



Type: Magazine Article

Censoring the Joseph Smith Story, Part III

Author(s): Hugh Nibley

Source: *Improvement Era*, Vol. 64, No. 10 (October 1961), pp. 724–725, 736,
738-740

Published by: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

THE JOSEPH SMITH STORY

BY HUGH NIBLEY

Mrs. Brodie, it will be recalled, rests her impeachment of the first vision story on the silence of the record between 1820 and 1840. But the argument of silence is if anything even less significant before 1840 than after. For if fifty-odd "standard works" on the history of Mormonism can all omit the key to that history even after that history has been formally published to the world, what are the chances of finding anything like a coherent account of that supremely unpopular and much-mishandled story in the much scantier literature of the earlier period, *before* there was any official Mormon version to act as a source, a check, or a control? One might argue that it is inconceivable that anti-Mormon writers, eager to convict Joseph Smith of blasphemy and boundless impudence, would pass by such a juicy item as the first vision story in silence. Yet we have just seen that fifty of them did just that; though they claimed to be quoting Joseph Smith's own story, none of them "even intimated," to quote Mrs. B., "that he had heard the story of the two gods." All of which shows that ignorance of an event is not the only reason for silence concerning it. Policy and prejudice play a dominant role in religious history, and especially in anti-Mormon history.

But, it may be argued, the suppression of the story after 1840 was not *total*. Neither was it before 1840. Let us consider some of the "implications" that turn up in the earlier literature which have somehow—but not surprisingly—quite escaped the notice of Mrs. Brodie, in spite of her predilection for implications. We must warn the reader that the stories we are about to quote are a mess—but no more so than those we have already quoted. It has been standard procedure among anti-Mormon writers to attribute all this confusion to Joseph Smith himself, who is charged with having told a great many conflicting stories, by way of explaining why the stories told against him by his enemies never agree. To this charge the fifty writers just cited provide an adequate refutation: No two of them tell the same story even after Joseph Smith is long dead and when they all claim to be following a single original. Who is responsible for

that? Not Joseph Smith and the Mormons, certainly.

It will be recalled that Joseph Smith was, as he puts it, "induced" to write his story "owing to the many reports which have been put in circulation by evil-disposed and designing persons. . . ." Did he merely imagine such things? He did not. On November 30, 1830 the Painesville *Telegraph* reported: "To record the thousand tales which are in circulation respecting the book and its propagators would be an endless task and probably lead to the promulgation of a hundred times more than was founded on truth."⁵⁶ The editor is well aware of what a swarm of stories about Joseph Smith are going around, and how easily they depart from the truth. Did Joseph Smith and the Mormons make up all those shockers—about themselves? We have examined a great number of those stories, which we compare in a recent study,⁵⁷ and found that they all turn on a few stock themes: There are the digging stories, the peep stones, appearances of angels and devils, crooked business deals and speculations, the mysterious plates, and, not least of all the first vision story.

Let us see how Mrs. Brodie tries to build up a case against Joseph Smith by implication. It was in 1834 "shortly after *Mormonism Unveiled* appeared" that Joseph Smith published the "first sketch of his early years," which "took the form of an apology for his youthful indiscretions."⁵⁸ This statement is misleading: an apology is an explanation or justification of actions which are explicitly admitted; but Joseph Smith's "apology" flatly denies Howe's charges that make him "the vilest wretch on earth," and insists that his "imperfections" are nothing worse than "a light, and too often, vain mind, exhibiting a foolish and trifling conversation."⁵⁸ In issuing this denial, Joseph Smith tells no story whatever; this is *not* a "first sketch of his early years" or of anything else, but simply a refutation of charges of gross misconduct. But by pretending that it is a history, Mrs. Brodie can announce that it "differed surprisingly" from the "official autobiography" of 1838 or 1842.⁵⁹ Of course it did; they are two totally different types of document, but there is not the slightest conflict between

them; they are photographs of the same man, just as Lincoln's jokes and his Gettysburg Address though they "differed surprisingly" are different photographs of the same man.

