Censoring the Joseph Smith Story, Part II

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PART II

Suppressing the First Vision Story after 1842:

In 1842 J. Turner gave the following resume of Joseph Smith’s story of the first vision: “Joseph Smith was, as he states, in disgust with all the sects, and almost in despair of ever coming to the knowledge of the truth, amid so many contradictory and conflicting claims. He resorted to prayer for ‘a full manifestation of divine approbation,’ and ‘for the assurance that he was accepted of him.’ This occurred sometime in the winter of 1823.” This is the whole story as Turner tells it; the first part is obviously taken, as he avers, from Joseph Smith’s own story, but the other parts, actually put in quotation marks as if they were Smith’s own words, are not found in that story at all. Turner has re-edited the story until there is virtually nothing left of it.

In the following year an ambitious study in the Dublin University Magazine describes the first vision thus: “Into this cloud of glory, Smith,” says the narrative, “was received, and he met within it two angelic personages, who exactly resembled each other; they informed him that all his sins were forgiven.” Here again there can be no doubt that the story is told from the original, but those all-important words, which Joseph Smith puts in italics, which identify the heavenly visitors, and which give the account of the vision its unique status are completely omitted. That the omission is studied and deliberate appears from the statement of the editor that “every part of this tale is an obvious plagiarism from Mohammed’s account of the first revelation made to him in the cave of Hira.” For “every part of this tale” has certainly not been reported, the most obvious parallel of all, the very words with which the Father introduced the Son on the Mount of Transfiguration, being deleted. Why should young Smith have gone to Mohammed when the Bible, as Eduard Meyer points out, presents much closer and much more readily available material for plagiarism?

In 1851 the American Whig Review reported: “Occasionally he was heard advancing contradictory statements concerning the discovery made by him of certain gold plates. . . . These various stories gradually assumed form, and in aftertimes, the story told . . . was as follows.” Then comes Joseph Smith’s account of the revivals and his perplexity, and then, “one day, as he retired to a grove for purposes of prayer and meditation, an angel from heaven appeared . . . prophesying that he should be the founder of a sect destined to be greater than the others. He was directed to search the summit of the hill Camora [sic],” and told “. . . he was to be married to a woman described to him, and whom he should know as soon as they might meet; and was to prepare himself for the labor of translating by diligent study of Coptic. In 1827 he might return and claim the book.” The thing to note is that this wild hodge-podge is confidently put forth as the final, official Mormon version of what happened, after that version had been in circulation for at least thirteen years.

In the following year (1852) Cushman’s famous work on the Mormons appeared, in which the story of Joseph Smith is told from the beginning “according to his autobiography”;
and yet the first vision is nowhere mentioned, the appearance of Moroni being put forth as the first manifestation seen by Joseph: "Judging from what he says in his autobiography," writes Gunnison, "the prayers were answered by a heavenly vision," whereupon the author proceeds to tell of Moroni's visit.27

The Edinburgh Review of 1854 takes the prize with this: "Young Joseph amused himself by fixing the attention of his pious friends upon himself, by an 'experience' more wonderful than any of theirs. . . .'I saw,' says he, 'a pillar of light above the brightness of the sun, which descended gradually until it fell upon me. . . ." Joseph Smith's own story is then given right up to the words "standing above me in the air," where—it abruptly breaks off with the comment, "He goes on in his 'Autobiography' (from which we quote) to say, that these heavenly messengers declared all existing Christian sects in error, and forbade him to join any of them."28 Again the all-important part has been skipped, our critic checking himself in the nick of time. This article was printed again with some changes in 1863, but with still no indication of who the heavenly beings might be.29

And here is the complete story as told by J. Reynolds in 1855: "Smith became interested for the salvation of his soul, and prayed fervidly in a grove near his father's house in Palmyra, and at last the darkness gave way and the light descended from Heaven until the whole country was illuminated with a dazzling brilliancy that was indescribable."30 That, as we said, is the whole story.

One of the most famous anti-Mormon books was John Hyde's Mormonism, which goes so far as to report that "Smith pretends to receive his first vision while praying in the

the enemy which held me bound: When the light rested upon me I saw two personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the air. One of them spake unto me, calling me by name, and said, pointing to the other:

"This is my Beloved Son, hear Him!"

My object in going to inquire of the Lord was to know which of all the sects was right, that I might know which to join. No sooner, therefore, did I get possession of myself, so as to be able to speak, than I asked the Personages who stood above me in the light, which of all the sects was right, and which I should join.

I was answered that I must join none of them; for they were all wrong and the Personage who addressed me said that all their creeds were an abomination in His sight, that those professors were all corrupt, that "they draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; they teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof."

He again forbade me to join with any of them, and many other things did He say unto me, which I cannot write at this time. When I came to myself again, I found myself lying on my back, looking up into heaven.

