

*Editor: Sandra Tanner***Utah Lighthouse Ministry**1358 S. West Temple
Salt Lake City, UT 84115
www.utlm.org

THE FIRST VISION

200 Years Later

LDS President Russel M. Nelson started 2020 with a challenge to the church members to “immerse yourself” in the story of Joseph Smith’s First Vision and the restoration of the church in preparation for the next General Conference, which would be the 200th anniversary of Smith’s vision.¹ He promised those who thus prepare themselves that the April 2020 annual conference would be “not only memorable but also unforgettable.”

However, events took an unexpected turn with the outbreak of COVID-19 and the closing of all public meetings. The annual church conference, held in Salt Lake City, Utah, and usually attended by thousands, had to be broadcast from an empty auditorium with pre-recorded music from the Tabernacle Choir.

During the session on Sunday, April 5th, a pre-recorded message from President Nelson was broadcast. He read a new proclamation, “The Restoration of the Fulness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ: A Bicentennial Proclamation to the World.”² In it we read:

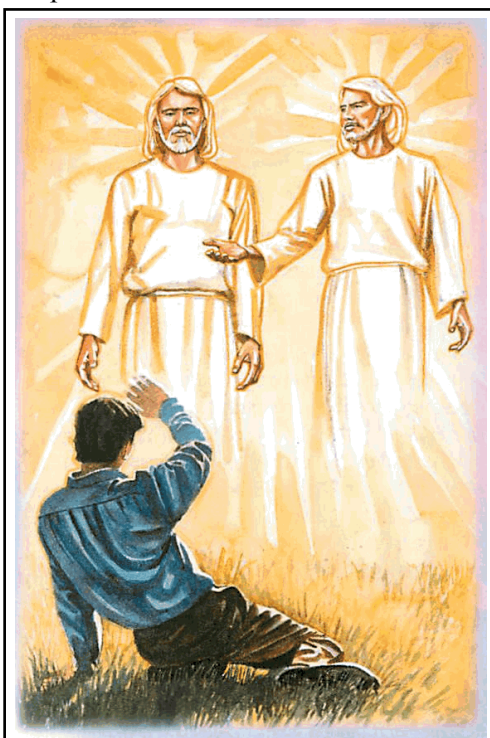


Illustration of Joseph Smith’s First Vision.
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Two hundred years ago, on a beautiful spring morning in 1820, young Joseph Smith, seeking to know which church to join, went into the woods to pray near his home in upstate New York, USA. He had questions regarding the salvation of his soul and trusted that God would direct him.

In humility, we declare that in answer to his prayer, **God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, appeared to Joseph** and inaugurated the “restitution of all things” as foretold in the Bible. . . . We declare that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, organized on April 6, 1830, is Christ’s New Testament Church restored.³

Joseph Smith’s First Vision was also 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

¹ “President Nelson Invites Sharing of Gospel Restoration,” <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/president-nelson-invites-sharing-gospel-restoration>

² “Prophet Introduces a New Proclamation to the World: ‘The Restoration of the Fulness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ,’” <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/restoration-proclamation>

³ “Read the New Proclamation: The Restoration of the Fulness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ,” <https://www.ldsliving.com/Read-the-New-Proclamation-The-Restoration-of-the-Fulness-of-the-Gospel-of-Jesus-Christ/s/92649>

hinge on which turns the gate that leads to the path of salvation and eternal life.⁴

However, Joseph's conflicting accounts of this event, along with various historical problems, leaves the LDS Church with a very shaky foundation. In an attempt to reconcile the various versions the LDS Church has posted an article with links to the actual documents. This is certainly a welcome step toward full disclosure, but still leaves many questions unanswered.

GOSPEL TOPICS ESSAY – FIRST VISION ACCOUNTS

As part of an ongoing series of essays on the LDS church website that deal with topics on Mormonism that have traditionally been criticized, the church's current article on the First Vision states, "Joseph shared and documented the First Vision, as it came to be known, on multiple occasions; he wrote or assigned scribes to write four different accounts of the vision."⁵

Granted, he related several accounts of the First Vision, but not necessarily of the Father and Son appearing in each of them. 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 and 1839, 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*.⁶

In the official account 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 state 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 thereof.⁷

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 . . ."⁸

Yet Smith's story of "great persecution" is absent from contemporary sources. LDS scholar Steven C. Harper conceded: "There is no evidence in the historical record that Joseph Smith told anyone but the minister of his vision for at least a decade."⁹

CHALLENGING THE 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 "An Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions" in 1840.¹⁰ 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

4 Gordon B. Hinckley, "What Are People Asking About Us?" *The Ensign*, (November 1998): pp. 70-71)

5 *Gospel Topics Essays*, "First Vision Accounts," <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/first-vision-accounts?lang=eng>

6 *Pearl of Great Price* (Latter Day Saints), Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pearl_of_Great_Price_\(Latter_Day_Saints\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pearl_of_Great_Price_(Latter_Day_Saints))

7 *Pearl of Great Price*, Joseph Smith—History, 1:19, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/pgp/js-h/1?lang=eng>

8 *Pearl of Great Price*, Joseph Smith—History, 1:20

9 Steven C. Harper, *First Vision: Memory and Mormon Origins*, (Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 11.

10 Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, (Alfred A. Knopf, 1945 ed.) p. 24.

