. I can never go back to mormonism after what i have learned. It poses a problem though. I don’t know what to do about my parents and other siblings. They are devout mormons.

November 2013: Cindy Prince, author of *It’s Time: A Family’s Journey of Discovering Truth and God’s Amazing Grace*, wrote:

I just wanted to share with you that the part in our story when our arrogant Bishop decided to bring up Adam-ondi-ahman to John, trying to show how smart he was and assumed my husband was too inferior to know anything about it, the reason John was armed for that moment was because of reading your material about it. We had “heard” of it when we were members but didn’t know anything really. . . . But the reason John was able to hold his own, stun the bishop, and tell him the “real” story behind the ‘revelation’ was because of the information he had read in your work. . . . I know I’m a broken record here but thank you for all you sacrificed to get that information in all of our hands when there’s no way we could have done that ourselves!

November 2013: I have enjoyed watching and listening to your video clips on you tube. i want to thank you for opening my eyes to the truth about the LDS religion.

November 2013: I’m so glad that your website is available like a brazen serpent raised on a staff to heal any if they will only look. The truth of mormonism is so easy to find thanks to your ministry. The LDS church has taken great efforts to erase the evidence of its checkered past, and tried to whitewash their image and proclaim a perfect church. The LDS have succeeded in placing millions under mind control and for almost 30 years of my life, I was one of them. . . .

I have found that you can leave the church, but the church won't leave you alone. We have regularly had the pressures of ward missionaries sent to "work" with us. . . . I feel sorry for them, and I do pray for them, but I am no longer like them, and I owe that to your website. . . . And there I found that the truth of Mormonism is not to be found inside the manuals of the LDS church.

November 2013: You truly need to stop fighting against the Lord's true church Sandra. I testify that if you continue, the Lord will not hold you innocent at the last day. You will be held accountable for all souls you teach false doctrine to and lead astray. They too will be held accountable, but YOU will be held more accountable for actively teaching them lies.

November 2013: I came to your bookstore several months ago and we chatted across your desk for an hour or so. My resignation letter is the culmination of what that first conversation generated. I've used some of your materials and my own research to finally compose my resignation letter, which I mailed this past Monday!

November 2013: People like YOU spread rumors and lies in hatred against the church. That is YOUR issue. The church is still true and always will be REGARDLESS of what YOU believe or teach. Do you get that?

Learn to wise up and realize you left the church, because YOU chose to believe lies. That's a fact. I KNOW that you misrepresent the LDS church and you lie. You spread lies in attempt to justify what YOU chose to believe. You won't accept that YOU strayed from the truth and accepted lies of the devil. You now actively fight against the truth. You and your husband apostatized. That's a fact.

November 2013: I'm going through a transition which is very scary for me. I don't think the mormon church is true anymore. It scares me. I was born and raised LDS. I married outside of the temple to my wife who I baptized but we quickly became weary and fell away. . . . Are what people saying truly fact about danites and what all the church has lied or hid from us. They give no answer except have faith carry on.

November 2013: I testify Sandra that what you and your husband have done in fighting against the LDS church is 100% wrong. You will not stand blameless at the last day Sandra. I hope you will repent and come back to the church. Don't judge the church by individual people Sandra. People make mistakes, but that doesn't make the LDS church false. Lies about Joseph Smith don't become true based on how many times the lie is told to others Sandra. I know Joseph Smith was a prophet of God. I KNOW IT!

December 2013: [This is from one of the people involved in the Swedish meetings in 2010.]

We are reading in the new testament and learning about the Christian Jesus. We have a pastor and she is helping us on the way.

December 2013: i left the church back in Sep 2011 after 36 years, i found the [LDS apostle] Delbert Stapley letter [to Governor George Romney regarding racial issues. <http://tinyurl.com/ydlat82>], then it all came crashing down.

Since then my life has been great and i have such inner peace and joy . . . i feel free, thank you so much for all you have done. When i was a missionary back in 1977 we knew about you and your husband to stay clear, who would ever think i would be here saying thank you.

December 2013: God knows Joseph Smith was called to be a prophet. Did you ignore the fact that God warned Joseph his name would be had for both good and evil among men? . . . You need to stop teaching lies against the LDS church . . . Your progression and salvation are dependent upon whether you continue to persecute the saints and fight against Christ's church. . . . I testify of this. My witness of the truth of the LDS church WILL stand against you if you refuse to stop teaching lies.

December 2013: I just wanted to thank you again for visiting with me and my sister this past November at your store. What a thrill it was to meet you in person and have you sign my copy of *Mormonism Shadow or Reality*. Thank you for taking time to share and pray with us. I was impacted by you and your husband's book back in 1973 while a freshman student at Eastern New Mexico University.

