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Revised or Unaltered? Joseph Smith's Foundational Stories



Matthew B. Brown

Critics of Joseph Smith have long claimed that the stories of the Restoration offered by him were revised over a period of time until they became what is known today as the accepted history of the Church. In my lecture this morning I would like to examine this claim of revisionism from a documentary perspective. I will start by talking about the story of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon and then move into a discussion of the First Vision. I have a very definite reason for addressing these topics in reverse historical order and will hopefully become apparent as my lecture progresses.

Please be aware that in my remarks today I will be utilizing several abbreviations such as **JS 1832** (which refer to Joseph Smith's 1832 history) and **JS 1838** (which refers to the manuscript that was published in 1842 and became the official history of the Church).

I will be presenting and summarizing some new research today on both the story of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon and that of the First Vision and it is my hope that you will find something in this material that will be useful in defending the Prophet's foundational stories from the critics of the Church.

Book of Mormon

If a person wants to determine whether or not a story has changed over time it is logical to first examine that story in its earliest known form. In the case of the Book of Mormon account we are fortunate to have records from several eyewitnesses who heard Joseph Smith relate this story for the

first time. These witnesses are his mother (Lucy Mack Smith), his sister (Katherine Smith), and his brother (William Smith). These three eyewitnesses agree that Joseph's story was first told to them during the Fall harvest season shortly before Alvin Smith died (thereby giving us the date of 1823) and they are in agreement that the story told to them was that an angel had appeared to Joseph and told him about a golden, engraved record hidden in a nearby hill. Joseph talked to his whole family about this revelation for a considerable length of time. He stated to them that he was required to wait for a period of four years before he would be allowed to retrieve the record, and he warned his family members that they must not tell others in the community about this ancient artifact.¹

None of these three eyewitnesses ever mentions that they heard any different story of origin related by Joseph Smith. And none of them ever mentions hearing, even in the community, any earlier version of this story at any earlier point in time.² We know that Joseph's story about the book remained the same through the year 1826. During that period he worked in southern New York state for the Knight family and while he was in their employ he said that a personage had appeared to him in a "vision" and told him where there was an ancient gold book buried.³

Martin Harris is our next eyewitness for the content of Joseph Smith's story. He said that the first time he heard about the Gold Bible was around the first of October in the year 1827. Harris recalled that the day following this he went into Palmyra and spoke to some of the residents of the village about the matter. They repeated the account of the golden book as given to them by Joseph Smith Sr. and it matched what Joseph Jr. had said earlier to his family.

Lucy Mack Smith arrived a little bit later at Martin Harris's house and told him about Joseph bringing the plates to the Smith residence "and many other things." She further informed Martin that Joseph wished to see him. Martin sent his wife and daughter home with Lucy Mack Smith at this time and when they returned they told Martin that they had both been allowed to lift a very heavy object that was said to be the golden plates.

When Martin Harris went himself to the Smith home in Manchester, New York Joseph Jr. was away on an errand. Martin reports, "[This] gave me an opportunity of talking with his wife and the family about the plates." Martin indicates that he desired to get at the truth of the matter. "I talked with them separately," he said, "to see if their stories agreed, and I found they did agree. When Joseph came home I did not wish him to know that I had been talking with them, so I took him by the arm and led him away from the rest, and requested him to tell me the story, which he did as follows. He said an angel had appeared to him, and told him it was God's work...[Joseph talked about "the spectacles" and said that they had the ability to display a life-like visual image]. He [also] said the

angel told him that the plates must be translated, printed and sent before the world.” Martin further relates, “While at Mr. Smith’s I hefted the plates, and I knew from the heft that they were lead or gold, and I knew that Joseph had not credit enough to buy so much lead.”⁴

We may conclude from all of this documentary evidence that between the initial disclosure of the origin of the Book of Mormon in the Fall of 1823 and Joseph bringing the plates into the Smith residence in the Fall of 1827 his story did not change. He consistently told individuals that an angel of God had informed him about a set of golden plates.

Then the historical scene changes dramatically. It is known from documentary sources that in the year 1827 Joseph Smith started making his story known among the general populace. I have collected several statements by critics of Joseph Smith who say that they heard the story during this year from one authoritative source or another. There were, of course, some people who were skeptical about the young man’s claims of new revelation from the Almighty—in the form of a golden book no less! This is the time period where the public started to speculate heavily about what they thought was really behind Joseph Smith’s story and how they imagined the book idea really originated.