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."¹¹

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, the leaders 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 the canonization of the *Pearl of Great Price* in 1880, which contained Smith's First Vision.

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 Joseph Smith's long suppressed handwritten 1832 account of the First Vision, wherein only Christ appears.

We then published the 1832 account in our booklet, *Joseph Smith's Strange Account 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 1820.¹² Beginning in the 1960's the LDS 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 Gospel Topics article "First Vision Accounts"¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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 would have been 15, not 14, and had already concluded that all churches were wrong before entering the grove to pray, but the official account claims it was 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 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. And even then, there was no emphasis on the Father as a physical being.¹⁵

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**

11 James B. Allen, "The Significance of Joseph Smith's 'First Vision' in Mormon Thought," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* (Autumn 1966): p. 33.

12 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*. The original booklet has been renamed *The Palmyra Revival & Mormon Origins*.

13 *Gospel Topics Essays*, "First Vision Accounts," <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/manual/gospel-topics-essays/first-vision-accounts?lang=eng>

14 Orson Pratt, *An Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions*, (Scotland, 1840).

15 See for instance, *Journal of Discourses*, vol. 12, pp. 333-334; vol. 11, pp. 1-2; vol. 13, pp. 77-78; vol. 18, p. 239.

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baptism of the Savior. . . . He had an understanding of the Father and the Son that no other man had really ever experienced.¹⁶

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.¹⁷

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.¹⁸

FROM MAGIC, TO AN ANGEL, TO GOD AND JESUS

Below is a timeline analyzing Smith's evolving story, the LDS concept of God and the First Vision accounts.

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 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.¹⁹

1822 — Joseph Smith found a dark magical stone while digging in a creek and a white stone while digging a well. Both stones were later used in money-digging and translating the Book of Mormon.²⁰

1823 — According to the *Pearl of Great Price*, the angel Moroni appeared in Joseph's bedroom on September 22, 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 writes about this event.

Two months after the angel first appeared 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.²¹ 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 1820.²² 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.²³ Joseph's brother William 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.²⁴

This would make Smith's chronology hopelessly confused. If the First Vision happened after Alvin's death (in 1823) what year did the angel first appear and tell Joseph about the plates?

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."²⁵ 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 this, Joseph and his father left Manchester, New York, and traveled across the state to Harmony, Pennsylvania, to work for a farmer named Josiah Stowell, as he searched for a lost silver mine.²⁶ Joseph

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

17 Institute for Religious Research, "Mormon Doctrine and the Trinity," <http://mit.irr.org/mormon-doctrine-and-trinity>

18 The King Follett sermon is reproduced in *The Ensign*, (April and May 1971), online at www.lds.org

19 Marquardt and Walters, *Inventing Mormonism*, pp. 17-25.

20 Michael Hubbard Mackay and Nicholas J. Frederick, *Joseph Smith's Seer Stones*, (BYU and Deseret Book, 2016), pp. 66-88; Richard Van Wagoner, *Natural Born Seer: Joseph Smith, American Prophet, 1805-1830*, (Salt Lake City: Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2016), pp. 141-143.

21 See *Pearl of Great Price*, Joseph Smith-History, 1:5.

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

23 Marquardt and Walters, *Inventing Mormonism*, chapter 2.

24 "William Smith interview with E. C. Briggs, 1893," *Early Mormon Documents*, vol. 1, edited by Dan Vogel, (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2000), pp. 512-513.

25 Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, vol. 3, p. 50.

26 Marquardt and Walters, *Inventing Mormonism*, p. xxiii.

mentions this event in his history but brushes it aside by describing his involvement as merely being a laborer, hired to help dig for the treasure.²⁷ 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.²⁸

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."²⁹ 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, Smith met his future wife, Emma Hale.³⁰ Isaac Hale was one of the men named in the treasure seeking agreement.

1826 — In March Joseph Smith, the "glass looker," was arrested in Bainbridge, New York, and charged with being "a disorderly person and an impostor."³¹

Wesley Walters and Michael Marquardt observed:

27 *Pearl of Great Price*, Joseph Smith–History 1:56-57.

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

29 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

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

31 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).

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.³²

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 of injuring his health, especially his eyes—made them sore."³³ After spending two nights in custody and appearing before the judge, he was evidently escorted out of the county. 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.³⁴

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."³⁵

Keep in mind that, according to Smith's 1842 account, he was being prepared by God for the work of translating scripture from 1823 to 1827. Why would he be involved in magic during this time, which is condemned in the Bible?³⁶

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 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:

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

33 *People vs. J.S.*, Chenango Co., NY, Justice of the Peace Court, 20 March 1826; <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/appendix-docket-entry-20-march-1826-people-v-js/1>

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

35 Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, vol. 4, pp. 284-286.

36 See Deut. 18:9-12; Rev. 21:8.

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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.³⁷

If God had instructed Smith in 1820 not to join any church, why was he seeking to join the Methodist Church in 1828?³⁸

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.**³⁹

In September Joseph was finally able to take the ancient plates home and began his translation. However, rather than using the “interpreters” (Mosiah 8:13; Ether 4:5) preserved with the plates, he used his magic stone to conjure up the translation. Supposedly God had the “interpreters” preserved because the Nephite language would be totally unknown to the future seer (Joseph Smith). Yet a rock Smith inadvertently found on a neighbor's farm apparently worked just as well.⁴⁰ Using the same process that he did when scrying⁴¹ for

lost treasures, Smith placed the stone in his hat, where it shone in the dark and purportedly gave him the translation of the plates, word-for-word, which he then dictated to a scribe.