December 2013: Thank you and your Dear Gerald for your work, your research and faith in Jesus Christ and for putting it all online. I studied your website utlm to learn the truth and now I have a wonderful personal Relationship with the real God and Savior and a trust in God's precious and cherished Word the Holy Bible. thank you with endless gratitude for doing the Lord's work.

February 2014: As a person who became intrigued with Mormons and Mormonism over year ago, I want to thank you for saving from me from joining what I now realize is a cult. I'd been reading and listening to everything I could find concerning LDS doctrine and theology. More than anyone or anything else, the many interviews and speeches of yours I've watched on YouTube have helped me see that the claims of Joseph Smith and the religion he founded cannot be true. . . . I just wanted you to know that you are making a difference in the lives of people you haven't even met!

February 2014: I converted to the church in my early 20's. I was told horrific things about you and your husband. I was counseled to stay as far away from your writings. In other words, looking into your story meant getting together with Satan. Needless to say I lived the TBM [true believing Mormon] life to a T. I had my whole being invested in the church. My five children were also raised to be tbm. . . . Fast forward 26 years from my conversion. I resigned last May. Seeing your videos and reading your story helped me tremendously in my search for real truth.

February 2014: A lot of this information you have could be false. A lot of documents and records were from people who were enemies of Joseph Smith. . . . So a lot of records could be things Joseph Smith’s enemies could have written. . . . Joseph smith knew the bible he lived by his good morals and wanted other people to follow his good morals . . . And I love how people say how bad the church is and that Joseph wasn’t a prophet when clearly they have never felt the gift of the holy spirit. Have you experienced your self the holy spirit? It’s an overwhelming type of feeling that’s gives me peace and happiness.

February 2014: I come from a Mormon family, was half in and half out for 48 years, polygamy never did sit well with me, but my parents are true believers, so I went with it. My truth finding mission started with reading a book on Mark Hofmann and wondering why the church leaders paid thousands to hide his work. Then I got the real truth from Fawn Brodie. Information from your web site and your personal experience with the church took away any doubts I may have had. Thank you for your courage and dedication to God’s truth!

February 2014: God has used your little bookstore to shake that whole state, and abroad. Our family prays for your ministry often. You spent about a hour and a half ministering to my mom in your bookstore and explained lds problems to her with clarity and compassion. I will always remember that. Your a blessing! Thank you for serving Him!

March 2014: I’m from Brasil and i’m reading the digital book “The Changing World of Mormonism.” I’ve served a mission, married at the temple, served in others positions on the local church . . . I alwais had some doubts about the church history and doctrine. This book is helping me so much . . . Thank you.

March 2014: I want to personally thank you and Jerold, for all that you have personally done for my family. . . . Both I and my husband . . . were born and raised in the LDS church. . . . If it wasn’t for you, I don’t know if we ever would of heard the truth. I can’t stop the tears from flowing this morning. . . . We love you Sandra and [in our] heart are forever grateful. Your sister in Christ,

April 2014: Saw your last post and it reminded me of how much you and your knowledge has helped me. From trying to lift your display of golden plates to the books you have that shed light on the Gospel. I found Jesus two years ago and with the help of people like you, so has my oldest daughter, son-in-law and granddaughter.

April 2014: I was an investigator considering joining the LDS church until I started seeing how many things I was taught in the lessons don’t match up to archaeology findings and also the many changes that happened to their Book of Mormon.



LDS GROWTH STATS

In 2012 the LDS Church announced that it was lowering the age of its male missionaries from 19 to 18 years old. The age of women missionaries was dropped from 21 to 19 years old. This resulted in a significant increase in the number of missionaries for 2013. Below are the statistics for both 2012 and 2013, taken from the LDS conference reports.

2012

LDS Church Membership.....	14,782,473
New Children of Record.....	122,273
Convert Baptisms.....	272,330
Missionaries.....	58,990

2013

LDS Church Membership.....	15,082,028
New Children of Record.....	115,486
Convert Baptisms.....	282,945
Missionaries.....	83,035

The new report is of particular interest as it gives us an idea of the effectiveness of increasing the number of LDS missionaries last year. The results are less than impressive. The *Salt Lake Tribune* reported:

In the year and a half since the LDS Church lowered the minimum age for full-time missionary service, the Utah-based faith has seen its proselytizing force swell from 58,500 to more than 83,000. That’s a 42 percent leap.

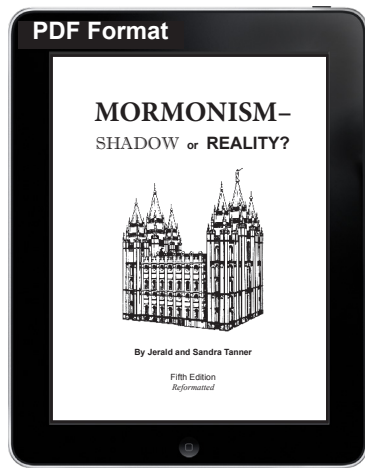
The number of convert baptisms last year grew to 282,945, up from 272,330 in 2012. That’s an increase of—less than 4 percent.