By the Summer of 1829 (when the Book of Mormon was being prepared for the press) the line between history and mythology had been blurring for some time. An issue of the June 1829 *Wayne Sentinel* newspaper in Palmyra made note of the fact that there had already been “much speculation” about the Golden Bible floating around the region. Stephen S. Harding provides us with a unique and insightful snapshot of what was going on during this precise time period. He visited the Grandin print shop where the book was being published and there he met Father Smith, the Prophet, Oliver Cowdery, and Martin Harris—in the morning. Then, in the afternoon, he had a lengthy conversation with his cousin Pomeroy Tucker and Mr. Grandin where he heard some “new” things about the book that was being produced there. The things that he heard from these two different groups of men is very instructive. Martin Harris informed Harding that the plates of the book were found in a hill, an angel of the Lord was involved, and the devil was working to thwart the project. Pomeroy Tucker, on the other hand, told him something quite different. He wanted Harding to believe that Joseph Smith had a connection with “the black art,” animal sacrifice, and money-digging⁵ (though in later years Tucker admitted that these stories only qualified as “rumors”).⁶ When Mr. Grandin was interviewed about the Book of Mormon just two years later than his 1829 meeting with Harding, he also seemed to be of the opinion that the golden plates were connected with money-digging lore.⁷ John H. Gilbert (whose picture you see on this slide) was also a workman in the Grandin print shop during the production of the Book of Mormon. He likewise held to the belief that Joseph Smith was a money-digger who was involved in “magic” practices.⁸ From this documentary evidence it can be concluded

that two different stories of origin were being promulgated in the Grandin building at the same time that the Book of Mormon was being issued from it. The workmen of the Grandin print shop typeset and proofread the preface page of the Book of Mormon, and so they knew without any ambiguity what the authentic story of its origin was. And they were also aware, from this very document, that there were “many false reports” circulating about the book.⁹ Yet, they chose to champion the rumors that were swirling around the region. Their repetition of idle reports, therefore, represents a deliberate revision of the storyline presented by the Prophet.

On this next slide I have highlighted the date August 1829 so that you can see how the information that I just presented correlates with what I will talk about next. It was at the very same time that Stephen Harding was hearing an alternative storyline in Palmyra that some Latter-day Saints tried to set the record straight. The report of story elements printed in the 11 August 1829 issue of the *Palmyra Freeman* is not perfect but it is very close to being correct. If a few slanted comments by the editor of the paper are filtered out of this account we find the following story elements.

- Joseph Smith of Manchester, New York
- said he was visited three times by a messenger of the Almighty
- Joseph was informed that a Golden Bible was deposited in a hill in Manchester
- it was an ancient record of divine nature and origin
- Joseph went to the place of deposit, dug into the earth a little ways, and found the Golden Bible along with a huge pair of spectacles
- Joseph was instructed not to let any person see the objects on penalty of death
- the plates of gold measured 8 inches long and 6 inches wide and were 1/8 of an inch thick
- the plates were engraved with hieroglyphics
- and the spectacles enabled Joseph to interpret the characters on the plates

The rest of the information on this slide shows a very interesting pattern. The first items tells us that the rumors were flying through the countryside. Next, the Saints offer the authentic elements of the story to the public. Then we find a blatant act of historical revisionism.

Abner Cole wanted to mock the Book of Mormon in his newspaper (*The Reflector*). He was most probably motivated to do this because he had violated copyright law by printing portions of the Book of Mormon in his paper and the Prophet Joseph Smith forced him to stop his illegal activity. Cole’s mockery text was called the “Book of Pukei.” In this peculiar literary production the editor took many authentic elements of the story of the Book of Mormon’s origin and mixed them together with

elements of speculation that had been floating around the community. Cole utilized the dialogue of one of the characters in his mockery text to call Joseph Smith an ignoramus, a criminal, and a servant of Satan. It is in this text that Joseph Smith is first connected with a man from Great Sodus Bay, New York, called “Walters the Magician” (probably Luman Walter). Cole claims in the “Book of Pukei” that the Book of Mormon *really* came into existence in the following manner:

- Walters the Magician was involved in witchcraft and money-digging.
- Walters was summoned to Manchester, New York by a group of wicked, idle, and slothful individuals—one of which was Joseph Smith.
- Walters took the slothful individuals of Manchester out into the woods on numerous nighttime money-digging excursions. They drew a magic circle, sacrificed a rooster, and dug into the ground but never actually found anything.
- The slothful group of Manchesterites then decided that Walters was a fraud. Walters himself admitted that he was an imposter and decided to skip town before the strong arm of the law caught up with him.
- At this point, the mantle of Walters the Magician fell upon Joseph Smith and the rest of the Manchester rabble rallied around him.
- The “spirit of the money-diggers” (who is identified implicitly with Satan in the text) appeared to Joseph Smith and revealed the Golden Bible to him.

