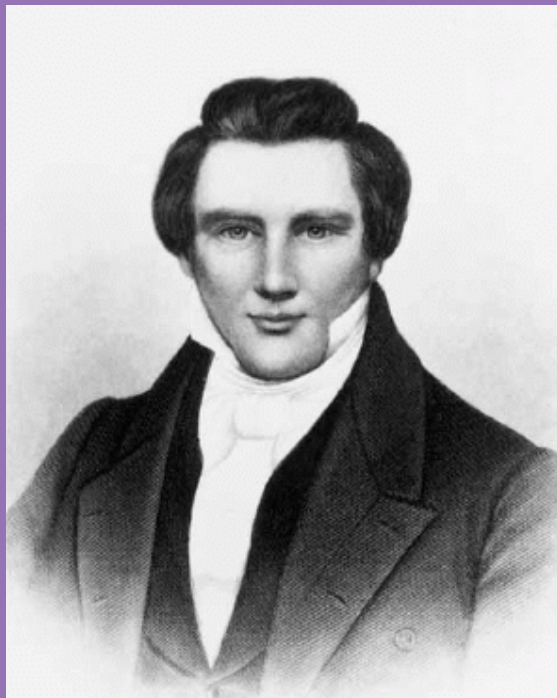


JOSEPH SMITH'S STRANGE ACCOUNT OF THE FIRST VISION



*Important document suppressed for 130 years now comes to light.
This document dictated by Joseph Smith reveals that
he did not see the Father and the Son in 1820.*

ALSO

A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE FIRST VISION BY JERALD AND SANDRA TANNER

**JOSEPH SMITH'S
STRANGE ACCOUNT
OF THE FIRST VISION**

ALSO

**A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE FIRST VISION
By Jerald and Sandra Tanner**

**1965
Digital version 2024**

**Utah Lighthouse Ministry
www.utlm.org**



**Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0
International (CC BY-NC 4.0)**

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

CONTENTS

PART ONE

A Critical Study of the First Vision
By Jerald and Sandra Tanner1

PART TWO

Joseph Smith's Strange Account of the First Vision16

PART 1

A Critical Study of the First Vision

By Jerald and Sandra Tanner

In the *Times and Seasons* for April 1, 1842, the following statement by Joseph Smith appears:

... I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head . . . When the light rested upon me I saw two personages (whose brightness and glory defy all description) standing above me in the air. One of them spake unto me, calling me by name, and said, (pointing to the other) "This is my beloved Son, hear him." (*Times and Seasons*, Vol. 3, p. 748)

Joseph Smith claimed that this vision occurred in 1820, when he was only fourteen years old. This account of Joseph Smith's First Vision is printed today in the *Pearl of Great Price*, and it is considered to be one of the most important visions given to mankind. Joseph Fielding Smith, who is the Mormon Church Historian, made this statement concerning Joseph Smith's vision:

JOSEPH SMITH'S GREAT HONOR — There is no account in history or revelation extant, where ever before both the Father and the Son appeared in the presence of mortal man in glory. (*Essentials in Church History*, pp. 46–47)

David O. McKay, President of the Mormon Church, has made this statement:

The appearing of the Father and the Son to Joseph Smith is the foundation of this church. (*Gospel Ideals*, p. 85)

The importance of the First Vision to members of the Mormon Church cannot be overemphasized. Paul R. Cheesman wrote the following in his thesis:

Thus the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the story of Joseph Smith must stand or fall on the authenticity of the First Vision and the appearance of the Angel Moroni. (*An Analysis of the Accounts Relating Joseph Smith's Early Visions*, A

Thesis Submitted to the Dept. of Graduate Studies in Religious Instruction, Brigham Young University, May, 1965, p. 75)

In the book, *Mormonism—Shadow or Reality?* we present evidence which would seem to show that the First Vision story was made up many years after it was supposed to have occurred. Paul R. Cheesman, who was a student at the Brigham Young University, tried to answer our arguments in his thesis. Strange as it may seem, however, he has reproduced a document dictated by Joseph Smith himself which not only proves that he did not see the Father and the Son in 1820, but also casts a shadow of doubt upon his entire story of the origin of the Church. We will consider this document in its proper place, and it will be reproduced in full in Part Two.

The first argument against the validity of the First Vision story is the fact that Joseph Smith waited so long before he published it to the world. Dr. Hugh Nibley, of the Brigham Young University, made this statement:

Joseph Smith's "official" account of his first vision and the visits of the angel Moroni was written in 1838 and first published in the *Times and Seasons* in 1842. (*Improvement Era*, July, 1961, p. 490)

Paul Cheesman made this statement concerning this problem:

One of the problems in connection with the story's authenticity is the time-lapse between the events and the written accounts. Joseph Smith reported that the first vision took place in 1820. Joseph Smith's journal story of his visions was first published in the *Times and Seasons*, the Church's official publication, March 15, 1842. (*An Analysis of the Accounts Relating Joseph Smith's Early Visions*, a Thesis by Paul R. Cheesman, p. 3)

Joseph Smith's Strange Account of the First Vision

On page 4 of the same thesis Mr. Cheesman states:

Possible reasons why Joseph's story was not put into written form until eighteen years after its occurrence and then not published until four years later require attention . . . Joseph Smith recorded other revelations as they happened, even preparing some of them for publication as early as 1831.

On pages 6 and 7 of the same thesis Paul Cheesman states:

It is possible that Joseph Smith kept this vision a secret because he felt that communications of this nature were to be treated as sacred and not to be made public at first . . .

After eighteen years, Joseph Smith apparently felt that the need for secrecy had passed.

No effort was made from that time forth to keep silent on the visitations.

Dr. Hugh Nibley also claims that Joseph Smith tried to keep the First Vision a secret. In a letter to us, dated March 8, 1961, Dr. Nibley stated:

The Prophet did not like to talk about the first vision and those to whom he told the story kept it to themselves. It was only when inevitable leaks led to all sorts of irresponsible reports that he was 'induced' to publish an official version. I am treating the subject at some length in a forthcoming study.

In the *Improvement Era* for July, 1961, Dr. Nibley stated:

But, one may ask, why should Joseph Smith have waited so long to tell his story officially? From his own explanation it is apparent that he would not have told it publicly at all had he not been "induced" to do so by all the scandal stories that were circulating. (*Improvement Era*, July, 1961, p. 522)

In the November issue of the *Improvement Era* Dr. Nibley stated:

Throughout his life Joseph Smith was never eager to tell the story of his first vision. This is a thing which the publicity-minded writers of anti-Mormon books seem quite incapable of comprehending; hungry for "success" and attention themselves, they find it simply inconceivable that Joseph Smith or any of the prophets should have "kept it close, and told no man of any of those things which they had seen." (Luke 9:36.) (*Improvement Era*, Nov. 1961, p. 813)

This argument which is advanced by Dr. Nibley and Paul Cheesman is in direct contradiction to

Joseph Smith's own story. Joseph Smith stated that he was persecuted because he told this story and would not deny it. He stated:

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; and though I was an obscure boy, only between fourteen and fifteen years of age, and my circumstances in life such as to make a boy of no consequence in the world, yet 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 . . . though I was hated and persecuted for saying that I had seen a vision, yet it was true; and while they were persecuting me, reviling me, and speaking all manner of evil against me falsely for so saying, I was led to say in my heart: Why persecute me for telling the truth? . . . For I had seen a vision; I knew it, and I knew that God knew it, and I could not deny it, neither dared I do it . . . (*Pearl of Great Price*, Joseph Smith 2:22 and 25)