In 2016 LDS Apostle Dieter F. Uchtdorf compared Joseph's use of a seer stone to that of a text message on a mobile phone:

*People have asked me, “Do you really believe that Joseph Smith translated with seer stones? How would something like this be possible?” And I answer, “Yes! That is exactly what I believe.” This was done as Joseph said: by the gift and power of God. In reality, most of us use a kind of “seer stone” every day. My mobile phone is like a “seer stone.”*⁴²

Thus the “translation” was not accomplished through any regular process used by scholars, but by mystical means. Smith simply read the divinely given message off the stone.

1829 — In need of money to publish the Book of Mormon, Joseph consulted his seer stone about selling the copyright for the Book of Mormon in Canada. God the Father revealed through Smith's stone that several of his followers were to make the journey, and would be successful. However, they failed to find anyone to buy the copyright. David Whitmer wrote about the debacle:

Joseph looked into the hat in which he placed the stone, and received a revelation that some of the brethren should go to Toronto, Canada, and that they would sell the copyright of the Book of Mormon. Hiram Page and Oliver Cowdery went to Toronto on this mission, but they failed entirely to sell the copyright, returning without any money. Joseph was at my father's house when they returned. . . .

Well, we were all in great trouble; and we asked Joseph how it was that he had received a revelation from the Lord for some brethren to go to Toronto and sell the copyright, and the brethren had utterly failed in their undertaking. Joseph did not know how it was, so he enquired of the Lord about it, and behold the following revelation came through the stone: “Some revelations are of God: some revelations are of men: and some revelations are of the devil.” So we see that the revelation to go to Toronto and sell the copyright was not of God, but was of the devil or of the heart of man.⁴³

1830 — The Book of Mormon was published in March of 1830, having been financed by Martin Harris,

42 Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “President Dieter F. Uchtdorf Compares Seer Stone to Cell Phones,” *LDS Daily*, <https://www.ldsdaily.com/church-lds/president-dieter-f-uchtdorf-compares-seer-stone-cell-phones/>

43 David Whitmer, *An Address To Believers in Christ*, (Richmond, Missouri, 1887), p. 31; <https://www.mrm.org/attempt-to-sell-copyright>.

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

38 Wesley P. Walters, *The Mormon Prophet Attempts to Join the Methodists*, online at <http://utlm.org/onlineresources/josephsmithmethodist.htm>

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

40 Michael H. MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, *From Darkness unto Light: Joseph Smith's Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon*, (BYU, 2015), p. 125.

41 “Scrying, also known by various names such as ‘seeing’ or ‘peeping’, is the practice of looking into a suitable medium in the hope of detecting significant messages or visions.” <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scrying>

a local farmer and convert to the LDS Church. Smith's new scripture does not contain any teaching that God the Father has a physical body, only the Son.⁴⁴ It actually teaches that God is a spirit. 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).

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.

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.

Shortly after the publication of the Book of Mormon in 1830, Smith formed the Church of Christ. In 1834 the name was changed to the Church of the Latter Day

Saints and then renamed The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 1838.

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, which would put it more in line with the Book of Mormon. 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)⁴⁵

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 . . .⁴⁶

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's claim of an 1820 vision or objecting to Smith's view of God.⁴⁷

1832 — Smith started working on the first draft of his history in 1832. In his handwritten account he related that he was fifteen (in his "sixteenth year") when he had

⁴⁵ *Joseph Smith's "New Translation" of the Bible*, (Herald House, 1970); also LDS King James Bible, Luke 10:22, footnote 22b, printed by the LDS Church, 1979.

⁴⁶ "Lucy Smith to Solomon Mack, Jr., 6 January 1831," Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, vol. 1, pp. 215-216.

⁴⁷ Alexander Campbell, "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," *Millennial Harbinger*, Bethany, Virginia (February 7, 1831).

⁴⁴ Book of Mormon, Ether 3:16-21.

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 **apostatised** from the true and liveing faith and there was **no society or denomination** that built upon the gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the new testament . . .⁴⁸

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.”**⁴⁹

Also absent from the 1832 account is any admonition to not join any existing church. He then relates 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 . . .⁵⁰

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.

The 1832 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 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.⁵¹

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.**⁵²

Yet there is no evidence that anyone had heard of this experience until after he started his church in 1830. Since non-Mormons had related similar heavenly visits it is doubtful that Smith's vision described in his 1832 account would have caused much of a stir. Even his 1842 account of the Father and the Son is not that different from other visionaries of the day.