If we look again at the chronological data on the slide, we can see a very informative pattern emerge. A few months after Abner Cole printed his Book of Pukei he lamented that the published attempts to explain the origin of the Book of Mormon were thus far unsatisfactory and “uncertain.” This means two very important things. (#1) Abner Cole was announcing that he rejected the authentic elements of the Book of Mormon story that had been made known in the *Palmyra Freeman* during the same time when the book was being published. (#2) Abner Cole was NOT claiming that the information put forward in his Book of Pukei was the final word in historical accuracy. But that acknowledgment did not last long. In the next item on the slide we see that shortly thereafter Cole reprinted the speculative information on “Walters the Magician” but this time he left out all of the authentic elements of the Book of Mormon story that he had included in the Book of Pukei. He proclaimed, this time around, that there was “little doubt” in the minds of some Palmyra residents, that this version of events was the real deal. Shortly thereafter there was yet another transformation of the magic theory. In March 1831 it was being proclaimed in the press that there was no doubt about Cole’s purported connection between Joseph Smith and “Walters the Magician.” So, we can see that between June 1829 and March 1831 the progression among outsiders went from uncertain speculation to absolute certainty.

There was only one thing wrong with the certainty of the “Walters the Magician” scenario being advocated by Abner Cole and his associates—it was the exact opposite of historical reality as reported by eyewitnesses.

Emer Harris (the brother of Martin Harris) said that he had personal knowledge of the fact that some people in Palmyra had “hired an astrologer to find the plates” of the Book of Mormon.¹⁰ Lucy Mack Smith recalled that a group of ten or twelve men sent “for a conjuror to come to divine by magic art the place where the record was deposited.” This conjuror did, in fact, arrive in Palmyra and assembled with the group which had sent for him. We know this to be the case because the Prophet’s father saw them meeting together to the east of his farm and overheard their plans to try and obtain the Golden Bible for themselves.¹¹ The Prophet’s sister Katherine remembered when her father heard of the conjuror and that an effort was made to warn Joseph Smith of what was taking place.¹² Joseph Knight Sr. verifies that a “great rodsman” went to the Smith home in Manchester and attempted to locate the hiding place of the golden plates through the use of divining rods.¹³ And Brigham Young reported that this “fortune-teller” was named “Walters.” President Young relates that this man angrily pointed out Joseph Smith among a crowd of people and with considerable profanity identified him as the one who could obtain the hidden treasure in the hill—but he acknowledged that he himself was not able to obtain it!¹⁴ “Walters the Magician” was not the friend of Joseph Smith; he was his adversary. The eyewitnesses never connect these two individuals in any type of venture or complicity.

Now that I have shown you that some of Joseph Smith’s critics were perfectly willing to intentionally alter his storyline, I would like to demonstrate that some of these critics have, in fact, preserved clear evidence that the Prophet did NOT alter his own storyline over time.

I have taken a careful look at the accounts of Mormonism’s detractors who claim that they heard Joseph Smith and his close associates tell the Book of Mormon story from 1827 through 1830. Once a person understands the full Book of Mormon account that was being repeated by the early Saints then it is not difficult to pick up on pieces of that pattern as they are scattered throughout the narratives of the critics. Let me read to you just the pattern that is present in one single source for the year 1827.

Joseph Smith Sr. said that some years prior to 1827 a spirit was “sent” and appeared to his son in a vision. This personage informed Joseph about the existence of a record on gold plates that were deposited inside of a stone box. Joseph Jr. was identified as the person who must obtain the plates and he was to do so on September 22nd. Joseph went to the place and raised up the top stone of the box. There was a large pair of spectacles with the plates; Joseph removed the gold book. He was worried that someone might discover where he had gotten it so he laid down the plates in order to replace the