In contradiction to the argument of secrecy, the Mormon Apostle John A. Widtsoe stated:

Whether the story of the first vision existed in written form in the early days of the Church is not known. Many manuscripts of that time have been lost. In some cases, secretaries deliberately carried Church records away from Church possession. But, even were they all available, minutes of meetings as they are usually kept might seldom mention the first vision, for familiar and repeated things are often not recorded because they are taken for granted. (*Evidences and Reconciliations*, 3-Vol.-in-1 edition, p. 334)

Thus we see that even the Mormon writers are divided over this issue. The Apostle John A. Widtsoe would have us believe that the early Mormons talked constantly of this vision, whereas Dr. Nibley and Paul Cheesman would have us believe that they kept it a secret. Actually, an examination of the early publications of the Mormon Church reveals that the members did not know anything concerning a vision in 1820. It was taught that the first vision Joseph Smith had was in 1823, when he was seventeen years of age, and that the personage who appeared was an angel (not God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ) who told him about the Book of Mormon. Oliver Cowdery, who was one of the witnesses to the Book of Mormon and the first Church Historian, wrote a history of the Church which was published in the *Messenger and Advocate*. This history

Joseph Smith's Strange Account of the First Vision

absolutely proves that the early members of the Mormon Church had no knowledge of a vision prior to the vision of the angel in Joseph's room in 1823. Francis W. Kirkham, in his book *A New Witness For Christ in America*, Vol. 1, page 17, says:

The first published consecutive account of the origin of the Church began in the October, 1834, issue of the *Messenger and Advocate*. It consists of eight letters written by Oliver Cowdery to W. W. Phelps. This account is very important as Oliver Cowdery claims in a letter published in the October, 1834, issue, but dated September 7, 1834, that Joseph Smith assisted him in the writing of the letters.

In the *Messenger and Advocate*, Vol. 1, page 13, the following statement was made concerning this history:

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

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

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

Since, then, our opposers have been thus kind to introduce our cause before the public, it is no more than just that a correct account should be given; and since they have invariably sought to cast a shade over the truth, and hinder its influence from gaining ascendancy, it is also proper that it should be vindicated, by laying before the world a correct statement of events as they have transpired from time to time. (*Messenger and Advocate*, Vol. 1, p. 42)

On page 78 of the *Messenger and Advocate* the following account of Joseph Smith's vision is given:

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

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

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

Several things should be noted concerning this history. First, that it claimed to be a "correct account." Second, that Joseph Smith assisted in the writing of this history. Third, that the date of the religious excitement in Palmyra was 1823, when Joseph Smith was 17 years old. Fourth, that Joseph Smith desired to know at this time "if a Supreme being did exist." Certainly if he had seen the Father and the Son in 1820, he would not be praying in 1823 to know "if a Supreme being did exist." Fifth, that a "messenger sent by commandment of the Lord" appeared to him and told him that his sins were forgiven. Certainly this history refutes the story that the Father and the Son appeared to Joseph Smith in 1820. Hugh Nibley tries to belittle the importance of this history by stating:

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

This explanation for Oliver Cowdery's silence concerning the First Vision is not reasonable; if Oliver Cowdery was so unreliable, why was he chosen to be one of the three witnesses to the Book of Mormon? Could it be possible that Joseph Smith would not trust Oliver Cowdery, the first Church Historian, with the true history of the Church?

Joseph Smith's Strange Account of the First Vision

In trying to discredit this history, Dr. Nibley is overlooking the fact that Joseph Smith assisted in the production of it. Therefore, if the account given was not correct Joseph Smith himself must be held responsible for it. Joseph Fielding Smith uses this history to try to prove where the Hill Cumorah is located, and he claims that this history was written under the “personal supervision” of Joseph Smith:

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

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

Paul Cheesman does not try to deal with this problem, however, he does reproduce Oliver Cowdery's letters in Appendix F of his thesis, and he admits that “Joseph approved of Oliver's writing this particular story” (see page 64 of his thesis).

Either before or shortly after Oliver Cowdery wrote the letters which were published in the *Messenger and Advocate*, Joseph Smith dictated a “strange” account of the First Vision to his scribe. The Mormon Church leaders have never dared to publish this account because it proves that Joseph Smith did not see God the Father. The fact that Joseph Smith wrote a history (which may be the same one we are referring to here) prior to 1838 is shown by a statement Joseph Smith recorded in the *History of the Church*, under the date of Oct. 29, 1835:

Returned to our writing room, went to Dr. Williams' after my large journal . . . and my scribe commenced writing in my journal a history of my life; concluded President Cowdery's second letter to W. W. Phelps, which President Williams had begun. (*History of the Church*, Vol. 2, p. 293)

Levi Edgar Young, who was the head of the Seven Presidents of Seventies in the Mormon Church, told LaMar Petersen that he had examined a “strange” account of the First Vision and was told

not to reveal what it contained. The following is from notes made by LaMar Petersen of an interview with Levi Edgar Young held February 3, 1953:

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

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

A few years ago we became interested in the “strange” account and wrote to Joseph Fielding Smith, the Mormon Church Historian, enclosing \$1.00 and asking for a photocopy of it. Unfortunately, this letter was never answered, and we had almost given up hope of ever seeing this document. Much to our surprise, however, we found a “strange” account of the First Vision (which may be the very account Levi Edgar Young spoke of) reproduced in Appendix D of the thesis by Paul Cheesman. Mr. Cheesman introduced this account as follows:

This account was found in a journal ledger in the Church Historian's office in Salt Lake City. The pages had been cut out but were matched with the edge of the journal to prove location. This was done in the presence and with the agreement of Earl Olsen and Lauritz Peterson of the Church Historian's office. The first page of this ledger identified Frederick G. Williams as the scribe and bore the date of 1833. Subsequent pages in the journal contained copies of letters of Oliver Cowdery, Joseph Smith, Hyrum Smith, William W. Phelps, Reynolds Cahoon, Jared Clark, Sidney Rigdon, and John Murdock. The earliest letter was dated June 14, 1829; the latest August 4, 1835.

There was no date or indication of scribe of the account of the manuscript which follows. The information provided in the above statements seem to suggest that this account was written near 1833. Since it is recorded in the first person this would also

Joseph Smith's Strange Account of the First Vision

suggest either that Joseph Smith wrote it or that he dictated it. From handwriting comparisons it would appear that the later supposition is the more likely one. (*An Analysis of the Accounts Relating Joseph Smith's Early Visions*, A Thesis by Paul Cheesman, p. 126)

On pages 63 and 64 of the same thesis Paul Cheesman states:

In discussing Appendix D, which appears to be the earliest written account of the first vision, there is certain additional information given which is not directly related to the thesis, but is nevertheless historically important. In this particular narrative Joseph's scribe wrote down a number and then wrote over it. To the writer and others, it looks like a 16, indicating the year in which Joseph had the first vision (in his 16th year) . . .

This account was never published or referred to by any of the authorities of the church as far as the writer has been able to determine. From the lack of recognition and importance given this document, it seems evident that it was a draft which was started but never corrected or finished. Instead of going back over and revising, Joseph Smith evidently dictated the story later as we have it in Appendix A.