But if Joseph Smith invented all his heavenly visitors in reply to Mr. E. D. Howe, one is at a loss to explain how all those religious manifestations got into Howe's book in the first place; for example, Howe quotes Ezra Booth as reporting in 1831: "Smith describes an angel, as having the appearance of 'a tall, slim, well-built, handsome man, with a bright pillar upon his head.'"⁶⁰ Now, what we would like to know is how Joseph Smith could have been going around in 1831 giving intimate firsthand descriptions of angels—pillar of light and all—if he first invented his angelic interviews in 1838? Howe is not one to report the first vision; he declares his extreme reluctance to report any of Joseph Smith's supernatural tales,⁶¹ and insists that "no one but the vilest wretch on earth, disregarding all that is sacred, would ever dare to have profaned the sacred oracles of truth to such base purposes. . . . We are left without weapons to combat the credulous Mormon believer."⁶² Yet on the other hand he resents Joseph's reticence and accuses him of "mystifying everything."⁶³ From which it is quite plain that Howe was denied access to a good deal of information, and that he was angered and frustrated. As a result his record is a monument of confusion, contradiction, and invective.

Take, for example, Peter Ingersoll's story of how when "he was once ploughing near the house of Joseph Smith, Sr." he was returning to work through the field when the elder Smith stopped him and gave him a lecture on seer stones, gazed at one in his own hat, and "being very much exhausted, said in a faint voice, 'If you knew what I had seen, you would believe.'" This according to Ingersoll, took place sometime between 1822 and "about 1830."⁶⁴ One wonders just how reliable this story is. Is Ingersoll making up the story or just mixing it up? Could this be a garbled version of what happened to Joseph Smith the day after Moroni's first visit—working in the field, going back to the house, fainting, the ap-

pearance of a vision, a conversation with the elder Smith in the field, Father Smith's declaration of belief? It is all there, only with Peter Ingersoll, one of the greatest storytellers of them all, in the leading role.⁶⁵

The man who claimed to have known Joseph best, to have been in fact his intimate associate "from his twelfth to his twentieth year," reported in 1867:

"About this time (1827) Smith had a remarkable vision. He pretended that, while engaged in secret prayer, alone in the wilderness, an 'angel of the Lord,' appeared to him, with the glad tidings that 'all his sins had been forgiven,' and proclaiming further that 'all religious denominations were believing in false doctrines, and consequently that none of them were acceptable of God as of His Church and Kingdom'; also he had received a 'promise that the true doctrine and the fullness of the gospel should at some future time be revealed to him.' Following this, soon came another angel (or possibly the same one,) revealing to him that he was himself to be 'the favored instrument of the new revelation. . . .' In the fall of the same year Smith had yet a more miraculous and astonishing vision than any preceding one."⁶⁶

Mr. Tucker does not bother to tell us what that most marvelous vision of all might have been, but instead he reports that Joseph then "announced to his family and friends and the bigoted persons who adhered to his supernaturalism," that he would go and get the plates. These visions, according to Tucker, were "repeatedly quoted by his credulous friends at the time."⁶⁷

Now if Tucker is anything like the reliable firsthand source that the critics take him to be, it would be hard to deny that the story of the first vision was being told and retold in 1827: the usual distortions are there, but it is plain enough what is being distorted. At the very least it is certain that Tucker lived in Palmyra in the early 1820's (he moved to Canandaigua in 1822 or 1823 and stayed there four years), and he does seem to have the strong impression that stories of Joseph Smith's visions were current at that time. *(Continued on page 736)*

competition to become the chief incentive to work. Encourage them all, of course, to do their best, but let your competition from now on be with your own mission, your own past record, and not with any other mission. Teach your missionaries that their competition must be with themselves and not with the other missionaries, but inspire them with ambition and enthusiasm. Encourage them to be humble and prayerful. Do not downgrade them with unfavorable comparisons. Preserve their self-confidence and self-respect. Do not break their spirits. When great movements get the impetus of a prairie fire there is danger. I hope I have not spoken out of place. I am just sounding this word of warning.

In your enthusiasm to increase the flock, be careful you don't lose the shepherds. The Lord spoke about leaving the ninety and nine and going out to save the one; I am thinking in reverse order. You are asking the one to go out and get the ninety and nine, but be sure you don't lose the one. God bless you, my brethren and sisters. God bless the missionaries. One of the most effective techniques of your work is that which all of you are employing and asking your missionaries to employ, that of bearing testimony. I want to tell you from the very center of my heart that I know that Joseph the Prophet talked with Jesus Christ. I know that this is the restored gospel of Jesus Christ, that this Church is led by revelation, and that the man who stands at the head of the Church today is a prophet of God.