top stone of the box. The book vanished and reappeared inside the box. Joseph attempted to get the book again but he was struck several times. A man (the spirit of the prophet who wrote the book) appeared and told Joseph that he had not been obedient. Joseph was told to come to the same spot one year later and bring his oldest brother. Before the end of the year, however, Joseph's oldest brother died. Joseph went one year later and was directed by the spirit to return after another year. Joseph went to Harmony, Pennsylvania and eloped with Emma Hale. In the forepart of September 1827 Joseph Smith Jr. told Willard Chase that he expected that he would soon take possession of the gold book and asked Chase to make him a chest with a lock on it—stating that he had been commanded to keep the book concealed from the eyes of all others but himself. A few weeks later Joseph told Chase that early in the morning of 22 September 1827 he took the one-horse wagon of a houseguest and, together with his wife, went to the hill that contained the book. Joseph left his wife in the wagon, retrieved the book, hid it in a tree, and went home. He then traveled to Macedon, New York to work. After ten days a rumor arose that someone had gotten the book and so Joseph's wife went after him. Joseph went to the place where he had hidden the plates, wrapped them in his work frock, and headed toward his family's home. Joseph was attacked in the woods by two men; he knocked them down, arrived safely at his home, and secured his treasure. Martin Harris gave Joseph Smith \$50.00 to help in the work of translating the book.¹⁵

This is just one of eleven unsympathetic sources that provide eyewitness evidence of what Joseph Smith and his close associates were saying about the coming forth of the Book of Mormon in 1827. And many of the elements just mentioned can be verified in the autobiography of the Prophet's mother Lucy Mack Smith. These early story elements help to verify that the Prophet's account did not evolve. I wish I had adequate time to show you the remaining story elements that were presented by the Saints in 1827 and subsequent years because the NON-EVOLUTION of the storyline becomes much more apparent when this evidence is considered.

This slide will also help to demonstrate that Joseph Smith's story did not change over time. I have taken the data provided by critics for the year 1827 and compared it with the Prophet's 1832 and 1838 histories. You will see by this chart that there are 18 matching story elements with the 1832 history but when it comes to the much longer, more detailed 1838 history there are even more story element parallels. If the Prophet's story had indeed evolved over time then we would expect to see less parallels as time went on. But just the opposite is true. When more written information is analyzed we find more matches with the verbal information that was being circulated by Joseph Smith.

The final point that I would like to make in relation to the Book of Mormon storyline is that it is necessary for any person to obtain an accurate understanding of a document before they can draw

legitimate conclusions from it. The Prophet's 1832 history provides us with a prime example of the importance of this principle. This document is the earliest known cohesive account of the coming forth of the Nephite scripture produced by Joseph Smith. Some critics may think that since it is the earliest document then any story elements that are not found within it, but which turn up in later narrations, must represent an expansion or evolution of the storyline. But they would be dead wrong.

I decided to do a detailed comparison of the Book of Mormon story elements found in JS 1832 with **non-Mormon** sources that related what was said about the coming forth of the book BEFORE JS 1832 was written. It turns out that approximately 50% of the story elements available to the public are not found within the document—thus demonstrating that Joseph Smith chose not to record everything in this particular history. I also did a study that demonstrates that the elements missing from the document (but known by the public) WERE included in subsequent LDS histories (including those produced by Joseph Smith), thus indicating that they were all integral parts of the story. This research paper is very long and there is no way for me to share its content with you during this lecture but I wanted you to be aware of it because it is important with regard to what I will speak about next—the First Vision.

The First Vision

JS 1832 is the first known document where Joseph Smith speaks in detail about the First Vision. This document is especially notable because it is the only one where the First Vision story is in the Prophet's own handwriting.

As stated before, JS 1832 is only about 50% complete when it comes to story elements that follow directly after the First Vision narrative. And so it is advisable to ask whether or not all First Vision story elements known in the public domain before the document was created are present within the document itself. And the answer is "NO."

A preliminary survey of the literature on my part turned up several First Vision story elements that were known in **non-LDS** circles before JS 1832 was created. They did not make it into this particular account, but they were included by Joseph Smith in JS 1838, signifying that they were integral parts of the story. This is enough to establish the fact that JS 1832 must not be considered as a full rendition of the First Vision event. Critics of Joseph Smith, therefore, would be wise to pause before making the accusation that any story elements that are not in this document, but which show up in later recitals, must represent a revision.

I would now like to draw your attention to some extremely interesting facts about JS 1832. I believe that what I am about to tell you regarding the nature of this document qualifies as new discovery. And I also believe that when this document is seen from the perspective I am about to present, it nullifies many of the criticisms that are brought against it.