A careful reading of this document reveals why the Church leaders have "never published or referred" to it. To begin with, Joseph Smith said that prior to the time he received his First Vision he knew that all the churches were wrong:

. . . by Searching the Scriptures I found that mankind did not come unto the Lord but that they had apostatised from the true and living faith and there was no society or denomination that built upon the gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the new testament . . . (*An Analysis of the Accounts Relating Joseph Smith's Early Visions*, p. 128)

In the account Joseph Smith wrote later, however, he claimed that he went to the Lord to find out which church was right:

My object in going to inquire of the Lord was to know which of all the sects was right, that I might know which to join. (*Pearl of Great Price*, Joseph Smith, verse 18)

In the story as it was first published in the *Times and Seasons*, Vol. 3, page 748, Joseph Smith stated: "for at this time it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong"; this clause has been deleted in the *Pearl of Great Price* without any indication.

In the account Joseph Smith first wrote he did not mention a religious revival, however, in the account which is published today he devotes a great deal of space to tell of this revival. In the first account Joseph Smith did not mention an evil power trying to overcome him, however, in the second account he stated:

. . . I kneeled down and began to offer up the desire 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. (*Pearl of Great Price*, Joseph Smith 2:15)

In the thesis, page 129, line 8, Joseph Smith said that his First Vision was in the "16th year of my age." In the version he wrote later, Joseph Smith said that the vision occurred when he was in his "fifteenth year" (*Pearl of Great Price*, Joseph Smith, verse 7). The Mormon Apostle John A. Widtsoe argued that the First Vision had to occur in 1820, when Joseph Smith was fourteen years old:

Clearly, knowledge of the first vision was current in the early days of the Church, and was dated as the Prophet says, in 1820, when he was not yet fifteen years old . . . Whatever opinion may be held as to what he saw on that occasion, it must have occurred in 1820. Any other view would make liars of these witnesses, or make them connivers in untruth with the Prophet. (*Gospel Interpretations*, by John A. Widtsoe, p. 119)

On page 132 of the same book John A. Widtsoe stated:

All acceptable evidence within and beyond the Church confirms the Prophet's story that his first vision occurred when he was between fourteen and fifteen years of age in the year 1820 and before the Book of Mormon revelations occurred.

The early document written by Joseph Smith would seem to destroy John A. Widtsoe's argument concerning the date of the First Vision. In fact, the early document not only contradicts the story Joseph Smith later wrote as to the date of the vision, but also as to the number of personages who appeared and what he was told on that occasion.

At this point we are going to show in parallel columns how the two stories contradict each other:

The Story as Joseph Smith First Wrote It

... a pillar of light above the brightness of the sun at noon day come down from above and rested upon me and I was filled with the Spirit of god and the Lord opened the heavens upon me and I saw the Lord and he spake unto me saying Joseph my son Thy Sins are forgiven thee, go thy way walk in my Statutes and keep my commandments behold I am the Lord of glory I was crucified for the world, that all those who believe on my name may have Eternal life behold he won't lieth in Sin at this time and none doeth good no not one they have turned aside from the gospel and keep not my commendments they draw near to me with their lips while their hearts are far from me and mine anger is kindling against the inhabitants of the earth to visit them according to their ungodliness and to bring to pass that which hath been spoken by the mouth of the prophets and apostles behold and lo I come quickly as it was written of me in the cloud clothed in the glory of my Father ... (*An Analysis of the Accounts Relating Joseph Smith's Early Visions*, Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Department of Graduate Studies in Religious Instruction, Brigham Young University, by Paul R. Cheesman, May, 1965, p. 129)

The Story as It Was Later Rewritten

... 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. When the light rested upon me I saw two personages (whose brightness and glory defy all description) standing above me in the air. One of them spake unto me, calling me by name, and said, (pointing to the other.) "This is my beloved Son, hear him."

My object in going to enquire of the Lord was to know which of all the sects was right? that I might know which to join. No sooner therefore did I get possession of myself, so as to be able to speak, than I asked the personages who stood above me in the light, which of all the sects was right, (for at this time it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong,) and which I should join. I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong, and the personage who addressed me said that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight; that those professors were all corrupt, they draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; they teach for doctrine the commandments of men, having a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof." He again forbade me to join with any of them; and many other things did he say unto me which I cannot write at this time. (*Times and Seasons*, Vol. 3, pp. 748-749, reprinted in the *Pearl of Great Price*, Joseph Smith 2:16-20)

Notice that in the first account Joseph Smith says "I saw the Lord," whereas in the account that he wrote later he said "I saw two personages." This is definitely a contradiction. In the first account Joseph Smith told that the Lord said he was "crucified for the world." This would mean that the personage was Jesus Christ. Therefore, we see that Joseph Smith did not include God the Father in his first account of the vision. Paul R. Cheesman tries to excuse this by saying:

As he writes briefly of the vision, he does not mention the Father as being present; however, this does not indicate that he was not present. (*An Analysis of the Accounts Relating Joseph Smith's Early Visions*, a Thesis by Paul Cheesman, p. 63)

This explanation by Paul Cheesman does not seem reasonable. Actually, in the first account Joseph Smith quotes the Lord as saying more words than in the second account. Why would he not mention the most important part of the story? Dr. Hugh Nibley, of the Brigham Young University, criticizes the anti-Mormon writers for omitting the words "This is my Beloved Son." In the *Improvement Era* for August, 1961, he stated:

In its original form, the present study was burdened by quotations from more than fifty important anti-Mormon writings, all of which were guilty of deliberately disfiguring the first vision story ... All of them will be found busily censoring Joseph Smith's story by calculated distortion and omission, and invariably by deleting the all-important words which identify the heavenly visitors. (*Improvement Era*, August, 1961, p. 608)

On page 577 of the same issue of the *Improvement Era*, Hugh Nibley stated:

In the following year an ambitious study in the Dublin University Magazine describes the first vision thus: "Into this cloud of glory, Smith, says the narrative, was received, and he met within it two angelic personages, who exactly resembled each other; they informed him that all his sins were forgiven." Here again there can be no doubt that the story is told from the original, but those all-important words, which Joseph Smith puts in italics, which identify the heavenly visitors, and which give the account of the vision its unique status are completely omitted. (*Improvement Era*, August, 1961, p. 577)

Joseph Smith's Strange Account of the First Vision

If Hugh Nibley had read Joseph Smith's first account of the vision, perhaps he would not have been so eager to criticize the anti-Mormon writers, for Joseph Smith not only omitted the "all-important" words, but he also left God the Father completely out of the vision.

The Mormon Church teaches that God the Father has a body of flesh and bones, and the First Vision is used as proof of that fact. Joseph Fielding Smith stated:

The vision of Joseph Smith made it clear that the Father and the Son are separate personages, having bodies as tangible as the body of man. (*Doctrines of Salvation*, Vol. 1, p. 2)

Bruce R. McConkie made this statement:

... Joseph Smith saw and conversed with the Father and the Son, both of which exalted personages were personally present before him as he lay enwrapped in the Spirit and over-shadowed by the Holy Ghost . . . Through it the creeds of apostate Christendom were shattered to smithereens . . . This vision was the most important event that had taken place in all world history from the day of Christ's ministry to the glorious hour when it occurred . . . our account of the First Vision is the only plain scriptural record now extant which details the personal appearance of the Father and the Son to mortal man. (*Mormon Doctrine*, p. 264)

In the manual used by the Mormon missionaries the following appears:

Elder: Mr. Brown, the reason we have gathered together here today is to tell you about a prophet called by the Lord in our own time. His name was Joseph Smith. In 1820 Joseph Smith was a young man living in the state of New York. He wanted to join a church, but as he visited those in his neighborhood he found this same confusion about which we have been talking. So he decided to pray and ask God which of the churches was right. He went to a grove of trees near his father's farm and knelt in prayer. As he was praying he saw a pillar of light exactly over his head, above the brightness of the sun, which descended gradually until it fell upon him. When the light rested upon him he saw, standing above him in the air, two personages in the form of men whose brightness and glory defied all description. One of them called Joseph Smith by name and said, "This is My Beloved Son." Mr. Brown, who were these two personages?

