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Confirming Records of Moroni's Coming

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Abstract: This article presents an analysis of the five published accounts of Moroni's visits with Joseph Smith on the night of September 21-22, 1823. These accounts were dictated to secretaries with known record-keeping skills. The article carefully examines eight elements of the vision to create a composite description.



Confirming Records of Moroni's Coming

By Dr. Richard Lloyd Anderson

Illustrated by Phyllis Luch

● Authentic experience teems with detail. Momentous events can be retold with new dimensions because descriptive powers only approximate the vividness of real life. On five occasions, experienced scribes recorded the appearance of Moroni to Joseph Smith on September 21 and 22, 1823. Four distinct manifestations had called the young prophet to his work of translating an ancient record, an intense spiritual contact unsurpassed in scripture.

The quality of the written history about Moroni's coming is even more striking. Not only are multiple accounts of a vision rare in the Bible, but the exact process of recording is not known. However, the accounts of Moroni's first appearances are generally actual dictations to secretaries known for their record-keeping skills, and the result furnishes ten times the detail of even the three versions of Paul's first vision.

The past few years have seen intense study of the First Vision by Latter-day Saint scholars and the consequent publication of several little-known narratives of Joseph Smith's earliest spiritual experience.¹ However, every major record of the First Vision continues its narrative through the coming of Moroni. Therefore, recently publicized records of the First Vision also permit the visions concerning the Book of Mormon to be told in greater depth. First, it is necessary to review the five sources that detail Moroni's first appearances:

1. The most important account of the early visions is also the most widely used. Its total circulation is numbered in millions. In pamphlet form it is now known as *Joseph Smith's Testimony*. Its dictation began in 1838, its first publication as the "History of Joseph Smith" was in 1842 in the *Times and Seasons*, and it has been printed in full form since 1902 as the intended opening of the Prophet's detailed narrative, *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*. It is familiar to every reading Latter-day Saint as a part of his scriptures, the "Extraets from the History of Joseph Smith, the Prophet" as part of the Pearl of Great Price.

2. Next in importance is the earliest known manuscript record of the early visions. Through the invaluable work of Dean Jessee, of the Church Historian's Office, it has been known that this account was written in either 1831 or 1832. However, he has recently discovered that the recorder (Frederick G. Williams) did not begin to write for the Prophet until the later date. This earliest manuscript history is therefore fixed at 1832.² This early attempt at official history is more detailed than any other account except the

"History of Joseph Smith."

3. In 1842, the Prophet approved for publication the *Wentworth Letter*, a summary of the main points of Church history up to that time. By an interesting coincidence, it was published in the *Times and Seasons* one issue prior to the first installment of the detailed "History of Joseph Smith." Characterized by the Prophet himself as a "brief history," it is a sparkling gem of condensation.³

4. The spontaneous quality of a personal conversation with Joseph Smith is preserved in the 1835 record of the interview with the notorious pretender "Joshua, the Jewish minister." Joseph Smith defended his own authority by relating God's call through the coming of angels. Somewhat more detailed than the Wentworth letter, the 1835 conversation was taken down at the time by Warren Cowdery.⁴

5. The first published history of the coming of Moroni appeared in letter form in the *Messenger and Advocate* in 1835. Its author was Oliver Cowdery, but its wealth of detail must be attributed largely to the Prophet. Prefacing the first installment, the Second Elder indicated that he had the full cooperation and "assistance" of the First Elder, and the narrative is interspersed with occasional indications of this, either the language of quotation ("to use his own words") or details obviously originating with the Prophet.⁵

Because critics of Joseph Smith have misused the Cowdery letters, it is important to stress their limitations. Like many writers, Oliver Cowdery aspired to more than he could perform. His preface envisioned "a full history of the rise of the Church of the Latter Day Saints, and the most interesting parts of its progress. . . ." What he actually produced, however, was a history of the years in which the Book of Mormon was revealed and delivered for translation, 1823 to 1827. Skeptics assert that Joseph Smith did not have a First Vision because Oliver Cowdery did not narrate it. With equal logic, one might claim that nothing of note took place in Mormon history from 1827 to 1835 because Oliver Cowdery's narrative stops at 1827. Arguments from silence are extremely hazardous. Although Oliver Cowdery apparently began to narrate the background of the First Vision, he shifted his chronology and jumped from 1820 to 1823—we do not know why.⁶

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However, he did compose the longest account of the 1823 revelations. All historians must be read in terms of their strengths and weaknesses, and Oliver Cowdery's letters are essentially descriptions of the coming of Moroni and his message.