The first pattern that I would like you to see is shown here on this slide. The red text indicates where Joseph Smith took over and did the writing himself in JS 1832. You can see that the scribe (Frederick G. Williams) barely wrote down a paragraph worth of material before he was replaced by the Prophet. This is a very curious fact, especially because right after Joseph Smith finished with the First Vision material Brother Williams took over again. This pattern seems to be an indication that the Prophet wanted to write down the First Vision story himself. And so the next question becomes, “WHY”? A possible answer to this question presents itself when one considers what happened to Joseph Smith when he tried to share the First Vision story the first time on an informal, verbal basis. We read in the 1838 history of the Church that when the Prophet first started telling others about his theophany he ran into an immediate snag, and it was a particularly perplexing one. His story was not only treated with great contempt but Joseph was told that the experience was “all of the devil.” I believe that Joseph Smith was trying, in his initial written account of the First Vision, to find a way to counteract these very negative reactions. And here is my evidence.

This slide shows that the JS 1832 First Vision recital is built over a continuous framework of biblical passages—roughly 47 in all. They span the entire Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. It appears that Joseph Smith was attempting to bolster the chances of his story being accepted by the world by couching it in language that would resonate in a positive manner with the masses.

But look more closely at this slide. In the area where the actual theophany takes place you will notice that Joseph Smith has incorporated three very relevant Bible stories into the telling of his tale; three stories that have to do with the appearance of heavenly beings. The first is the story of the angels who visited the shepherds and amidst a heavenly light announced the coming of the Christ. The second has to do with the appearance of the Savior to the apostle Paul when the heavenly light shown around him. And the third is about the apostle Stephen seeing both the Father and the Son. But before we move on to the next slide I will remind you what the Prophet said about the rejection he experienced when he first announced his vision. He said, ‘I felt like the apostle Paul because they wouldn’t believe his vision of Deity either.’ Now here we see Joseph utilizing Paul’s story to tell his own. Joseph used more of this story than any of the others and there is probably an important insight to be gained here. When Joseph Smith incorporates Acts 26 as a framework the parallels are so exacting that when Paul speaks in his text, Joseph speaks in his text; when Jesus addresses Paul in the Bible

passage, Jesus addresses Joseph in JS 1832. And then the pattern reverts to Paul speaking and Joseph speaking.

There is another scriptural framework to be found in JS 1832, but it is on the large scale—it overarches the entire text. It appears that Joseph Smith found a close parallel to his experience in the words of Psalm 31. The remarkable closeness of themes and verbiage between the Psalm and the Prophet's historical narrative demonstrate a close connection between the two texts. Psalm 31 is a deeply personal passage of scripture and this may be the reason why it was utilized. This intimate sense is mirrored in JS 1832. And it should be noted that several themes of Psalm 31 seem to have ended up in the Prophet's 1838 recital of the First Vision also.

The next pattern to be seen in JS 1832 is shown here on this next slide. The color-coded words represent many matching themes and matching props within this narration. The dividing line indicates where the lead-up material ends and the actual theophany begins. It is apparent from this exacting pattern of parallels that Joseph Smith was trying to show that the concerns which weighed heavily upon him before his prayer in the woods were all addressed and resolved by his Savior. These exacting parallels also indicate that JS 1832 is a deliberately constructed, and complex text—it is NOT the simple retelling of a story.

And this leads us to the next pattern. Here on this slide you will see that there are a considerable number of opposing themes embedded within the text. These represent what happened to Joseph as a result of his experience. The world was in darkness; Joseph was surrounded by a brilliant light. Joseph's mind was exceedingly distressed before; he was filled with love after; Some people said that there was no God; but Joseph saw the Lord himself. Mankind did not come unto the Lord before the prayer; but the Lord was with Joseph afterward. Joseph felt grief before; but he felt joy after. Joseph had belief before; but afterward he could find none who would believe.

As you can tell by now, JS 1832 is no ordinary text. Even though it is relatively short in length, it is deliberately assembled and tightly structured, which more than anything explains why certain details of the First Vision story were left out of it.

This brings us to the most frequent anti-Mormon criticism about JS 1832. God the Father is obviously not mentioned as making an appearance to Joseph Smith in this First Vision account. I would like to suggest, however, that all this time we as Latter-day Saints have not recognized that God the Father's appearance is, in fact, referred to right in this document. This has occurred, I believe, because we have been looking in the wrong place.