Brown: God and Jesus Christ.

Elder: I know that Joseph Smith did see the Father and the Son. In fact, he could see them just as clearly as you can see Elder Jones and me. And he could see that his own body truly was created in the image and likeness of God. At that time the churches taught that God was only a spirit, that he had no body. But what do we learn about God from the experience of Joseph Smith?

Brown: That he has a real body.

Elder: Yes, he does. The churches also taught that God the Father and Jesus Christ, his Son, were both the same person. But what did Joseph Smith see?

Brown: He saw two Personages in the form of men. (*A Uniform System For Teaching Investigators*, August 1961, pp. 11 and 12)

The Mormon missionaries have found this method to be very effective. If the Mormon leaders were to publish the story as Joseph Smith first told it, however, it would overthrow the entire argument used by the missionaries.

It would be almost impossible to believe that Joseph Smith would not have mentioned the Father as being present in this vision if he was really there. The only reasonable explanation is that Joseph Smith did not see God the Father, and that he made up this part of the story after he wrote the first manuscript. This, of course, throws a shadow of doubt upon the whole story.

It is also very interesting to note that Joseph Smith changed his mind concerning the Godhead. In the Book of Mormon, which was first published in 1830, this statement appeared:

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

Joseph Smith's Strange Account of the First Vision

This statement from the Book of Mormon clearly teaches that God the Father is a spirit. In the first edition of the *Doctrine and Covenants* this statement appeared:

. . . the Father being a personage of spirit, glory, and power, possessing all perfection and fullness, the Son . . . a personage of tabernacle . . . (*Doctrine and Covenants*, 1835 edition, p. 53; p. 54 of 1890 edition)

Since this statement was published in 1835, it shows that at the time Joseph Smith wrote his first account of the vision in the “wilderness” he did not believe that God the Father had a body. Toward the end of his life Joseph Smith decided that God has a body. In 1844 he stated:

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

Since Joseph Smith had changed his mind concerning the Godhead, he decided to change his story concerning the first vision.

Although Joseph Smith dictated to his scribe that he had seen “the Lord,” he was very reluctant to tell this story publicly. He claimed that on November 14, 1835, he told Erastus Holmes that his first vision was only a “visitation of angels”:

This afternoon, Erastus Holmes, of Newbury, Ohio, called on me to inquire about the establishment of the church, and to be instructed in doctrine more perfectly. I gave him a brief relation of my experience while in my juvenile years, say from six years old up to the time I received the first visitation of angels, which was when I was about fourteen years old; also the revelations that I received afterwards concerning the Book of Mormon, and a short account of the rise and progress of the church up to this date. (*Deseret News*, Vol. 2, No. 15, Saturday, May 29, 1852)

Because this statement by Joseph Smith contradicted the teaching that the Father and the Son appeared to him in the first vision of 1820, the Mormon Church Historians altered the words of Joseph Smith when they reprinted them in recent editions of the *History of the Church*. They altered the wording so that the word “angels” was

completely left out. The following is a comparison of the way this reference was originally published in the *Deseret News* and the way it has been changed to read in the *History of the Church*:

DESERET NEWS, Vol. 2, No. 15

. . . I received the first visitation of angels, which was when I was about fourteen years old . . . (May 29, 1852)

HISTORY OF THE: CHURCH, Vol. 2

. . . I received my first vision, which was when I was about fourteen years old . . . (Vol. 2, page 312)

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

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

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

It is interesting to note that it was Orson Pratt (not Joseph Smith) who first published the story of the First Vision to the world. It was published in England in 1840 under the title of, “Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions, and the Late Discovery of Ancient American Records.” Although two personages are mentioned as being present in the vision, the “all-important words which identify the heavenly visitors” are strangely missing.

Joseph Smith's Strange Account of the First Vision

On March 1, 1842, Joseph Smith published a letter in the *Times and Seasons* that he had written to John Wentworth. Joseph Smith said that he saw two personages in the First Vision, however, he did not include the “all-important” words. This may have been a feeler to see how the story would be accepted, for just one month later he published the official account which included the words “This is my Beloved Son, hear him.”

Dr. Hugh Nibley, of the Brigham Young University, claimed that Joseph Smith told his great-grandfather the story of the First Vision:

The writer's great-grandfather was a Jew, and a very hardheaded and practical man. He tells in his journal, writing on the very day that the event took place, of how he cross-examined Joseph Smith on every minute detail of the First Vision and of how the Prophet satisfied him promptly and completely. (*The World and the Prophets*, p. 21)

In a letter to us, dated March 8, 1961, Dr. Nibley stated:

The day my great-grandfather heard that remarkable account of the First Vision from Joseph Smith he wrote it down in his journal; and for 40 years after he never mentioned it to a soul. Therefore, when I came across the story unexpectedly I handed the book over to Joseph Fielding Smith and it is now where it belongs—in a safe.

Our curiosity was aroused, and we wrote to Joseph Fielding Smith, the Church Historian, concerning this journal. His reply was as follows:

Private journals are filed in this office with the understanding that they will be available to members of the family, but not to the general public. The furnishing of copies of journals also follows this ruling.

I am sorry but this office is not in a position to furnish you with the microfilm or photograph of the Alexander Neibaur journal which you requested in your letter. The ten dollars you enclosed is herewith returned.

Just eight days later Dr. Nibley wrote us a letter in which he stated:

The reason that Alexander Neibaur told no one of his experience for forty years is that it was strictly confidential and should remain so. I think we should respect his confidence. Actually, the last time I asked permission to see the Journal, I was refused. Any attempt to reproduce it at this time is out of the question.

Strange as it may seem, Paul Cheesman was able to get access to this journal, and he quotes from it on page 29 of his thesis:

Alexander Neibaur, a teacher who instructed Joseph Smith in German and Hebrew, recorded in his personal journal, dated May 24, 1844, the story of the first vision as related to him by Joseph after a period of instruction:

[Joseph Smith] went into the woods to pray, kneels himself down . . . saw a fire toward heaven come nearer and nearer; saw a personage in the fire; light complexion, blue eyes, a piece of white cloth drawn over his shoulders, his right arm bear [sic] after a while another person came to the side of the first.

As in the case of the other second-hand accounts, there are some astonishing embellishments in this diary, but the major point—the appearance of the two persons—is still there. (*An Analysis of the Accounts Relating Joseph Smith's Early Visions*, A Thesis, by Paul R. Cheesman, pp. 29–30)

It would be very interesting to know why Paul Cheesman made such a short quotation from the Alexander Neibaur journal when there is evidently much more to the story. The statement that “after a while another person came to the side of the first” seems to contradict Joseph Smith's published statement that says that he saw two personages “When the light rested upon me.”