I leave you that testimony and ask for your prayers for all of us that we remain humble and somehow be efficacious and partly, at least, equal to the task assigned to us. I leave you my blessing, a blessing of peace in your souls, wisdom in your minds and hearts, enthusiasm for the work. I bless you that you may go back inspired as never before to carry out the greatest work of all time. Revelations from God will continue to come, and the world will yet know, as they are beginning to know, that there is a force in the world that is capable of combating the satanic and implacable foe called communism or more properly called anti-Christ. I leave you that blessing and that testimony humbly in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Censoring the Joseph Smith Story

(Continued from page 725)

A closer check is provided by an article in the *Rochester Advertiser & Telegraph* for August 31, 1829: "In the fall of 1827," it says, "a person by the name of Joseph Smith, of Manchester, Ontario county, reported that he had been visited in a dream by the spirit of the Almighty and informed that in a certain hill in that town was deposited this Gold Bible . . . as he states . . . after penetrating mother earth a short distance the bible was found . . . [it was] nicely wrapped up and excluded from the 'vulgar gaze of poor and wicked mortals.'"⁶⁸

Here we find the usual freedom of invention, including the flowery editorial terms "mother earth" and "vulgar gaze of poor and wicked mortals" explicitly attributed to Joseph Smith himself two years before, though no sources are given. Again we see that the supernatural element in the Book of Mormon story is full blown in 1827 or at least in 1829—no need for Joseph Smith to wait until 1838 to invent it. The piece is just as thoroughly mixed up as the others we have cited, and an interesting note emerges in the confusion: it is not an angel who visits the young Joseph Smith but "the spirit of the Almighty," and that not in any abstract or mystic sense, but as a conveyor of specific information. If Joseph Smith was not talking to angels in 1827, it would seem from this scrambled account that he was talking to someone much higher up. Where could *that* rumor have started?

Just two weeks later (September 16, 1829) the *Palmyra Reflector* reported: "The Book of Mormon is expected to be ready for delivery in the course of one year. Great and marvelous things will 'come to pass' about these days."⁶⁹ Again the Book of Mormon is surrounded with an aura of the supernatural even before its publication. Then eight months later (May 15, 1830) the *Rochester Gem* announced: "The translator if we take his word for it, has been directed by an angel in this business . . . [This] is in point of blasphemy and imposition, the very summit."⁷⁰ So the stories of the angel were *not* invented years later, after all. But why wasn't it an

angel in the *Rochester Advertiser* account of the previous year, where "the spirit of the Almighty" was the visitor? Obviously, the earlier report has mixed up the story of Moroni with the first vision. That was a common blunder, as we have seen, in later years as well.

A few weeks after the appearance of the Book of Mormon, Obediah Dogberry published a satire on Joseph Smith in the *Palmyra Reflector*; it is the *Book of Pukei*, and we quote from Chap. ii. First the contents of the chapter are given: "1. The idle and slothful reverence the prophet. 2. The prophet reveals to them the first appearance of the Spirit. 3. The admonition and promises. 4. Description of the spirit. . . ."

Then beginning with verse 2: "And the Prophet answered and said . . . lol! yesternight stood before me in the wilderness of Manchester, the *spirit*. . . . And he said unto me, Joseph, the son of Joseph, hold up thine head . . . hold up thine face and let the *light* of mine countenance shine upon thee. . . . I am the spirit that walketh in darkness, and will shew thee great signs and wonders. And I looked, and behold a little old man stood before me, clad, as I supposed, in Egyptian raiment, except his Indian blanket and moccasins—his beard of silver white, *hung* far below his knees. On his head was an old-fashioned military half cocked hat . . . his speech was sweeter than molasses, and his words were the reformed Egyptian. And again he said unto me, 'Joseph thou who has been surnamed the *ignoramus*, knowest thou not, that great signs and wonders are to be done by thine hands?'"⁷¹

The broad, heavy Yankee humor is apparent enough, and it would be hard to explain such expressions as "reformed Egyptian" as coming from any but an official source. But what about the rest of the satire? Note the table of contents: "2. The Prophet reveals to them *the first appearance of the Spirit*. 3. Admonitions and promises. 4. Description of the Spirit." The *first* appearance of the Spirit is then depicted as taking place "in the wilderness of Manchester," where the Spirit addresses Joseph by name, introduces himself, and promises great things to come, including a work to be done by Smith himself.