In the introductory remarks of JS 1832 Joseph Smith outlined precisely how he was about to proceed in the narration of his history. He mentioned that the very first incident associated with his “marvelous experience” in the Restoration was that he received “the testimony from on high.” Because of the formatting of the introductory paragraph and the structure of the text which follows it, it can be concluded with a marked degree of certainty that this testimony was connected with the First Vision. The question to ask, then, is, What was the “testimony from on high” that Joseph Smith received during the First Vision? This question is easily answered by referring to another First Vision recital given by the Prophet in November 1835. There he states that one of the two personages who appeared unto him testified that Jesus Christ was the Son of God. In JS 1838 (which is the First Vision narrative now published in the Pearl of Great Price) we learn that one of the personages testified to Joseph using the following words, “This is my beloved Son.” We may comfortably conclude from this documentary evidence that the “testimony from on high” of JS 1832 is equivalent to the phrase spoken by God the Father in JS 1838. Therefore, we may safely say that when Joseph Smith wrote the 1832 account of the First Vision the appearance of God the Father was definitely in his mind—because he obliquely refers to it. It seems that he did not make an explicit mention of this part of the story simply because he had chosen to use the apostle Paul’s experience as the main framework for that portion of his narrative—and Paul only saw Jesus Christ.

Six Arguments of the Critics

I would now like to offer some brief insights on six other anti-Mormon arguments that are commonly used against the First Vision; specifically those that are connected with accusations of revisionism.

The first anti-Mormon claim that I would like to draw your attention to is what I call a real whopper. It says that Joseph Smith joined not just one church after God supposedly commanded him not to in 1820 (thus demonstrating that his meeting with the Lord never really happened), but he joined 3 different churches before he formally organized the LDS faith in 1830! The basic problem with all of these claims of church-hopping is that to date nobody has been able to produce any authentic church records confirming that Joseph Smith actually became an acknowledged member of either the Baptist, Methodist, or Presbyterian denominations. Every one of the claims of joining other faiths is made extremely late in the historical record. I have gathered together some very early statements, however, that say just the opposite. Allow me to share a few citations with you. First I will read three contemporary accounts from newspapers and then cite three reminiscent accounts from eyewitnesses.

1830 Document

Four LDS men from New York teach that at the time the angel appeared to Joseph Smith (22 September 1823) he “made no pretensions to religion of any kind.”¹⁶

1831 Document

The editor of a Palmyra, New York newspaper claims that he has been “credibly informed,” and is “quite certain,” that “the prophet...never made any serious pretensions to religion until his late pretended revelation” meaning the Book of Mormon.¹⁷

1832 Document

Orson Pratt and Lyman Johnson teach on 8 April 1832 that “in 1827 a young man called Joseph Smith of the state of New York, of no denomination [or not belonging to a church], but under conviction, inquired of the Lord...[and] an angel [appeared to him]...who gave information where the plates were deposited.”¹⁸

Reminiscence About 1825

Josiah Stowell, Jr. (a non-Mormon) & Sr.: “I will give you a short history of what I know about Joseph Smith, Jr. I have been intimately acquainted with him about 2 years. He then was about 20 years old or thereabout. I also went to school with him one winter. He was a fine, likely young man and at that time did not profess religion.”¹⁹

Reminiscence About 1827

In 1827 David Marks went to Palmyra and Manchester where he “made considerable inquiry respecting...[Joseph] Smith” and learned from “several persons in different places” that Joseph was “about 21 years [old]; that previous to his declaration of having found the plates he made no pretensions to religion.”²⁰

Reminiscence About 1830

In October 1830 Peter Bauder spoke directly to the Prophet. Bauder commented: “he could give me no Christian experience,” meaning he did not belong to a church before his experience with the angel and plates.²¹

Second, is the irksome little argument that the Prophet initially identified his First Vision visitants as “angels” instead of Gods. The evidence that is used to support this claim is the Prophet’s diary

entry of 14 November 1835, which is posted at the top of this slide. All anybody needs to do is look at another entry in the very same diary, just 5 days earlier, to see that this argument is utter nonsense and the Prophet has actually provided us with a valuable insight into his experience. He says on 9 November 1835 that during the First Vision he “saw many angels” in addition to the two exalted Beings who stood before him. So when he says in the 14 November 1835 diary entry that his “first visitation of angels” took place when he was about 14 years old, he is being very precise in what he is saying. He did indeed see angels for the first time in the Sacred Grove.

The third claim that should be addressed is that Joseph Smith was not telling the First Vision story in public during the 1830’s because he was still making it up and didn’t settle on which elements to include until the 1840’s.

The information on this slide argues persuasively otherwise. Here you can plainly see that Joseph Smith was talking about seeing God in vision as early as 1829. And he talked about his theophany at a steady pace throughout the following decade. This story was NOT some cabalistic secret. And if Joseph Smith was really revising his story as he told it throughout the 1830’s you can be sure that somebody would have mentioned such a glaring discrepancy. But the howls of derision are conspicuously absent among the Latter-day Saints.