For example, in 1815 Norris Stearns published an account his own conversion to Christianity which included an appearance of the Father and the Son:

I saw two spirits, which I knew at the first sight. But if I had the tongue of an Angel I could not describe their glory, for they brought the joys of heaven with them. **One was God, my Maker, almost in bodily shape like a man.** His face was, as it were a flame of Fire, . . . Below him stood **Jesus Christ** my Redeemer, **in perfect shape like a man**—His face was not ablaze, but had the countenance of fire, being bright and shining. His Father's will appeared to be his! All was condescension, peace, and love.⁵³

Also, 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

48 History, circa Summer 1832, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-summer-1832/2>

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

50 History, circa Summer 1832, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-summer-1832/3>

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

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

53 Norris Stearns, *The Religious Experience of Norris Stearns Written by Divine Command*, (Greenfield, Massachusetts, 1815), p. 12. <https://archive.org/details/TheReligiousExperienceOfNorrisStearns/page/n5/mode/2up>

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 . . .⁵⁴

Alexander Campbell, well-known preacher, wrote the following on March 1, 1824, concerning a “revival in the state of New York” where many were claiming miraculous visions:

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.⁵⁵

Asa Wild claimed to have a revelation which is very similar to the story Joseph Smith later published. 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.⁵⁶

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 the Father 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 prior to the angel.⁵⁷

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. This volume teaches a

view of God and Christ that would have been acceptable in the Christian community. For example, chapter 24:18: “believe in the gifts and callings of God, by the Holy Ghost, which beareth record of the Father and of the Son, which Father and Son and Holy Ghost, is one God, infinite and eternal, without end.”

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

Also that year, Peter Bauder wrote of his visit with Joseph Smith at the Whitmer’s home in New York in 1830. Evidently Mr. Bauder asked Smith to recount his conversion experience. Instead, Smith started his story with the angel announcing the Book of Mormon, not with an account of an earlier vision of God and Jesus:

[I] had the privilege of conversing with him [Joseph Smith] alone, several hours, and of investigating his writings, . . . **He could give me no Christian experience**, but told me that **an angel** told him he must go to a certain place in the town of Manchester, Ontario County, where was a secret treasure concealed, which he must reveal to the human family.⁵⁸

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 1835.⁵⁹

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).⁶⁰ 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 1823.⁶¹

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.”⁶²

⁵⁴ Elias Smith, *The Life, Conversion, Preaching, Travels, and Sufferings of Elias Smith*, (Portsmouth, N.H., 1816), pp. 58-59; <https://archive.org/details/lifecon00smit>

⁵⁵ Alexander Campbell, ed., *The Christian Baptist*, 7 vols. in 1, (1835), https://archive.org/stream/TheChristianBaptistVol17/The_Christian_Baptist_Vol_1-7#page/n65/mode/2up

⁵⁶ *Wayne Sentinel*, Palmyra, New York, (October 22, 1823).

⁵⁷ *Early Mormon Documents*, vol. 2, pp. 65-66.

⁵⁸ *Early Mormon Documents*, vol. 1, p. 17.

⁵⁹ *Messenger and Advocate*, vol. 1, (Kirtland, OH, 1834-1835).

⁶⁰ *Messenger and Advocate*, vol. 1, (December 1834), p. 42.

⁶¹ *Messenger and Advocate*, vol. 1, p. 78.

⁶² *Messenger and Advocate*, vol. 1, p. 78.

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."⁶³

1835 — On August 17 a larger compilation of Smith's revelations was presented to the church, voted on and 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.

Lecture five made the distinction that the Father is "a personage of **spirit**" while the Son is "a personage of **tabernacle.**" 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.⁶⁴

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

⁶³ *Book of Commandments*, (1833), pp. 53-54.

⁶⁴ *Doctrine and Covenants*, (1835), Lectures on Faith, Section V, pp. 53, 55.

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 . . .⁶⁵

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, . . .⁶⁶

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).

⁶⁵ 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.

⁶⁶ Jessee, *Personal Writings*, pp. 112-113.

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.”⁶⁷

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 that 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.⁶⁸

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.

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.

67 Jerald and Sandra Tanner, Introduction to *3,913 Changes in the Book of Mormon*; <http://www.utlm.org/onlinebooks/3913intro.htm>

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

The average Christian of the day would no doubt view this event as a mystical experience, much like Steven in Acts 7:56 exclaiming “I see **heaven open** and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

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.⁶⁹

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.”⁷⁰

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 began publishing his official account of his early life, which would eventually be canonized in LDS scriptures.⁷¹

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; . . .”

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

70 Joseph Smith Papers, Church History, March 1, 1842; <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/church-history-1-march-1842/1>

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

This is also the first that we read of him being persecuted for telling people of his First Vision. Joseph wrote “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 which continued to increase.”⁷² 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, the same issue of the paper where Smith started his history 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.⁷³

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.⁷⁴

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 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 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>⁷⁵

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 7th 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; . . .⁷⁶

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.

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

⁷⁵ Levi Richards Journal, 11 June 1843, extract; <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/levi-richards-journal-11-june-1843-extract/2>

⁷⁶ Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, vol. 6, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1975), ch. 19, p. 305; also see *Ensign*, (April and May 1971).

⁷² *Times and Seasons* (April 1, 1842), vol. 3, p. 748.

⁷³ *Times and Seasons* (March 15, 1842), vol. 3, p. 720.

⁷⁴ *Times and Seasons* (September 15, 1842), vol. 3, p. 926.