The records discussed above make it obvious that Latter-day Saint history is in the process of its own correlation program. Multiple narratives of major events challenge historians to the hard work of collecting and the hard thinking of comparing. What emerges in the case of Moroni's coming is a powerful story of an overwhelming experience for Joseph Smith. But the intense night-long instruction from an angel can be best appreciated by studying the sequence of episodes during this time. For ease in handling quotations from the five sources, the following system will be adopted: (a) the basic Pearl of Great Price account, dictated in 1838, will not need citation; (b) supplemental information from Joseph Smith's three other accounts will be cited by the year of their recording, as discussed above; (c) supplemental information from the Oliver Cowdery letters will be indicated by his name.

1. *The Prayer for Direction*

No man lives without feeling inadequacy and guilt for his mistakes, and the candor of Joseph Smith in describing inner conflict marks his narrative with honesty. Conscious of his calling through his First Vision, yet acutely aware of his human failings, he sought a second revelation with "full confidence" because he "had previously had one." Oliver Cowdery evidently talked with the Prophet concerning the physical surroundings of 1823. The early-rising farm family was asleep, but Joseph lay awake for some time. Oliver Cowdery reported that "hours passed unnumbered—how many or how few I know not, neither is he able to inform me, but supposes it must have been eleven or twelve, and perhaps later, as the noise and bustle of the family in retiring, had long since ceased." All of Joseph's direct accounts mention his fervent prayer, though one implies alternate prayer and contemplation: "I had not been asleep, but was meditating upon my past life and experience. I was well aware I had not kept the commandments, and I repented heartily for all my sins and transgressions, and humbled myself before him whose eye surveys all things at a glance" (1835).

2. *The Angel's Appearance*

In June 1830 (right after the organization of the Church), Joseph Smith recorded his main impression of the overwhelming sight of the angel, "whose countenance was as lightning, and whose garments were pure and white above all whiteness." This

striking metaphor is repeated in the 1838 History, in which the Prophet vividly detailed the angel's garment—"a whiteness beyond anything earthly I had ever seen"—and person: "glorious beyond description, and his countenance truly like lightning." Retelling could not improve upon comparing the brilliant messenger to fiery lightning.

In fact, Joseph Smith portrays the intense glory also described by biblical prophets, a thought-provoking fact. Though in different words, they report a common vision experience, an indication of the reality of it all. Just as "the glory of the Lord shone round about" (Luke 2:9) in ancient visions, the youthful Prophet found his room illuminated "lighter than at noonday." This celestial radiance is pictured in the 1842 narrative: "a light like that of day, only of a far purer and more glorious appearance and brightness, burst into the room; indeed the first sight was as though the house was filled with consuming fire."

Every word just quoted from the Prophet in 1842 is also found (in slightly amplified form) in the 1835 account of Oliver Cowdery, but attributed to Joseph Smith: "Indeed, to use his own description, the first sight was as though the house was filled with consuming and unquenchable fire." The Prophet's 1842 reiteration of Oliver Cowdery's words validates the latter's details of Moroni's appearance. Joseph Smith's approval of Oliver's narrative makes two other comments of Oliver highly significant: first, on the stature of the angel: "a little above the common size of men in this age," and second, on the angel's personality. Joseph Smith disclosed the trust inspired by the personality of the messenger: "When I first looked upon him, I was afraid, but the fear soon left me." But the Prophet's secretary more intimately revealed the celestial love that accompanied celestial power: "though his countenance was as lightning, yet it was of a pleasing, innocent, and glorious appearance—so much so, that every fear was banished from the heart, and nothing but calmness pervaded the soul."

3. *The Angel's Identity*

"He called me by name, and said unto me that he was a messenger sent from the presence of God to me, and that his name was Moroni." This wording in the present Pearl of Great Price is modified from the first printing, in which the messenger was identified as "Nephi," a fact that has generated its share of superficial comment. A textual critic or a court of law reserves the right to use common sense in the face of obvious documentary errors. The "Nephi" reading contradicts all that the Prophet published on the subject during his lifetime. In 1835 Joseph Smith identified the messenger in official scripture: "Moroni,

whom I have sent unto you to reveal the Book of Mormon. . . .”⁸ That year Oliver Cowdery also named this individual in the *Messenger and Advocate*: “the angel Moroni, whose words I have been rehearsing, . . . communicated the knowledge of the record of the Nephites. . . .”⁹ Without exhausting the evidence, nothing could be clearer than Joseph Smith’s statement printed in the same year that the *History* began to be dictated: “Moroni, the person who deposited the plates, from whence the Book of Mormon was translated, in a hill in Manchester, Ontario County, New York, being dead, and raised again therefrom, appeared unto me, and told me where they were; and gave me directions how to obtain them.”¹⁰