After Joseph Smith's death the Mormon leaders still seemed reluctant to proclaim that he had seen God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ. The following appeared in the Mormon publication, *The Millennial Star*:

It would here perhaps be interesting to the inquirer to know something of the origin of the Book of Mormon, for the authenticity of which we have been pleading. 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; yet being dissatisfied with the contradictory nature of the principles of the various religious bodies, 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, and after repeated trials of his own

Joseph Smith's Strange Account of the First Vision

weakness, preparing him to be instrumental in bringing forth the long hidden record . . . (*Millennial Star*, Vol. 6, p. 69)

The Mormon Apostle Orson Pratt mentioned the vision of the Father and the Son in 1852, however, in 1871 he said that it was an “angel” who first appeared to Joseph Smith. George A. Smith, who was sustained as first counselor in the First Presidency in 1868, made the following statement in November of the same year:

When Joseph Smith was about fourteen or fifteen years old . . . there was a revival of religion, and the different sects in the portion of the State . . . He had read the Bible and had found that passage in James which says, “If any of you lack wisdom let him ask of God that giveth to all men liberally and upbraideth not,” and taking this literally, 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)

On another occasion George A. Smith stated:

When Joseph Smith w(a)s about 15 years old there was, in the western part of the State of New York, a considerable excitement upon the subject of religion . . . He was led to pray upon the subject in consequence of the declaration of the Apostle James: “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God that giveth to all men liberally and upbraideth not.” (James, 1st chap., 5th verse.) He sought the Lord by day and by night, and was enlightened by the vision of an holy angel. When this personage appeared to him, one of the first inquiries was, “Which of the denominations of Christians in the vicinity was right?” He was told they had all gone astray . . . (*Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 13, pp. 77–78)

On November 20, 1870, George A. Smith made this statement:

It was in this position of perplexity and doubt that Joseph Smith was placed when he went and asked the Lord to tell him which was right; and the Lord revealed to him, through an holy angel, that they were all wrong . . . (*Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 13, p. 294)

John Taylor, the third President of the Mormon Church, made the following statement on March 2, 1879:

. . . when the Prophet Joseph asked the angel which of the sects was right that he might join it. The answer was that none of them are right . . . What, none of them? No. We will not stop to argue that question; the angel merely told him to join none of them that none of them were right. (*Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 20, p. 167)

On another occasion John Taylor stated:

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

On still another occasion he stated:

Joseph Smith, what did you proclaim? “I called on the Lord and a holy angel appeared to me, and God revealed his will to me, and showed me the true position of the world religiously and every other way . . .” (*Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 7, p. 369)

Wilford Woodruff, who became the fourth President of the Mormon Church, made this statement in 1855:

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

In 1869 Wilford Woodruff stated:

It commenced by an angel of God flying through the midst of heaven and visiting a young man named

Joseph Smith's Strange Account of the First Vision

Joseph Smith in the year 1827. That was the time of a great awakening among the sectarians of the day . . . This young man looked around amid the confusion among the different sects . . . in the midst of this contention he did not know which to join. While in this state of uncertainty he turned to the Bible, and there saw that passage in the epistle of James which directs him that lacks wisdom to ask of God. He went into his secret chamber and asked the Lord what he must do to be saved. The Lord heard his prayer and sent His angel to him, who informed him that all the sects were wrong, and that the God of heaven was about to establish His work upon the earth. (Sermon by Wilford Woodruff, *Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 13, p. 324)

Brigham Young declared that it was messengers that God first sent to Joseph Smith:

Do we believe that the Lord sent his messengers to Joseph Smith, and commanded him to refrain from joining any Christian church, and to refrain from the wickedness he saw in the churches, and finally delivered to him a message informing him that the Lord was about to establish his kingdom on the earth, and led him on step by step until he gave him the revelation concerning the plates? Yes, this is all correct. (*Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 18, p. 239)

Paul R. Cheesman infers that these sermons may have been incorrectly reported:

It might also be remembered that the sermons given in that day were taken down by clerks in longhand and could not be absolutely correct. These things go far in accounting for alleged discrepancies in the oft-repeated story of Joseph Smith's visions. (*An Analysis Of The Accounts Relating Joseph Smith's Early Visions*, A Thesis by Paul R. Cheesman, p. 36)

Wilford Woodruff, however, made this statement:

Sermons reported by G. D. Watts, one of the official reporters, were considered as reported correctly, and when they are found in the *Journal of Discourses*, they are considered correct. Some of my own sermons are published there, and they are correct. (*Temple Lot Case*, p. 309)

As to the statement that "the sermons given in that day were taken down by clerks in longhand" the following appears in a letter written by the First Presidency of the Mormon Church which was published in the front of volume 1 of the *Journal of Discourses*:

Dear Brethern—It is well known to many of you, that Elder George D. Watt, by our counsel, spent much time in the midst of poverty and hardships to acquire the art of reporting in phonography, which he has faithfully and fully accomplished; and he has been reporting the public Sermons . . . for nearly two years, almost without fee or reward.

Phonography is defined in the *American College Dictionary* as "a system of phonetic shorthand."

The Apostle John A. Widtsoe made this statement concerning the sermons published in the *Journal of Discourses*:

This book was made possible because Brigham Young secured stenographic reports of his addresses. As he traveled among the people, reporters accompanied him. All that he said was recorded. Practically all of these discourses (from December 16, 1851, to August 19, 1877) were published in the *Journal of Discourses* . . . The corrections for the printer, as shown by existing manuscripts, were few and of minor consequence. (*Discourses of Brigham Young*, by John A. Widtsoe, Preface)

This statement not only shows that "stenographic reports" were made of the sermons, but also that the sermons were corrected before publication. This would seem to destroy Paul R. Cheesman's argument that the sermons may not have been reported correctly.

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

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

At length he determined to call upon the Lord until he should get a manifestation from him. He accordingly went out into the woods and falling upon his knees called for a long time upon the Lord for wisdom and knowledge. While engaged in prayer a light appeared in the heavens, and descended until it rested upon the trees where he was. It appeared like fire. But to his great astonishment, did not burn the

trees. An angel then appeared to him and conversed with him upon many things. He told him that none of the sects were right; but that if he was faithful in keeping the commandments he should receive, the (end of page 8) true way should be made known to him . . .

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

On June 8, 1884, William Smith stated:

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

Paul Cheesman apparently realized that his argument concerning the sermons being incorrectly reported did not solve the problem, for he claimed that the word “angel” could be applied to Jesus or even to God himself:

A problem of consistency is seen in the fact that John Taylor referred to the heavenly messenger as an *angel*. Joseph Smith, on the other hand, said that it was the Father and the Son who appeared to him in response to his inquiry concerning which church was right. It is clear from other references, however, that John Taylor believed that the Father and the Son had appeared, and it is therefore safe to assume that he used the word *angel* to refer to Christ. (*An Analysis Of The Accounts Relating Joseph Smith's Early Visions*, pp. 31-32)

On pages 37–38 of the same thesis Paul Cheesman stated:

When the same men who knew the philosophy of Joseph Smith referred to God, Christ, Moroni or other heavenly personages as angels, they seem to have been following an accepted pattern. This title does not seem to belittle the calling of the Son; it only describes a special mission. As Joseph Smith used the term *angel*, he suggested that an angel is one who is chosen to be a *messenger*. In this sense all of the visiting personages could be termed *angels* . . . This would suggest they were using the term “angel” in the generic sense to identify any heavenly messenger, even God.