(Continued on page 738)

(Continued from page 736)

In the burlesque description of "the Spirit," special mention is made of the *light* of his countenance and the extreme whiteness of his beard. With the coming of this light, Smith is told, "hold up thine head," as if before he had been cast down.

Now is Mr. Dogberry simply making all this up or is he satirizing? The humor of his heavy-handed discourse is anything but intrinsic; his long, laborious spoofing of the Book of Mormon (from which we

have quoted only a few lines) is only effective if the reader recognizes each point as a take-off on Joseph Smith, who is represented as having told his followers, "the idle and slothful"—and no one else!—of that "first appearance of the Spirit" which took place "in the wilderness of Manchester."

Just a week after the Painesville *Telegraph* had deplored "the thousand tales which are in circulation respecting the book and its propagators," that journal (December 7,

1830) added to the confusion with yet another tale:

"... friends and advocates of this wonderful book state that Mr. Oliver Cowdery has his commission directly from the God of Heaven, and that he has his credentials, written and signed by the hand of Jesus Christ, with whom he has personally conversed, and as such, said Cowdery claims that he and his associates are the only persons on earth who are qualified to administer in his name."⁷²

The source of this story is not given; we are not even told whether the "friends and advocates" in question were Mormons or merely sympathizers, or whether the report came at first, second, or thirdhand from personal friends of Cowdery. It is simply another of those "thousands of tales" going around in 1830; but the elements of the story are familiar—a personal face-to-face conversation with Jesus Christ, as a result of which it can be confidently announced that there was no authorized church on the earth at that time.

Another version of the story puts Sidney Rigdon in the leading role. One Alexander Majors claimed to recall that "an elder by the name of Rigdon preached in the courthouse one Sunday in 1832, in which he said he had been to the third heaven, and had talked face to face with God Almighty. The preachers in the community the next day went en masse to call upon him. He repeated what he had said the day before. . . ."⁷³

Yet according to the same Majors, Joseph Smith's story anticipated Rigdon's by a good two years, for in 1830 "five Mormon elders made their appearance in the county . . . said that they had the priesthood 'that had been organized by Joseph Smith, who had met an angel and received a revelation from God. . . .' In that day and age it was regarded as blasphemous . . . for anyone to claim that they met angels and received from them new revelations, and the religious portion of the community, especially, was very much incensed and aroused at the audacity of any person claiming such interviews from the invisible world."⁷⁴ From this it would appear that at an early date people were much angered and excited by Joseph Smith's claims to heavenly visitations; note that a distinction is made between the angel's visit and

Reaction Time

RICHARD L. EVANS



Last week we closed with a quotation which we now again recall: "Spend your time in nothing which you know must be repented of; in nothing on which you might not pray for the blessing of God; in nothing which you could not review with a quiet conscience . . . in nothing which you might not safely and properly be found doing if death should surprise you in the act."¹ Many, if not most of people's problems come with misuse of time—not only time in continuing quantity, but the decisions or reactions of a single second. Studies of the reaction time of people indicate how vitally important can be a fraction of a second. In the oft-portrayed use of side arms, for example, the difference between those who live and those who die is frequently a fraction of a second. And the same no doubt could be said for the days when swords and spears were the common weapons—and certainly the same can be said for these days of highway hazards, where, at sixty miles an hour, a car travels eighty-eight feet in a single second. And so the difference between life and death, good and evil, safety and sorrow, between a quiet or unquiet conscience, between what can and what cannot be recalled, is often only an instant. This is true of utterance as well as action. A second's thought before we say something would leave many things blessedly unsaid; a second's thought before we do something would leave many unwise things blessedly undone. The ill-advised action or utterance, without first thinking through, can lead to incalculable consequences. There is no problem in filling time. There are demands and invitations and urges and interests and opportunities in ten thousand different directions. It is a question of using time for what we should—for what is immediately necessary, and for what is of value everlastingly—and of striking a balance between the two. This suggests itself as a significant sentence; ". . . do not spend money for that which is of no worth, [or life or time] nor your labor for that which cannot satisfy."² We need time to think, to explore, to reach for the real essentials, to pursue a sincere and honest search, ever seeking to come closer to the answers that evade us, and to an understanding of eternal truth. And the thoughtful use of time, with honest intent, gives peace to the soul and a deep and satisfying assurance.