The fourth argument to look at is related to the one just mentioned. It is that the Saints in general (and Church leaders in particular) must not have been aware of the First Vision event in the 1830’s because Oliver Cowdery did not include it in his 1834-1835 history of the Church.

This is actually a fascinating puzzle to solve. Dr. Richard Anderson stated way back in 1969 that if anyone were to compare Oliver’s history with JS 1832 they would find a connection. Elder Cowdery announced at the outset of his project that he not only had the Prophet’s assistance available to him but he also had “authentic documents” in his possession that told the history of the Church. These documents, it turns out, were JS 1832—which most definitely DOES speak about the First Vision. I have independently verified on paper that Oliver Cowdery was utilizing JS 1832 in the writing of his account. And so the question that should be asked is, ‘Why in the world did Oliver Cowdery skip right over the First Vision story’?

I have a theory about why this occurred and it is laid out here on this slide. I believe the answer is quite mundane. Oliver obviously began telling the First Vision story in his text because he started talking about the revival activity (which, by the way, is information that is actually referred to in JS 1832 but not expounded upon). Then Oliver got a letter from William W. Phelps requesting him to

write about the coming forth of the Book of Mormon and he made specific mention of the year 1823. When Oliver wrote the next installment of the Church history he acknowledged receipt of Phelps' letter, said that he did not want to talk about the revival anymore, changed his dating to 1823, and proceeded to tell the story of the Book of Mormon. I call this the Redirection Theory, and I believe that it has some merit.

This brings us to the fifth topic that I would like to tell you about, and that is the revival activity that was connected with the First Vision. Anti-Mormons are adamant that Joseph Smith's statements about revival activity in Palmyra in 1820 cannot be verified in historical sources. The way I interpret the historical sources is that Joseph Smith is speaking about three distinct zones of revival activity—as illustrated on this slide. The village of Palmyra is only the first zone and there are some non-Mormons who knew Joseph Smith (such as Orsamus Turner and Pomeroy Tucker) who verify that he was indeed involved in some type of revival activity near that location. The second zone listed by the Prophet is the region of country around where he lived and the third zone is the whole district of country. It seems to be this third zone that Joseph associates with large amounts of people converting to the Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians. I would like to propose an interpretation of the Prophet's zone model that I think is fit for at least some consideration.

Here is a preliminary map that I have created of what I consider to be the "region of country" around the town of Palmyra. It is commonly referred to as the Finger Lakes region of New York state. This map demonstrates that a large amount of revival activity was going on in this region in the year 1820 and if you read the captions you will find that there are many converts being garnered because of what is taking place at this time. There was a great deal of other revival activity going on in 1820 in the area just to the east of the towns on this map and I would consider them to be located in area 3 of Joseph Smith's model—which he referred to as the "whole district of country."

A seemingly ordinary type of document provides us with assurance that the Prophet's descriptions of revival activity are firmly grounded in reality. An eyewitness informs us that Joseph Smith would pick up a newspaper every week called the *Palmyra Register* and indications are that this was taking place sometime around the year 1820. But it is the information that was being printed in that newspaper, during that year, that is of particular interest to us here.

On this slide we see that throughout the second half of 1820 Joseph Smith would have been reading about a great deal of revival activity that was taking place in two of the three zones that he mentions in his historical text. The first zone included his own town. A Methodist revival did take place there in the early Summer of 1820 and it was mentioned twice in the newspaper. All of the other

revival activity in the newspaper accounts took place in zone 3. Notice that the newspaper being received and read by the Smith household offered 5 straight months of revival descriptions, all three of the denominations mentioned by the Prophet in his historical narrative were represented, and great multitudes were being converted. I am definitely of the opinion that Joseph Smith's account of revival activity may be connected with the information printed in his newspaper. I am also of the opinion that the revival activity mentioned by Joseph Smith deserves further study.

The final topic that I would like to address is the accusation that Joseph Smith merged together his First Vision narrative with revival activity that took place in Palmyra in 1824 and 1825. The piece of evidence used to bolster this claim is the Lucy Mack Smith autobiography, wherein she mentions a revival taking place in the Palmyra area after her son Alvin died. And she also mentions her desire to join with the group which had put together this revival.