4. *The Personal Message*

Joseph Smith approached the Lord in sincere repentance, and the first words of the angel brought assurance and forgiveness. But the precise phrasing reminds every reader that there is no favoritism with God—that full acceptance is based on overcoming weakness. Oliver Cowdery’s report stresses both the mercy and the justice of God: Joseph “received a joy and happiness indescribable by hearing that his own sins were forgiven, and his former transgressions to be remembered against him no more, if he then continued to walk before the Lord according to his holy commandments.” The accuracy of Oliver Cowdery’s reporting is shown by the Prophet’s inclusion of both forgiveness and responsibility in recalling Moroni’s first words: “and he said the Lord had forgiven me my sins” (1832); “he said . . . be faithful, and keep his commandments in all things” (1835).

5. *The Message of the Book of Mormon*

The angel of God proclaimed a new dispensation, and new scripture to restore “the fullness of the everlasting gospel.” Preserved on metal plates, the sacred book contained “an account of the former inhabitants of this continent, and the source from whence they sprang.” Moroni fully explained this subject. Oliver Cowdery reported “a history of the aborigines of this country” from the angel, who “said they were literal descendants of Abraham.” Joseph Smith used identical language: “He said to me, the Indians were the literal descendants of Abraham” (1835). The angel’s historical survey captured the complexity of actual civilizations: “a brief sketch of their origin, progress, civilization, laws, governments, of their righteousness and iniquity, and the blessings of God being finally withdrawn from them as a people . . .” (1842).

The method of translation of the ancient record was also revealed. According to Oliver Cowdery, Moroni clearly explained that prophecy would be fulfilled in presenting scholars an opportunity to trans-

late, and their inability to do so would necessitate the Lord’s accomplishment of this work through inspiration. Joseph Smith’s extended history explains the function of the Urim and Thummim, “two stones in

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silver bows . . . fastened to a breastplate.” Supplementary accounts call them “transparent stones” (1842) and characterize the instrument as a spiritual help: “God would give me power to translate it with the assistance of this instrument” (1835). But such a gift was based on continued worthiness—the Prophet might have the “privilege” of obtaining the plates and translating “if obedient to the commandments of the Lord . . .” (Cowdery).

6. *The Message of Restoration*

The accounts considered together depict the announcement of gospel restoration more clearly than the account in the Pearl of Great Price. There, however, is the most detailed record of particular scriptures explained by the heavenly instructor. The great unfulfilled prophecies of the Bible were about to be vindicated in the modern era. The proud and wicked would face God’s righteous anger at an imminent day of judgment (Mal. 3, 4). Elijah would be sent to establish a great work of preparation for the coming of the Lord (Mal. 4:5-6). The “Lord shall set his hand again the second time to recover the remnant of his people,” and there will be millennial peace and security for the righteous (Isa. 11). All who abide that day will accept and obey Jesus Christ (Acts 3:19-21). The “terrible day of the Lord” will not come unannounced, for his spirit will be “upon all flesh,” and “your young men shall see visions” (Joel 2:28-32). Yet this is not a comprehensive list: “He quoted many other passages of scripture and offered many explanations which cannot be mentioned here.”

The supplementary accounts are particularly helpful at this point. As implied above, Oliver Cowdery named Isaiah 29 as a prophecy to be fulfilled; the learned would be incapable of reading the “book that is sealed” (Isa. 29:11-12). According to Oliver Cowdery, the angel quoted the immediately following passage: “Therefore, behold, I will proceed to do a marvelous work among this people, even a marvelous

work and a wonder: for the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the understanding of their prudent men shall be hid." (Isa. 29:14.) Oliver Cowdery also explained the angel's message to Joseph Smith as a call to begin the great work of the restoration of Israel in the latter days, so that under the Messiah's leadership all may rejoice in one fold under one shepherd. (See John 10:16.)

Prophecy and the concept of restoration fit together beautifully in the Prophet's incisive *Wentworth Letter*: "This messenger proclaimed himself to be an angel of God, sent to bring the joyful tidings that the covenant which God made with ancient Israel was at hand to be fulfilled, that the preparatory work for the second coming of the Messiah was speedily to commence; that the time was at hand for the gospel, in all its fulness, to be preached in power, unto all nations, that a people might be prepared for the millennial reign."

7. *The Angel's Departure*

Since every aware person has some of the scientific discoverer's curiosity, details of the appearance and disappearance of a heavenly being challenge the imagination. At the beginning of the vision, the light "continued to increase" to noonday intensity, but the angel's departure reversed this process. At the end of the manifestation "the light in the room began to gather immediately around the person" of the angel—and an apparent "conduit" of light carried Moroni from sight. The supplementary accounts confirm this experience. In 1835 the Prophet recalled, "... he then gradually vanished out of my sight, or the vision closed." The same year, Oliver Cowdery indicated that Joseph Smith saw "the light and glory withdraw," and he also portrayed the powerful spiritual impact on the Prophet: an indescribable "calmness and peace of soul."