A brief examination of the references we have just quoted shows that Paul Cheesman's explanation does not solve anything. For instance, Wilford Woodruff states that “The Lord heard his prayer and sent his angel to him.” However, if we substitute the word “Christ” for the word “angel” we read: “The Lord heard his prayer and sent his Christ to him.” Now, this would imply that God the Father was not present. All of these references present a similar problem. Brigham Young said that “The Lord sent his messengers to Joseph Smith.” Now, according to Paul Cheesman's explanation, the word “messengers” would really mean the Father and the Son, however, if we try to substitute the words “Father and the Son” for the word “messengers” we come out with the following: “The Lord sent his Father and the Son to Joseph Smith.”

It is interesting to note that in 1855 Brigham Young gave a sermon in which he absolutely denied that the Lord came to Joseph Smith in his First Vision:

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

Joseph Smith's Strange Account of the First Vision

The Mormon Apostle Orson Hyde made a similar statement:

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

Heber C. Kimball, the first counselor to Brigham Young, made the following statement:

Do you suppose that God in person called upon Joseph Smith, our Prophet? God called upon him; but God did not come himself and call . . . (*Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 6, page 29)

Heber C. Kimball went on to explain that rather than God coming himself, He sent messengers to Joseph Smith. Then he stated:

Why did he not come along? Because he has agents to attend to his business, and he sits upon his throne and is established at head-quarters, and tells this man, "Go and do this;" and it is behind the veil just as it is here. You have got to learn that. (*Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 6, p. 29)

So we see that Paul Cheesman's statement that Jesus or even God the Father can be referred to as an angel does not begin to answer the problem. Actually, the Mormon historians bear witness against themselves, for if it is proper to refer to the Father and the Son as "angels," why did they delete this word from Joseph Smith's statement that he had a "visitation of angels" when he was 14 years old? They would not have deleted this term if it had not contradicted the story that he had seen the Father and the Son. Dr. Hugh Nibley claims that even God the Father could be referred to as an angel, however, he did not hesitate to criticize an anti-Mormon writer for saying that it was an angel that appeared to Joseph Smith in 1820:

One of the most famous anti-Mormon books was John Hyde's *Mormonism*, which goes so far as to report that "Smith pretends to receive his first vision while praying in the woods. He asserts that God the Father and Jesus Christ came to him from the heavens." Hyde specifies the time as April 1820. Yet having admitted so much, Hyde covers it up later in his book when he writes: "Joseph Smith,

born in 1805, sees an angel in 1820, who tells him his sins are forgiven. In 1823 he sees another angel." This is an interesting example of how a critic will refute himself to discredit Joseph Smith's story. (*Improvement Era*, August, 1961, pp. 578-579)

Now, if John Hyde refuted himself (as Dr. Nibley says) by stating that it was an angel that appeared to Joseph Smith in 1820, then many of the leaders of the Mormon Church also refuted themselves because they stated that it was an angel. If John Hyde refuted himself by stating that it was an angel who appeared in the First Vision, did not Joseph Smith also "refute himself" when he said that it was a "visitation of angels"?

Bruce R. McConkie, of the First Council of the Seventy, has made this statement concerning the First Vision:

When Joseph Smith, then but a youth in his 15th year, went into the Sacred Grove . . . He supposed, as was then universally taught in apostate Christendom, that God was a three-in-one Spirit that filled the immensity of space, incorporeal, uncreated, immaterial, without body, parts, or passions. When he returned from that sacred spot, he had the sure knowledge—for his eyes had seen—that the Father and the Son were two glorified Personages in the express image of each other. (D. & C. 130:22)

If this inexperienced youth had been seeking to fabricate some great spiritual experience he never in the world would have come back with a story that struck irreconcilably at all the creeds of Christendom and all the teachings he himself had so far received from his parents and others. In an attempt to deceive he might have said that an angel appeared, or that some other miraculous event transpired, but never would it have occurred to him to rock the whole religious foundation of the Christian world with such a startling claim as that which he did make. (*Mormon Doctrine*, pp. 265-266)

This statement by Bruce R. McConkie becomes very interesting to those who know that Joseph Smith did say that it was a "visitation of angels" he received when he was fourteen years old.

After Brigham Young's death the Mormon Church leaders began to stress that it was the Father and the Son who appeared to Joseph Smith. Orson Pratt (who had at least twice before stated that it was an angel that appeared in the First Vision) made this statement on September 19, 1880:

Joseph Smith's Strange Account of the First Vision

The first one that he gave to him was in the spring of 1820, before Joseph Smith was of the age of fifteen. Then a wonderful revelation was given to him, the first one he ever received. In a great and glorious open vision, in answer to his prayers, there was the manifestation of two of the great personages in the heavens—not angels, not messengers, but two persons that hold the keys of authority over all the creations of the universe. Who were they? God the eternal Father and his Son Jesus Christ, through whom God the Father made the worlds! (*Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 21, p. 308)

Even though Orson Pratt said that it was not angels who appeared in the First Vision, Andrew Jensen, the assistant Church Historian, identified the personage who appeared to Joseph Smith as an angel. In the *Historical Record*, published in 1889, Andrew Jensen stated:

The angel again forbade Joseph to join any of these churches, and he promised that the true and everlasting Gospel should be revealed to him at some future time. Joseph Continues:

“Many other things did he (the angel) say unto me which I cannot write at this time.”

(*Historical Record*, p. 355)

Apparently it was felt that it would be running a “risk” to leave the term “angel” in the *Historical Record*, so it was reprinted and changed to read as follows:

The Holy Being again forbade Joseph to join any of these churches, and he promised that the true and everlasting gospel should be revealed to him at some future time. Joseph continues:

“Many other things did he (the Christ) say unto me which I cannot write at this time.”

(*Historical Record*, reprinted edition, pp. 355–356)

It is interesting to note that Hugh Nibley, who started out in the July 1961 issue of the *Improvement Era* to criticize the anti-Mormon writers for censoring Joseph Smith's story, finally had to admit the following in the November 1961 issue:

The sources of LDS church history, like all human chronicles, bristle with errors . . . It was utterly impossible to understand the Son without the spirit of revelation from the Father. Once one has that spirit, the truth of things is made clear no matter how deplorable the state of the documents may be; without it, all the “scholarship” in the world is of no avail to determine what really happened. (*Improvement Era*, November 1961, pp. 868–869)

Paul R. Cheesman makes this statement on page 42 of his thesis:

In the final analysis, it is admitted that unquestioned “proof” of the actuality of this vision could not be provided, since Joseph was alone when he experienced this visitation . . . In actuality, the only method by which one might arrive at a decision as to the truth or falsity of this story would seem to be through an inner, spiritual experience; after thorough study, one would have to do exactly as the young boy claimed he did: pray, and receive one's own witness, through the intangible power of God.