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 him⁷⁷

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; . . .⁷⁸

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 16th, 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 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**.⁷⁹

Again, we see that he did not appeal to his experience in the grove to establish the distinction of the Father and the Son. In fact, Smith's teachings through the years do not show that he had always taught a plurality of Gods or the Father 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 sermon, 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[oly] G[host] are only 1 God—It is a strange God anyhow 3 in one & 1 in 3." . . .⁸⁰

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:

the apost[les] have disc[ove]red. that there were Gods above—God was the Fa[the]r of our L[or]d. J[esus] C[hrist]—my object was to preach the Scrip—& preach the doctrine **there being a God above the Fa[the]r of our Ld. J.C.**⁸¹

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**."⁸² By dropping the "and" and inserting a comma he made the verse clearly state that it is only referring to Heavenly Father.

⁷⁹ Smith, *History of the Church*, vol. 6, pp. 473-474.

⁸⁰ Charles R. Harrell, "This is My Doctrine:" *The Development of Mormon Theology*, (Greg Kofford Books, 2011), p. 114.

⁸¹ Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, comp., *The Words of Joseph Smith*, (Religious Studies Center, BYU, 1980), p. 378.

⁸² *Joseph Smith's "New Translation" of the Bible*, (Herald Publishing House, 1970), p. 514.

⁷⁷ Journal of Alexander Neibaur, (May 24, 1844), online at <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/alexander-neibaur-journal-24-may-1844-extract/1>

⁷⁸ *Nauvoo Expositor*, Nauvoo, Illinois, (June 7, 1844); excerpts online at www.utlm.org

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."⁸³

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.⁸⁴

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.

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, . . .⁸⁵

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 1823.⁸⁶ 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.

Although 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.⁸⁷

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.

Over the next 35 years LDS leaders occasionally referred to the First Vision, but often spoke of it as a vision of angels rather than the Father and Son.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ *Latter-Day Saints Millennial Star*, (August 15, 1845), vol. 6, p. 69.

⁸⁶ *Early Mormon Documents*, vol. 1, p. 288, note 87.

⁸⁷ "William Smith, on Mormonism, 1883," *Early Mormon Documents*, vol. 1, pp. 495-496.

⁸⁸ See *Salt Lake City Messenger*, no. 122. <http://www.utlm.org/newsletters/no122.htm#EvolvingFirstVisionStory>

⁸³ Harrell, *This is My Doctrine*, p. 114.

⁸⁴ 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.

For example, 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)

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.⁸⁹

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.⁹⁰

CONCLUSION

For over a 100 years the LDS Church has placed paramount importance on the appearance of God and

⁸⁹ 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.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 56-57.

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 that history** we have nothing. The truth of that unique, singular, and remarkable event [The First Vision] is the **pivotal substance of our faith**.⁹¹

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, with the canonization of the *Pearl of Great Price*, 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 **someone** in the grove that day. But this misses the important point that if he only saw *someone* 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**.”⁹²

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 married, 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

⁹¹ Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Marvelous Foundation of our Faith,” *Ensign* (November 2002).

⁹² Gordon B. Hinckley, *Conference Reports*, (October 1961), p. 116.

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, the **same as all Gods have done before you**, namely, by going from one small degree to another . . .⁹³

When Joseph Smith declared that “God was once a man like us,” and we can “learn how to be Gods” ourselves, it would imply that God at one time was a sinner like us. President Lorenzo Snow wrote: “As man now is, God once was; As God now is, man may be.”⁹⁴

Joseph Smith’s 1820 vision is obviously a later invention which was then back-dated to give a more dramatic start for his prophetic career and which also introduced 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-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.



⁹³ 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).

⁹⁴ *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Lorenzo Snow*, LDS Church, (2012), p. 83.

⁹⁵ Bill McKeever, “God the Father According to Mormonism,” Mormonism Research Ministry, www.mrm.org

LDS Church Growth for 2019

At the April LDS Conference it was reported that church membership now stood at 16,565,036, up from the 2018 count of 16,313,735. There were 94,266 new children of record listed and convert baptism was listed as 248,835.¹

According to the *Salt Lake Tribune* for April 4, 2020:

The latest statistical report, released Saturday, put total membership above 16.5 million at the end of 2019, up by more than 251,000 from the previous year.

That’s a 1.54% increase, according to independent demographer Matt Martinich, and represents the “first year since 2012 in which the rate of membership growth has accelerated instead of decelerated.” The church grew by 1.2% in 2018.

Convert baptisms last year also mushroomed, to 248,835, up more than 6% from 234,332 in 2018.

So 2019 “is the first year since 2014,” Martinich writes on his blog at ldschurch.growth.blogspot.com, “that the annual number of convert baptisms has increased by a sizable amount compared to the prior year.”²

¹ “2019 Statistical Report for April 2020 Conference,” <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/2019-statistical-report>

² “LDS Church membership tops 16.5 million as convert baptisms rise by 6%,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, April 4, 2020. <https://www.sltrib.com/religion/2020/04/04/lds-church-membership/>

LDS in Salt Lake County Continues to Slide

According to the *Salt Lake Tribune* for December 9, 2018,

an unrelenting demographic shift has hit a major milestone: Fewer than half the people living in Salt Lake County are on the rolls of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. . . .

They show Salt Lake County’s population is now 48.91 percent Latter-day Saint, the lowest since at least the 1930s, according to the available records. There are 558,607 people on the church membership rolls in the state’s largest county, which has an estimated population of 1,142,077.

