

PROBLEMS IN MORMON TEXT

By

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A brief study of certain changes in important Latter-day Saint publications including the *Book of Mormon*, *Book of Commandments*, *Doctrine and Covenants*, and *History of the Church*; with references to controversial aspects of the Restoration of the Priesthood and Mormon concepts of Deity.

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On Friday, April 1, 1842, in Nauvoo, the largest city in the state of Illinois (and not long since reclaimed from the parcel of swamp), the *Times and Seasons*, a miniature newspaper devoted to the interests of the Mormon people, made it semi-monthly appearance. There was nothing on the cover page to suggest the thunderbolt that lay obscurely on page 748: God, the Creator of the Universe had visited the earth! And in company with his Son, Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of the World! This plain announcement set in lower case, and without fanfare, was one of the most astounding items ever to appear in an American newspaper. Transcending the limits of the word “news,” it was now also history. The visit had occurred in 1820, twenty-two years prior to publication, in a quiet grove not far south of an ordinary American village: Palmyra, in western New York. The event had been witnessed by a fourteen year old lad, one Joseph Smith, the fourth child of humble parents, destined to become the famous American prophet. Joseph had carried the glorious vision in memory these many years, saying little even to intimates within the church he had founded in 1830. His reticence may have stemmed from the bitter persecution he claimed to have suffered at the hands of professors of religion, neighbors, and men of high standing to whom he had related the vision at the time of its occurrence. He had felt like Paul when he made his defense before King Agrippa and was reviled for saying he had seen a light and heard a voice, no amount of persecution inducing him to gainsay it. So it was with Joseph. He was certain that two Personages had addressed him; nevertheless he amended the assertion with “or one of them did.”¹ Because he had often wondered if all the churches were wrong Joseph sought enlightenment from the Personages “for at this time it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong.”² He was told they were all an abomination and he was to join none of them.

During the three years following his audience with the Deities, Joseph, candid in his admissions of frailty, succumbed to the “corruption” of his human nature, and to the “gratification of many appetites” offensive in

1 This phrase, deemed contradictory, was deleted from the official *History of the Church* edited by B. H. Roberts in 1902. References to unidentified dual beings who resembled each other and who appeared to the boy Joseph were made first by Orson Pratt in *Remarkable Visions* in 1840 and by Joseph in a letter to John Wentworth, *Times and Seasons*, March 1, 1842, p. 707. Neither version indicated that they were Gods, Father and Son.

2 This mild contradiction too was deleted.

the sight of God.³ On the evening of September 21, 1823, Joseph went to his room to ask God to forgive him for his sins and follies and to obtain a divine manifestation. A personage appeared at his bedside, announcing that he was Nephi, and that God had a great work for him to do.⁴ Nephi quoted some of the prophecies of Malachi, but with variation from the Bible text. Although many years had now elapsed since his encounter with the angel, Joseph, in recording the interview, remembered the exact words that Nephi used on that memorable September night in 1823, noting perhaps as he wrote them that not only did they vary from the King James Bible, but also from his own Inspired Translation of the Scriptures (which in 1842 was still a manuscript) as well as the Savior's quotes from Malachi in the *Book of Mormon*, and a revelation from God to Joseph dated November 3, 1831.⁵ Nephi spoke of the Priesthood which was soon to be restored by the hand of Elijah, but for reasons unknown Joseph failed to record these portentous words, among the most important in all Latter-day Saint scripture, in any of the published revelations.⁶

3 Such candor was thought unnecessary by redactors. The offensive words were deleted from the official history of 1902 and the following apologetic inserted:

In making this confession, no one need suppose me guilty of any great of malignant sins. A disposition to commit such was never in my nature. But I was guilty of levity, and sometimes associated with jovial company, etc., not consistent with the character which ought to be maintained by one who was called of God as I had been. But this will not seem very strange to any one who recollects my youth, and is acquainted with my native cheery temperament.