Although Paul R. Cheesman evidently wrote his thesis in defence of Joseph Smith's story of the First Vision, he has probably done more to destroy that story than he could ever imagine. The “strange” account of the First Vision, which he has reproduced in his thesis, proves that Joseph Smith did not see God the Father in the First Vision. In fact, it casts a shadow of doubt upon Joseph Smith's entire story. It not only shows that Joseph Smith was a deceiver, but it also shows that the Mormon Church leaders have been suppressing vital information from their people. Levi Edgar Young, who was the head of the Seven Presidents of Seventies in the Mormon Church, told LaMar Petersen and others that there are many secret manuscripts that the Mormon leaders do not allow the general public to see. The following is from LaMar Petersen's notes of an interview held at the Church Office Building on March 4, 1953:

Stated again that there were many secret manuscripts in the vaults “downstairs”; that someday they would be read and made known. Spoke of the fine handwriting in the journals because of the cost of paper. Went one time from Bro. Joseph Fielding's to Bro. Ivins to borrow microscope/magnifying glass?/. When he returned the manuscripts had been locked up again. Dale Morgan had asked him: “why doesn't the Church open its files to serious scholars doing historical research?” Bro. Young agreed that the library should be opened to all accredited students and that some day it would be.

The Church Historian's Office, of course, try to make it appear that they have nothing to hide. Preston Nibley, who was the Assistant Church Historian, made this statement:

Joseph Smith's Strange Account of the First Vision

Since I have been in the Church Historian's Office . . . No one has forbidden me to see whatever I wanted to see or read what I wanted to read or examine what I wanted to examine . . .

Some of us, who are all the time looking for something new, and who have the opinion that the Church has secrets that it is trying to protect and keep away from the public, remind me very much of the son of Sidney Rigdon . . . (Seminar on the Prophet Joseph Smith, Feb. 18, 1961, Brigham Young University Lecture Series, p. 15)

In a telephone conversation September 5, 1962, Preston Nibley admitted that he did not mean by this statement that anyone could read what they wanted or examine what they wanted to examine, but only that he (as Assistant Historian) could see what he wanted and examine what he wanted to examine. He stated that, as Assistant Church Historian, he had certain privileges that other people did not have.

It is very obvious that the Mormon Church leaders are trying to hide the fact that they are concealing the church records from the general public. The Church leaders make many excuses as to why these records are not available. Lauritz G. Petersen, Assistant Librarian at the Mormon Church Library, wrote us a letter on April 19, 1961, in which he stated:

We have received numerous requests from you asking for the information given in your letter to me. . . . Continual handling of these rare documents would damage them, for this reason we cannot comply with your requests.

This excuse is absolutely ridiculous; those who are familiar with the microfilm process know that the document only has to be handled once for microfilming, and that any number of copies can be made from this microfilm. This would eliminate the need of ever handling the originals again.

In this day of microfilming and photostat service there can be only one reason why the Church does not make these items available, and that is that they wish to keep their people in the dark. If, however, the general public would arise in protest, perhaps the Mormon leaders would be forced into making these documents available. For those who wish to protest against the suppression of these records, the address of the Church Historian's Library is: 47 East South Temple, Salt Lake City, Utah.

PART 2

Joseph Smith's Strange Account of the First Vision

**Photographs from the thesis, *An Analysis
of the Accounts Relating Joseph Smith's
Early Visions.***

By Paul R. Cheesman

70.3
415
365

AN ANALYSIS OF THE ACCOUNTS RELATING
JOSEPH SMITH'S EARLY VISIONS

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of the
Department of Graduate Studies in
Religious Instruction, Brigham Young University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Religious Education

by

Paul R. Cheesman

May, 1965

This thesis, by Paul R. Cheesman, is accepted in its present form by the Department of Graduate Studies in Religious Instruction of Brigham Young University as satisfying the thesis requirements for the degree of Master of Religious Education.

February 15, 1965
Date

James B. Allen
Thesis Committee

David H. Yarn, Jr.

C. Riddle
Department Chairman

APPENDIX D

Undated Manuscript

This account was found in a journal ledger in the Church Historian's office in Salt Lake City. The pages had been cut out but were matched with the edge of the journal to prove location. This was done in the presence and with the agreement of Earl Olsen and Lauritz Peterson of the Church Historian's office. The first page of this ledger identified Frederick G. Williams as the scribe and bore the date of 1833. Subsequent pages in the journal contained copies of letters of Oliver Cowdery, Joseph Smith, Hyrum Smith, William W. Phelps, Reynolds Cahoon, Jared Clark, Sidney Rigdon, and John Murdock. The earliest letter was dated June 14, 1829; the latest August 4, 1835.

There was no date nor indication of scribe of the account of the manuscript which follows. The information provided in the above statements seem to suggest that this account was written near 1833. Since it is recorded in the first person this would also suggest either that Joseph Smith wrote it or that he dictated it. From handwriting comparisons it would appear that the later supposition is the more likely one.

A History of the life of Joseph Smith Jr. an account of his marvilous experiences and of all the mighty acts which he doeth in the name of Jesus Christ the son of the living God of whom he beareth record and also an account of the rise of the church of Christ in the even of time according as the Lord brought forth and established by his hand firstly he receiving the testimony from on high secondly the ministering of Angels thirdly the reception of . . . [unclear word] the holy Priesthood by the ministering of . . . [unclear word] Angels to administer the letter of the Gospel. . . [unclear word] the Law and commandments as they were given unto him . . . [unclear word] and the ordinances forthly a confirmation and reception of the high Priesthood after the holy order of the son of the living God power and ordinance from on high to preach the gospel in the administrations and demonstrations of the spirit the key of the Kingdom of God confered upon him and the continuation of the blessings of god to him etc. . . . [unclear word] I was born in the town of Sharon in the state of Vermont North America on the twenty third day of December AD 1805 of goodly parents who spared no pains to instructing me in the christian religion at the age of about ten years my father Joseph Smith Senior moved to Palmyra Ontario County in the state of New York and being in indigent circumstances was obliged to labour hard for the support of a large family having nine children and as it required the exertions of all that were able to render any assistance for the support of the Family therefore we were deprived of the bennifit of an education. Suffice it to Say I was nearly instructed in reading and writing and the ground rules of Arithmatic which constituted my whole literary acquirements. At about the age of twelve years my mind became Seriously impres with regard to the all important concerns for the welfare of my immortal

Soul which led me to Searching the Scriptures believing as I was taught, that they contained the word of God they applying myself to them and my intimate acquaintance with those of different denominations led me to marvel exceedingly for I discovered that they did not adorn their profession by a holy walk and godly conversation agreeable to what I found contained in that Sacred depository this was a grief to my soul thus from the age twelve years to fifteen I pondered many things in my heart concerning the situations of the world of mankind the contentions and divisions the wickeness and and abominations and the darkness which pervaded the minds of mankind my mind become exceedingly distressed for I became convicted of my Sins and by Searching the Scriptures I found that mankind did not come unto the Lord but that they had apostatised from the true and living faith and there was no society or denomination that built upon the gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the new testament and I felt to mean for my own sins and for the Sins of the world for I learned in the Scriptures that god was the same yesterday to day and forever that he was no respecter to persons for he was God for I looked upon the sun the glorious luminary of the earth and also the moon rolling in their magesty through the heavens, and also the stars shining in their courses and the earth also upon which I stood and the beast of the field and the fowls of the heaven and the fish of the waters and also man walking forth upon the face of the earth in magesty and in strength of beauty whose power and intilgence in governing the things which are so exceding great and marvilous even in the likness of him who created them and when I considered upon these things my heart exclaimed well hath the wise man said it is a fool that saith in his heart there is no God my heart exclaimed all all these bear testimony