8. *Reappearances and Warnings*

Every narrative of Moroni's coming mentions two further appearances that night, and one the following morning. These generally mention the repetition of the angel's message through the three additional appearances, but they also imply greater instruction. "While meditating on what I had seen, the angel appeared to me again, and related the same things, and much more" (1835). The later interviews delved "farther and still farther" into "the mysteries of godliness and those things to come" (Oliver Cowdery). In this case the main account contained in the Pearl of Great Price almost exclusively discloses the nature of additional revelations. The world was on the verge of "great desolations by famine, sword, and pestilence." The moral commitment of the young Prophet must be

absolute, for he would be tempted by the financial value of the ancient objects to be entrusted to him for a time. These instructions should guide everyone with a call to serve: the angel warned "that I must have no other object in view in getting the plates but to glorify God, and must not be influenced by any other motive but that of building his kingdom. . . ." On more than one occasion the Prophet reported this warning. The Oliver Cowdery letters indicate that the angel promised Joseph Smith success in his translation on the strict condition that he serve "with an eye single to the glory of God."

The appearances of Moroni on September 21-22, 1823, were but the beginning of a series of visions and directions while translating the Book of Mormon, but that is another study in itself. The above narration of Moroni's first appearances is more complete than any single account because it blends the range of detail spontaneously recalled on several different occasions. The consistency of the five accounts is impressive. Certain phrases prominent in the detailed history of 1838 were first used in 1830—and many phrases of the 1832 and 1835 accounts are similar or identical in the 1838 History. Here is documentary evidence that the testimony of the coming of Moroni was the same from year to year.

A convincing witness is one who is sure of his observations, who reports them consistently, with factual detail to be expected from one who saw and heard for himself. In his history of Moroni's coming, Joseph Smith satisfies these characteristics of an eyewitness articulately reporting an actual experience. ○

FOOTNOTES

¹ The most detailed treatment of the First Vision and its setting is now *Brigham Young University Studies*, Vol. 9 (Spring 1969). Cf. James B. Allen, "Eight Contemporary Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision," *Improvement Era*, April 1970, pp. 4ff.

² See the notable article by Dean C. Jessee, "The Early Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision," *Brigham Young University Studies*, Vol. 9 (Spring 1969), pp. 277-78. Pioneer study and a first printing of the entire document was done by Paul R. Cheesman, *An Analysis of the Accounts Relating Joseph Smith's Early Visions* (BYU, M.R.E. Thesis, 1965), pp. 126-32.

³ The most accessible reprinting of the Wentworth Letter is Joseph Smith, *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, Vol. 4 (2d ed., Salt Lake City, 1949), pp. 535-41. The ultimate text is *Times and Seasons*, Vol. 3 (March 1, 1842), pp. 706-10.

⁴ See Jessee, "Early Accounts," *op. cit.*, pp. 280-83. Acknowledgment is made to President Joseph Fielding Smith for permission to quote the Book of Mormon section of this document.

⁵ The preface and initial letter of Cowdery appeared in *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate*, Vol. 1 (October 1834). His accounts of Moroni's coming began in "Letter IV," Vol. 1 (February 1835) and ran through "Letter VII," Vol. 2 (October 1835). A convenient secondary source of the Cowdery letters is Francis W. Kirkham, *New Witness for Christ in America* (Salt Lake City, 1951), chapters 7, 8, and appendix.

⁶ Oliver Cowdery evidently knew of the First Vision in 1835. See Richard Lloyd Anderson, "Circumstantial Confirmation of the First Vision Through Reminiscences," *Brigham Young University Studies*, Vol. 9 (Spring 1969), pp. 393-98.

⁷ Book of Commandments (1833) 24:7; present Doctrine and Covenants 20:6. The revelation was given in June 1830, and the language describing the angel was quoted in a letter of Lucy Mack Smith dated January 6, 1831. Its first printing was in *The Evening and The Morning Star*, Vol. 1 (June 1832). The word "other" was added before "whiteness" with the Prophet's approval in the 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants.

⁸ D&C 50:2 (1835 ed.), 27:5 (present ed.).

⁹ *Messenger and Advocate*, Vol. 1 (April 1835), p. 112.

¹⁰ *Elder's Journal*, Vol. 1 (July 1838), pp. 42-43, cit. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, *op. cit.*, Vol. 3, p. 28.