The article continues, “In Utah overall, the percentage of Latter-day Saints is 61.55 percent, a figure that has also inched down as the state’s hot job market has attracted new residents who are less likely to be members of the predominant faith than the state’s homegrown population.”¹

¹ “Salt Lake County is now minority Mormon, and the impacts are far reaching,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, December 9, 2018.

THE CHRISTUS STATUE TO BE NEW LDS LOGO

Since 1966, an eleven-foot replica of Danish sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen’s statue, The Christus, has been on display at the LDS Church visitor center in Salt Lake City. At the Saturday evening, April 4, 2020 session of LDS Conference President Nelson announced that the new church logo would be a drawing of the statue enclosed in an arch, with the name of the church underneath.¹

¹ “Nelson Unveils a New Symbol for LDS Church,” <https://www.sltrib.com/religion/2020/04/05/nelson-unveils-new-symbol/>

EXCERPTS FROM LETTERS AND EMAILS

August 2019: I am 17 years old from Montana. I'd like to start by thanking you for all of your research and provisions of information. They have been most helpful for me when talking with my mormon friends, and I pray that they will use your information to see the truth!

September 2019: A Call to Repentance. The warning call: Cease & desist your destructive behavior, and repent before it grows too late, lest ye find yourself among these "Lost Souls":

[*Doctrine and Covenants 76*]

31 Thus saith the Lord concerning all those who know my power, and have been made partakers thereof, and suffered themselves through the power of the devil to be overcome, and to deny the truth and defy my power—

32 They are they who are the sons of perdition, of whom I say that it had been better for them never to have been born; 33 For they are vessels of wrath, doomed to suffer the wrath of God, with the devil and his angels in eternity;

34 Concerning whom I have said there is no forgiveness in this world nor in the world to come—...

PS: It's never 'too late', whilst you draw breath, to repent & save the rest of your family. (& save your deceased husband, by helping in renewing his vows, via proxy work)

September 2019: I have half a bookshelf, at least, of your excellent works and other books... Thank you, Sandra and Jerald, for your decades of work. You helped me out more than you know. God Bless the late Jerald and everyone there at the UTLM.

September 2019: Though I am an Agnostic/Atheist I just wanted to reach out to UTLM and especially Mrs. Tanner. Obviously we are going to approach Biblical studies from a different perspective - I still learned so much from the talks that you have given that are available on YouTube.

It is always easy to spot a labor of love and it is very obvious you are incredibly passionate and well informed on the subject of Mormonism and its conflicts with its inspiration, the Bible.

September 2019: I am 74 years old and have just resigned my membership of 56 years. I was an active temple going member; teacher on both ward and stake level. First the control and manipulation came to my realization. Also I was taught one thing when I joined years ago and found teachings were entirely different years later when I finally gained access to the computer and found web sites such as yours. I LOVE YOUR WEB SITE !

September 2019: I became a Christian at the age of 41 and am now only 43. Studying Mormonism is what brought me into a relationship with Jesus. I attended [a Christian class on Mormonism] and it became a class of evangelism. I went from arguing for the possibility of Mormonism being true

to gaining the knowledge and relationship of Jesus. . . . I've gained one knowledgeable exmormon friend who loves Jesus and I have studied scripture but it is hard being a Christian and all your neighbors be Mormon.

September 2019: I'm 29 years old, . . . and for several years now, I've had a fascination with Mormonism. As such, it was only going to be a question of time before I came across Utah Lighthouse Ministry.

I wish to say that your work is marvelous. The intellectual honesty you have consistently shown, not just on celebrated matters such as the Salamander letter, but your general determination to make sure you always get every fact correct, your principled stance against sensationalism, is admirable. Further, you have always shown yourselves to be ever so gentle, diplomatic, and proper in your outreach to Mormons.

October 2019: "YOU are still a HUGE FRAUD."

October 2019: I cannot thank you [enough] for the years of service and dedication you've provided, many times under duress and threats . . . At 18 I joined the [LDS] Church in ____ OR; at 19 I was married in the Oakland Temple and things just went down the tube over a period of 21 yrs in a horrible marriage and financial oppressed lifestyle. There's not a day that goes by that I don't praise the Lord for His mercy of removing me from the bondage I had been in for 21 yrs. He IS a Merciful God, Who gave his life a ransom for me. I am blessed beyond expression.

November 2019: [Man from Missouri] I just finished reading an article in issue 133 of The Messenger, . . . You published Ronald Huggins' article, "Did Early Christians Practice Baptism for the Dead?" I found this article to be the best of its kind that I have read. In a scholarly way, Mr. Huggins presented objective historic information on this practice, and then reflected critically on Mormon scholars' misuse of this data. I found this article to be very informative, objective and balanced.

November 2019: [Man in Utah] Thanks to you, Sarah Tanner and cohorts, for publishing the Grammar and Alphabet of the Egyptian Language. I have been studying it for over 40 years. The LDS Church is ashamed of it, because nobody is intelligent enough to figure it out. The truth is, nobody on the planet reads Egyptian hieroglyphs correctly, nor hieratic in the least degree. But I have been able to prove that Joseph Smith was in fact the only man on the planet ever to read Egyptian correctly in our dispensation. . . . I have been able to prove that everything Smith translated was done correctly.

December 2019: I would like to thank Sandra for the years she and her husband Jerald spent uncovering the true history of the Mormon church. The MormonStories podcast she did was amazing. It solidified my view that my mormon life was a farce and needed to end.