and bespeak an omnipotent and omnipotent power a being who maketh laws and decreeth and bindeth all things in their bounds who filleth Eternity who was and is and will be from all Eternity to Eternity and when I considered all these things and that that being seeketh such to worship him as worship him in spirit and in truth therefore I cried unto the Lord for mercy for there was none else to whom I could go and to obtain mercy and the Lord heard my cry in the wilderness and while in the attitude of calling upon the Lord in the 16th year of my age a pillar of light above the brightness of the sun at noon day come down from above and rested upon me and I was filled with the Spirit of god and the Lord opened the heavens upon me and I saw the Lord and he spake unto me saying Joseph my son Thy Sins are forgiven thee, go thy way walk in my Statutes and keep my commandments behold I am the Lord of glory I was crucified for the world, that all those who believe on my name may have Eternal life behold he won't lieth in Sin at this time and none doeth good no not one they have turned aside from the gospel and keep not my commandments they draw near to me with their lips while their hearts are far from me and mine anger is kindling against the inhabitants of the earth to visit them according to their ungodliness and to bring to pass that which hath been spoken by the mouth of the prophets and apostles behold and lo I come quickly as it was written of me in the cloud clothed in the glory of my Father and my soul was filled with love and for many days I could rejoice with great joy and the Lord was with me but could find none that would believe the heavenly vision nevertheless I pondered these things in my heart but after many days I fell into transgression and sinned in many things which brought wound upon my soul and there were many things which transpired that cannot be written and my fathers

family have suffered many persecutions and afflictions and it came to pass when I was seventeen years of age I called again upon the Lord and he showed unto me a heavenly vision for behold an angel of the Lord came and stood before me and it was by night and he called me by name and He the Lord had forgiven me my sins and he revealed unto me that in the Town of Manchester, Ontario County N.Y. there was plates of gold upon which there was engravings which was engraved by Moroni and his father the servant of the living God in ancient days and deposited by the commandments of God and kept by the power thereof and that I should go and get them and he revealed unto me many things concerning the inhabitants of the earth which since have been revealed in commandments and revelations and it was on the 22 day of Sept. AD 1822 and thus he appeared unto me three times in one night and once on the next day and then I immediately went to the place and found where the plates was deposited as the angel of the Lord had commanded me and straightway made three attempts to get them and thus being exceedingly frightened I supposed it had been a dream of vision but when I considered I knew that it was not therefore I cried unto the Lord in the agony of my soul why can I not obtain them behold the the angel appeared unto me again and said unto me you have not kept the commandments of the Lord which I gave unto you therefore you cannot now obtain them for the time is not yet fulfilled therefore thou wast left unto temptation that thou mightest be made acquainted with the power of the adversary therefore repent and call on the Lord thou shalt be forgiven and in his own due time thou shalt obtain them/ for now I had been tempted of the advisory and sought the Plates to obtain riches and kept not the commandment that I should have an eye singled to the glory of God therefore I was chastened and sought diligently to

obtain the plates and obtained them not until I was twenty one years of age and in this year I was married to Emma Hale daughter of Isaach Hale who lived in Harmony Susquehana County Pennsylvania on the 18th January AD, 1827, on the 22nd day of Sept of this same year I obtained the plates and in December following we moved to Susquehana by the assistance of a man by the name of Martin Harris who became convinced of the vision and gave me fifty dollars to bear my expenses and because of this faith and this righteous deed the Lord appeared unto him in a vision and showed unto him his marvelous work which he was about to do and imediately came to Susquehannah and said the Lord had shown him that he must go to New York City with some of the characters so we proceeded to copy some of them and he took his Journey to the eastern City and to the learned saying read this I pray thee and the learned said I cannot but if he would bring the plates they would read it but the Lord had forbid it and he returned to me and gave them to me to translate and I said I cannot for I am not learned but the Lord had prepared spectacles for to read the Book therefore I commenced translating the characters and thus the prophecy of Isiah was fulfilled which is written in the 29 chapter concerning the book. and it came to pass that after we had translated 116 pages that he desired to carry them to read to his friends that peradventu he might convince them of the truth therefore I inquired of the Lord and the Lord said unto me that he must not take them and I spake unto him (Martin) the word of the Lord and he said inquire again and I inquired again and also the third time and the Lord said unto me let him go with them only he shall covenant with me that he will not show them to only but four persons and he covenanted with the Lord that he would do according to the word of the Lord therefore he took them and took his

journey unto his friend to Palmira Wayne County and State of New York and he brake the covenant which he made before the Lord and the Lord suffered the writings to fall into the hands of wicked men and Martin was chastened for my transgression for asking the Lord the third time wherefore the plates was taken from me by the power of God and I was not able to obtain them for a season and it came to pass after much humility and affliction of soul I obtained them again when Lord appeared unto a young man by the name of Oliver Cowdry and showed unto him the plates a vision and also the truth of the work and what the Lord was about to do through me his unworthy servant therefore he was desirous to come and write for me to translate now my wife had written some for me to translate and also my Brother Samuel H. Smith but we had become reduced in property and my wives father was about to turn me out of doors I had not whereto go and I cried unto the Lord and he would provide for me to accomplish the work where unto he had commanded me.

CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS
WEST EUROPEAN MISSION

"WHITE HAYES" GIVONS GROVE
LEATHERHEAD, SURREY

Telephone
Leatherhead 4587

Telegraphic Address
Quickmere Leatherhead

Feb. 13, 1965.

Modern Microfilm Company,
566 Center Street,
Salt Lake City, Utah.

Gentlemen,

It has come to my attention that you are printing and distributing some kind of publication with an inflammatory intent, to which you have attached my name.

May I call to your attention the fact that there are laws in the United States which protect people from having their names and their reputations infringed upon.

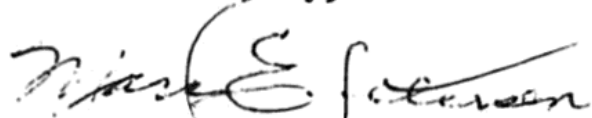
I have been in the publishing business all my life and therein learned what these rights are.

I donot know what you are publishing, but I do know that I have never given you any permission to attach my name to any publication whatsoever, and that when you do so you run the risk of serious legal action.

This letter to you is to notify you that unless you cease and desist from such publication, and recall the copies which you have circulated, that legal action will be instituted against you.

Would you like to have my attorney call on you, or do you wish to comply with my request without court action?

Yours truly,



Mark E. Petersen

THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS

THE COUNCIL OF THE TWELVE

47 E. SOUTH TEMPLE STREET

SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH

December 20, 1961

Mr. Gerald Tanner
566 Center Street
Salt Lake City, Utah

Dear Sir:

I have before me some of the memographed copies you mailed to me, from which I note that contrary to my instructions, you obtained permission from the Genealogical Department to read my great grandfather's Journal and that you have made excerpts therefrom, according to your own statement which you intend to use hereafter.

I am advised by legal authority that while the Journals belong to the organization or library, the literary rights belong to the descendants, and that if any one descendant objects, no one has the right to copy and print anything from such journals.

I am advised that Mrs. Kate Carter of the Daughters of the Utah Pioneers was recently stopped from publishing a diary because only one of the descendants in California opposed the publication.

This, therefore, is to advise you that if you quote from my great grandfather's journal in any of your future writings, you lay yourself liable to a suit for damages, since you have no permission and since I, as one of the descendants, positively object to your so quoting.

Very truly,



LeGrand Richards

LR:rs