An example of other sentences added to Joseph's story may be found in the *History of the Church*, Volume I, page 6, following "When I came to myself again, I found myself lying on my back, looking up into heaven," and ending with "Why the opposition and persecution that arose against me, almost in my infancy?"

4 The name "Nephi" appeared in reprints of the story for several years, including the *Millennial Star*, August, 1842, the first edition of the *Pearl of Great Price*, 1851, Lucy Mack Smith's *Biographical Sketches*, 1853, and *History of the Church of Jesus Christ* (Reorganized), 1902. John C. Whitmer, nephew of David Whitmer, told that he often heard his grandmother, Mary M. Whitmer, say that she was shown the plates of the Book of Mormon by an holy angel" whom she always called Brother Nephi." (*Historical Record*, Volume VII, edited by Andrew Jenson, October, 1888, p. 621.)

Early chroniclers of Mormon history such as Henry Caswell and Jules Remy used the Nephi designation: also Thomas Gregg, William Linn, and Sheridan Jones at later dates. The earliest stories of the celestial visitor referred to him only as a spirit, an angel, a personage, or a heavenly messenger. The first edition of the *Doctrine and Covenants*, 1835, and the *Elders' Journal*, July, 1838, both stated that the plates were revealed by Moroni. In the Wentworth letter (see footnote, page 3) Joseph declared that prior to 1827 he had had "many visits from the angels of God." Possibly he confused the identities of two of the angels as the story seems to have been told two ways.

5 Compare "Extracts from the History of Joseph Smith, the Prophet," *Pearl of Great Price* 2:37–39 with Malachi 4:1–6, 3 Nephi 25:1–6, and *Doctrine and Covenants* 133:64.

6 This important omission was corrected by Church officials 32 years after Joseph's death when it became Section 2 of the 1876 edition of the *Doctrine and Covenants*.

The *Times and Seasons*' story of Nephi's visit appeared in the April 15, 1842 issue, being part of the third installment of the "History of Joseph Smith," which might well have been entitled "the Story of the Birth of Mormonism." It was not the first time the story had been told. Seven and a half years earlier Oliver Cowdery, with Joseph Smith's assistance, had written eight articles in the form of letters to W. W. Phelps, entitled "Early Scenes and Incidents in the Church" which appeared in the *Messenger and Advocate*, the official Church organ at Kirtland, Ohio, beginning with the October, 1834 issue. The reader was informed that "we have thought that a full history of the rise of the church of the Latter Day Saints, and the most interesting parts of its progress, to the present time, would be worthy the perusal of the Saints. . . . That our narrative may be correct, and particularly the introduction, it is proper to inform our patrons, that our brother J. Smith, jr. has offered to assist us." The promise was made that it would be "founded upon facts" and would be "particular" and "minute." The third letter offered an additional promise of accuracy:

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

Thousands of words were used to relate the dramatic story of Joseph's early quest for guidance after partaking of the excitement of a religious revival, his prayer asking to know which church to join, the resultant visit of a personage—all of which occurred, it was said, in 1823 when Joseph was seventeen. This 1834 account, being several years closer to the events described, might well be more accurate than the version in 1842, but the reader of the two accounts is likely to become confused at certain obvious discrepancies. Did Joseph's spiritual excitation occur in 1820 or in 1823? Was he fourteen or seventeen when the personage answered his appeal, and was this personage single or dual?

In the 1842 history Joseph continued his narrative with the story of the Restoration of the Holy Priesthood which had been lost to the earth since shortly after the advent of the Savior. The Restoration was a double event: the first half being an ordination of Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery by the resurrected John the Baptist with the bestowal of the Aaronic, or lesser, Priesthood on May 15, 1829, and the second being the conferring of the Melchizedek Priesthood with the gift of the Holy Ghost by Peter, James, and John sometime later. The "full history—correct, particular, and minute" of 1834 should surely contain the details of these miraculous events, but

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