The story of Jerald driving to Missouri to find the truth about Mormon history was inspiring. Thanks for all you do.

December 2019: I give thanks to God for your ministry & faithful tenacity to the truth of the Word. Through your writings I have been able to converse with LDS family & have seen some come to faith in Christ Jesus. May God continue to encourage you with fruit as you move forward in integrity & love.

January 2020: I want to say how much I admire Sandra and her stamina all these years in informing Mormons of the truth of Mormonism! She has been an inspiration to me for truly decades!

I first learned of Jerald and Sandra's ministry in 2001, at a dinner . . . A woman at the table recommended [Mormonism] Shadow or Reality to me . . . Over the years, I was heavily involved with outreach as I seemed to be surrounded by Mormonism . . . Those experiences and conversations were some of the richest of my life!

January 2020: THANK YOU and Doris Hanson. I sent in formal papers yesterday to be removed officially from LDS church membership. Have been member since 1975. I live in [Utah] and health is not good. I prayed God would keep me alive until I could have my name removed. AND HE DID.....Praise God.

January 2020: I'm just learning about all of this. I was raised in the church, went inactive at 15 & went back to church at 50. I'm 56 now. So glad to be finding this out now. I have watched several of your videos including mormonstories. Thank you for the work you do!

January 2020: I just read the 2019 newsletter you sent. WOW! . . . As a former member of the church . . . I do want to say that I have the greatest respect & love for you, as you & Gerald spent your lives bringing truth & reason to a world who didn't & still doesn't want it—the inconvenient truth.

February 2020: You and your ministry were such a great help and resource when my father and I left the Mormon Church. I can never thank you enough for all you have done and still do. My father passed away a year ago and it was such a blessing to know he is with our Lord and Savior.

February 2020: I wanted to say thank you to you and your late husband, for all of the work that you have done. I have read many of the publications that you have released, and am especially grateful for people like you who have paved the way for people like me to live free of the ever-growing shadow of the church. I continue on my quest for my own scholarly education on early LDS history, and your work has helped me tremendously.

February 2020: My wife and I just watched an interview of Sandra on MormonStories.org. We want to let you know how much we enjoyed and were impressed by her articulate knowledge. Well done!

We moved into this area [Idaho] three years ago and it has been the work of vanguards like Jerald and Sandra who have helped us learn more about the faith of our neighbors.

February 2020: Hello Sandra It just listened to your interview with John Dehlin. I was very impressed with what you and your husband have accomplished. I can tell you are a very intelligent person. You represented yourself well. Thank you so much for all you have done. I've been out of the church for a little over a year.

February 2020: Dear Sandra, you sent me some of your free newsletters. To which I am responding because today, being the 9th day of February I am saved and a born again Christian. I owe you a deep debt of gratitude.

March 2020: I have heard just about every anti argument you can think of, and it does not bother me. I just don't understand what your purpose is. If it is only to destroy/tear down, it really isn't doing any good.

March 2020: Hello, Mrs. Tanner. On Tuesday my beloved mother in law passed. She was mormon and my husband's entire family is including his brother who is a bishop of the church . . . My husband was very upset during the [funeral] service but he was furious when the sta[k]e president was invited to speak and basically did the mormon sunday morning church speech for 30 minutes. . . . Its becoming more and more clear to him that [what] he was raised to believe was a cult. He likes listening to you alot. When I started on my education of Mormonism he said he wasn't supposed to listen to you lol. We are in Tennessee so as you know you are known all over but even here in our dumpy town. Thank you for reading and doing all you do.

April 2020: I never knew of you as a active member and it's been many years since I attended regularly. I am a man but couldn't receive the priesthood and always felt shame during blessings as everyone worthy made their way up front. I couldn't bless any of my kids and had to ask others in my place. Nothing seemed to go right.

I found out a couple years ago that Smith practiced polygamy and polyandry, I was devastated and for the first time directed an Earnest prayer to Jesus for answers. Within a week I started noticing crosses everywhere and my entire worldview started to crumble, things I believed my whole life somehow I knew they were wrong.

I started devouring the Bible and learning about historical Christianity and textual criticism. I'm an ironworker but I get up a couple hours early to study where I'm led and Jesus has come to life for me. I am so happy I'm not alone and I know you understand, your courage means so much to me.

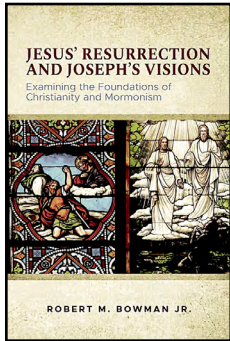
Looking back I have been so blessed, for some reason I was protected from the blasphemy of claiming the priesthood for myself and am aware of many other issues. I'm alone in my faith in my family but am quickly being equipped to defend my faith with reality and scripture.