How can that be? Why would a surge of 25,000 additional eager and earnest suit-and dress-wearing, scripture-packing, pamphlet-peddling young “elders” and “sisters” not translate into a similarly dramatic jump in the number of Mormons on membership rolls? (“Mormon conversions lag behind huge missionary growth,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, May 2, 2014)

Matt Martinich, an independent researcher, saw it as market saturation. The extra missionaries were sent into areas where the LDS Church had already done significant proselytizing. The article continues:

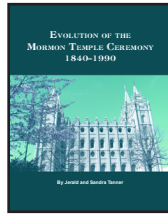
As it stands, the ratio of converts to Mormon missionaries has slipped from 5-to-1 in 2010 to less than 3.5-to-1 last year.

The article concludes: “Ultimately, though, the goal of Mormon missionary work may be as much about converting the proselytizer as converting the proselyte” (*Salt Lake Tribune*, May 2, 2014).

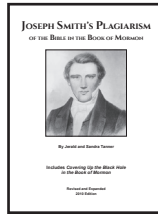


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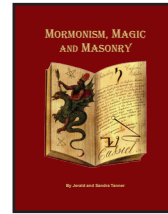
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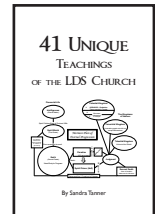
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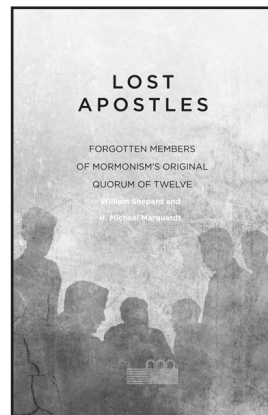
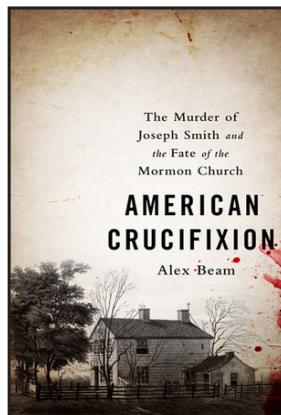


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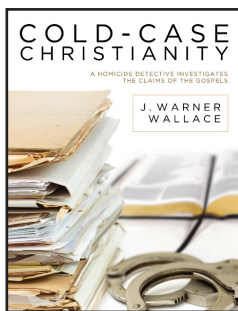
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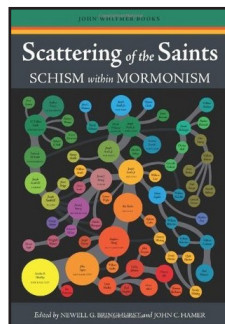


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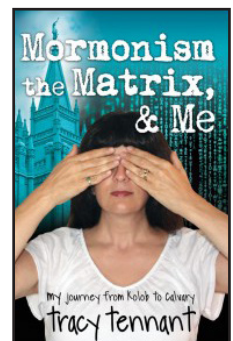


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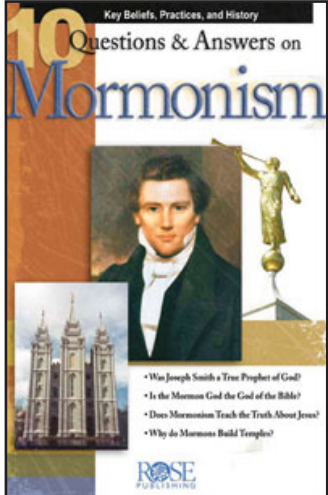
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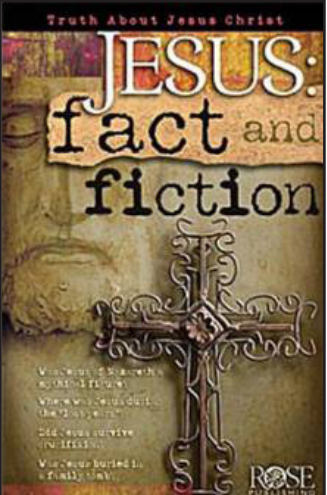
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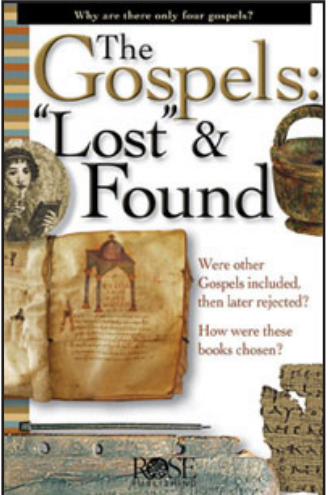
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