I would like to point out why this argument does not fly. If you look at this slide you will see that the activity referred to by Lucy Mack Smith as a 'revival' was actually instigated BY HER SON ALVIN'S DEATH. The two events are intertwined. This was no ordinary 'revival' either. It was being executed by only one man who wanted to join all the religious denominations together into one cohesive group. I would like to ask some questions about this so-called revival. First—did Lucy Mack Smith say that she actually joined the unidentified group of merge-hopeful congregations—NO! Is there any historical evidence that a merging of the denominations took place at this time? Not that I am aware of. When did this so-called revival take place? It seems to be shortly after the death of Alvin Smith in November 1823. When was the Palmyra revival of this time frame? If you read the account left by Reverend George Lane carefully, you will find that the Palmyra revival did not actually get rolling until about December 1824. Is there any evidence that Lucy Mack Smith actually joined the Presbyterian church in 1820? YES. Right in her autobiography she plainly states that she did not join herself formally to a church until Alvin Smith attained his 22nd year—which occurred on 11 February 1820. I believe that all of these events need to be separated from each other and understood in their proper context.

Before closing I would like to make an appeal and also an announcement.

If anyone who hears my lecture is aware of any not-well-known recitals of the First Vision, or story elements from it, that are in family histories, journals, diaries, newspapers, etc. (especially during the lifetime of Joseph Smith) I would appreciate it if you would contact me through my publisher—Covenant Communications in American Fork, Utah. It does not matter if the account is short or even

fragmentary. I have created an enormous timeline of First Vision recitals and I would like to add to it if possible so that this important part of Mormon history can be better understood.

If anyone is interested in learning more about the First Vision or the Book of Mormon, I would like to encourage you to read informative, but carefully-researched literature on them. To facilitate the learning process, I have placed substantial bibliographies on these and other topics on a website called "josephsmithstudies.com." There are many links on these pages that will take you straight to the texts of articles.

Thank you for your attention during this presentation today. I hope that your time has been well spent and that you will take something of intellectual value with you when this conference has ended.

Notes

¹ William B. Smith, *William Smith on Mormonism* (Lamoni, IA: Herald Steam Book and Job Office, 1883), 9; *Kansas City Times*, 11 April 1895; Lavina F. Anderson, ed., *Lucy's Book: A Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith's Family Memoir* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2001), chapter 18.

² A possible secondhand verification comes from Harrison Chamberlain. He claimed to have heard from people living in the vicinity of Palmyra that in the late Fall of 1823 Joseph Smith told his most intimate associates about his vision of the angel and the engraved golden plates buried in a hill which contained revelation from God (see *EMD*, 5:296ñ97).

³ Joseph Knight Jr. statement published in William G. Hartley, "The Knight Family: Ever Faithful to the Prophet," *Ensign*, January 1989, 44.

⁴ *Tiffany's Monthly* (New York), vol. 5, 1859, 167ñ169.

⁵ Letter, Stephen S. Harding to Thomas Gregg, February 1882.

⁶ *Wayne Democratic Press*, 26 May 1858.

⁷ *Morning Courier and New York Enquirer*, vol. 7, no. 562, 31 August 1831; *ibid.*, vol. 7, no. 563, 1 September 1831.

⁸ *Detroit Post and Tribune*, 3 December 1877.

⁹ Joseph Smith Jr., *The Book of Mormon* (Palmyra, NY: Egbert B. Grandin, 1830), preface.

¹⁰ *EMD*, 3:340.

¹¹ Anderson, ed., *Lucy's Book: A Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith's Family Memoir*, chapter 22.

¹² *Kansas City Times*, 11 April 1895.

¹³ *Brigham Young University Studies*, vol. 17, no. 1, Fall 1976.

¹⁴ Margery Ward, ed., *A Gentile Account of Life in Utah's Dixie, 1872ñ73: Elizabeth Kane's St. George Journal* (Salt Lake City: Tanner Trust Fund, University of Utah Library, 1995).

¹⁵ Willard Chase in Eber D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled* (Painesville, OH: Howe, 1834).

¹⁶ *Observer and Telegraph*, 18 November 1830 (Hudson, Ohio).

¹⁷ *The Reflector*, 1 February 1831 (Palmyra, New York).

¹⁸ *The Catholic Telegraph*, 14 April 1832 (Cincinnati, Ohio).

¹⁹ Letter, Josiah Stowell Jr. to John S. Fullmer, 17 February 1843.

²⁰ *Morning Star*, 7 March 1833 (Limerick, Maine).

²¹ Peter Bauder, *The Kingdom and Gospel of Jesus Christ* (Canajoharie, New York: A.H. Calhoun, 1834), 36.