¹Richard Baxter (Eng. Divine, 1615-1691.)
² Nephi 9:51.

"The Spoken Word," from Temple Square presented over KSL and the Columbia Broadcasting System, July 30, 1961. Copyright 1961.

"a revelation (i.e., a particular revelation) from God."

Since Oliver Cowdery and Sidney Rigdon were understandably confused with Joseph Smith in the stories that were going around, it is not surprising that Martin Harris had the same distinction. The indefatigable E. D. Howe was able to get an affidavit from one testifying that Martin Harris "frequently declares that he has conversed with Jesus Christ, Angels and the Devil . . . and at one time the presence of the Lord was so great that a screen was hung up between him and the Prophet."⁷⁵ One could not ask for a more obvious juggling of hearsay reports. We are told that the man claimed actually to have conversed with the Lord, and yet in his most wonderful experience he did not see Christ at all, but merely sensed "the presence of the Lord," from which he was shielded by a screen—only the screen was not between him and the Lord at all, but "between him and the Prophet." That would make Joseph Smith the one who was really in "the presence of the Lord," and not Harris. It is quite plain that somebody is confusing the story of the first vision with the well-known accounts of the translating of the plates.

(To be concluded)

FOOTNOTES

⁷⁰Quoted in Francis W. Kirkham, *A New Witness for Christ in America*, Vol. II (Independence, Missouri; Zion's Printing and Publishing Co.), p. 43.

⁷¹H. Nibley, *The Myth Makers* (S.L.C.: Bookcraft, 1961).

⁷²Brodie, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

⁷³*Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁷⁴E. D. Howe, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, p. 75f.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, p. 233.

⁷⁹It is Ingersoll who tells that Jos. Smith, Sr., insisted that "the large stones on the top of the ground . . . are, in fact, most of them chests of money raised by the heat of the sun," *ibid.*, p. 233, and then labors mightily to persuade Ingersoll to join him in digging for money! *Ibid.*, p. 234.

⁸⁰Tucker, *op. cit.*, p. 28. Italics ours.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁸²Cit. Kirkham, *op. cit.*, II, 32.

⁸³*Ibid.*, pp. 29f.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 52-53.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁸⁷Alex. Majors, *Seventy Years on the Frontier* (1893), p. 44.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, p. 43f.

⁸⁹E. D. Howe, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

Dynamic Friendship

BY RUTH C. IKERMAN

It had been twenty-five years since I had seen the close friend of my college days. Yet when she walked in the door on our reunion day, we started talking as though we had seen each other that very morning.



It was wonderfully reassuring to find that we could catch our lives together after all those years, and to realize that dynamic friendship goes on unendingly, "no matter what."

Neither of us had meant for the years to hurry past without visits. But the process of earning a living and family duties had made such journeys impossible. Now we were making the most of an afternoon together.

We remembered, among other things, a favorite course in English literature, and how it was there that we had read the famous advice of Samuel Johnson. He urged people to keep their friendship "in constant repair." Yet we had not managed many letters in all these years.

"Maybe there is a deeper wisdom than Samuel Johnson knew," said my friend reflectively. "If it's really friendship, it will not collapse with such neglect. Repair must be the wrong word."

What matters in friendship is the building of an attitude of understanding, and the mutual recognition that true understanding is all that matters. Then if getting together proves difficult, if sickness keeps from active participation, there is underlying strength in the knowledge that a friend does understand.

When circumstances change for the better, and there is opportunity for more normal living, no time has to be wasted in apology or explanations. But all the precious moments of companionship can be spent in enjoyment.

On the cultivating of an attitude of understanding, the development of true friendship is based. And this attitude is available to all wherever they happen to live, whatever their routine duties.

By practising this attitude of understanding with earthly friends we come to a greater appreciation of what it was that Jesus meant when he said, "Behold I have called you friends." Relying on his understanding, we are able to undertake more for our friends in this life, rejoicing in his eternal friendship.

And the power of friendship in building a better world cannot be overestimated. For it warms the heart when encountered daily or after a lapse of many years if it has the qualities of dynamic friendship.