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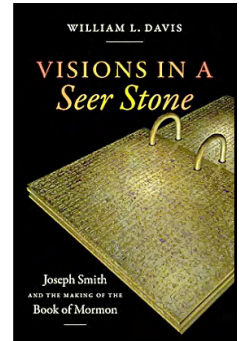
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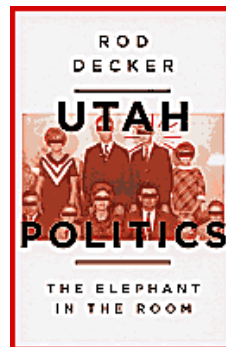
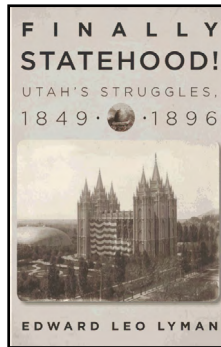


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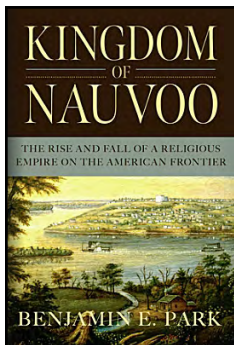
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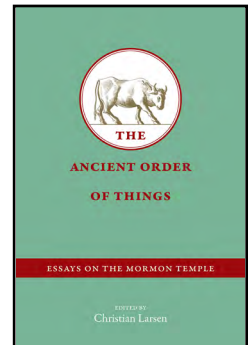


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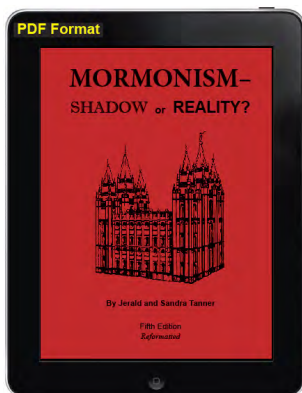
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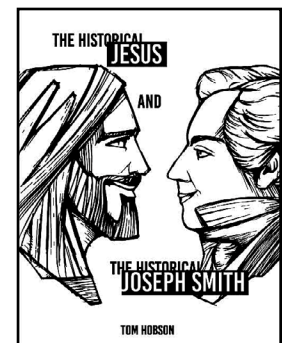
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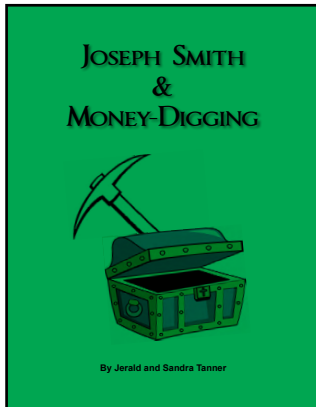
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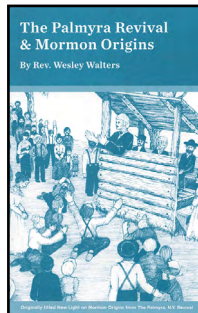
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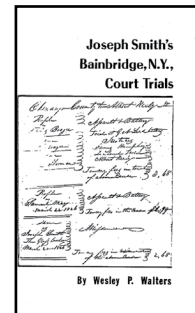
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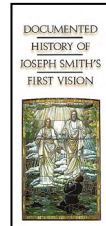
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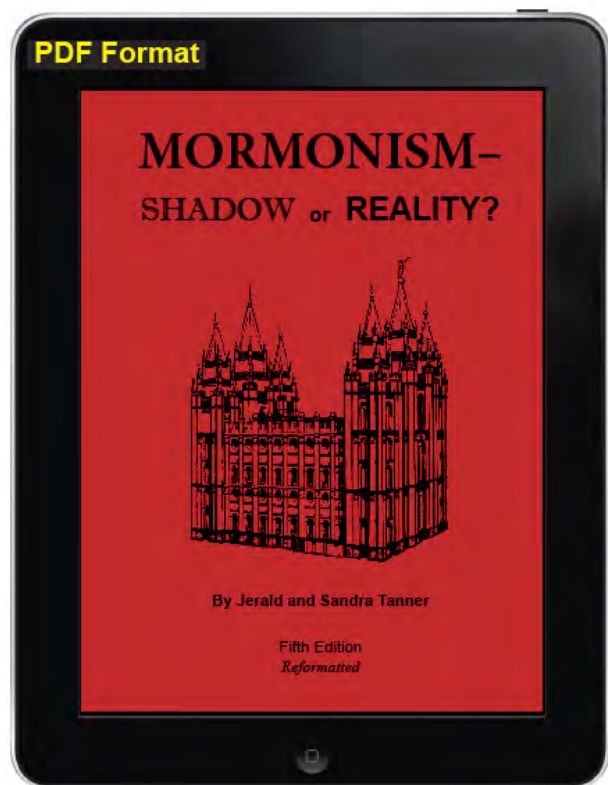
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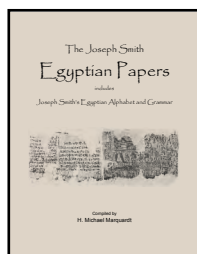


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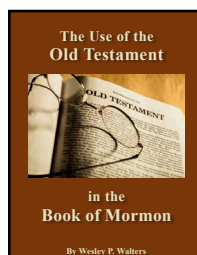


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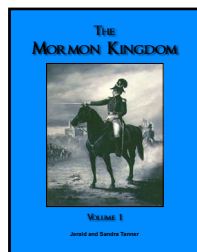
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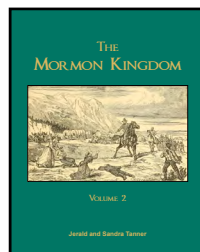
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