Some few weeks after I had this vision, I happened to be in company with one of the Methodist preachers, who was very
woods. He asserts that God the Father and Jesus Christ came to him from the heavens.” Hyde specifies the time as April 1820. Yet having admitted so much, Hyde covers it up later in his book when he writes: “Joseph Smith, born in 1805, sees an angel in 1820, who tells him his sins are forgiven. In 1823 he sees another angel.”9 This is an interesting example of how a critic will refute himself to discredit Joseph Smith’s story.

One of the first and most important anti-Mormon books to appear in a foreign language was T. Olshausen’s Geschichte der Mormonsen, 1856, which recounts: “As Joseph Smith completed his sixteenth year of life (1822), he began to think about the salvation of his soul. He frequently went to a retired spot in the forest to pray. After he had prayed fervently and often, and thereby removed the powers of darkness by which he was possessed, he saw one day a bright and glorious light, his spirit was carried away and he saw two bright figures. . . .”23 But like the others Olshausen gives never a hint as to who the bright figures might be.

In what pretended to be a very sophisticated and objective study, J. deRADIUS wrote in 1864: “Whether from insanity or sheer hypocrisy, the lad professed to have been favored, while in prayer, with a miraculous vision. ‘A pillar of light descended upon me,’ he says, ‘and I saw two personages standing above me in the air.’ They assured him that his sins were forgiven, and that all existing churches were alike in error. His vanity led him to proclaim his vision, and the persecution which he says he met with . . . made him only the more obstinate.”24

Then in 1867 came Pomeroy Tucker’s immortal work in which the first vision is described thus:

“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 the 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 of the fulness 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 ‘the favored instrument of the new revelation.’ . . .”25

The distortions and omissions, as well as the typical Tucker embellishments, are quite apparent; characteristic is the lavish use of quotation marks, making it appear that Tucker remembers the very words of Joseph Smith, forty years later.

An official history of Ohio, 1875, assures us that “Joe Smith’s story is as follows: ‘He says that in the year 1820, as he in a retired place was earnestly engaged in prayer, two angels appeared to him. They informed him that God had forgiven all his sins, that all the then religious denominations were in error, that the Indians were the descendants of the lost tribes, that these writings were safely deposited in a secret place, that he was selected by God to receive them, and translate them into the English tongue.”26 He says all that . . . ?

And listen to the once highly touted Mrs. Dickinson:

“In 1821 there was a revival in the Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian churches at Palmyra, and some of the Smith family declared they were ‘converted.’ . . . Joe asserted a partiality for the Methodists, but ultimately declared that he could not decide which was right. He said that . . . he gave himself up to prayer for days, ‘agonizing,’ that the truth might be made known to him among all of the conflicting opinions that he heard among these different sects; that suddenly his chamber was illuminated, an angel appeared and conversed with him, instructed him in the ways of righteousness, and informed him that there was no true Church on earth. He was further told that his prayers were heard, that he was ‘dearly beloved of the Lord, and should be commissioned a priest after the order of Melchisedec—organizing a church of the faithful persons in that line to receive the Lord, in the Millennium. In a second visit the angel informed him ‘that the truth should spring out of the earth’; . . .”27

It would be hard to do a more careful job of garbling the first vision story.

R. W. Beers’ version is remarkable for the fulness of detail with which it leads up to—nothing: “Joseph, in his own account of his early life, says that he became somewhat partial to the Methodist sect; but he was not able to decide which was right. In his bewilderment he gave himself up to prayer for days, that the truth might be made known to him among all the conflicting opinions that he heard among these different sects; and finally a heavenly messenger bade him not to join any sect. And three years afterward, in September 22, 1823,” etc.28

In the same year W. Messaros wrote: “In 1820, young Smith pretended to be converted at a Methodist revival and was received into the Church. The next month he claimed that he saw a vision of the Saviour and several Apostles, who informed him that his sins were forgiven, and that he had been chosen to preach a new gospel on earth, holier than any that had been hitherto taught. Before (Continued on page 805)
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six months had elapsed, he was worse than ever, swearing, drinking, and comporting himself with his accustomed vileness. But this did not frighten away his celestial visitors."

Though frankly hostile, C. F. Ward's Mormonism Exposed is no more inaccurate than the others: "In the spring of the year 1820 (at this time, be it remembered Smith was a lad of 15 years of age) an angel appeared to him (so he alleges) and forbade him to join himself to any church or sect, that they were all wrong. I leave it to you to reflect upon the tremendous improbability of this yarn from the beginning." But did he ever allege that? And though Thomas Gregg in his anti-Mormon "classic" promises to include "the more important portions" of "Joseph Smith's statement," he omits the part of the first vision which Smith puts in italics—obviously one of the less important portions."

"This is the fabricated story published to the world by this imposter." M. W. Montgomery declares in 1900: "Smith claimed that the Lord visited him in a vision at frequent intervals and told him that the golden plates contained the fulness of the Gospel dispensation." A fabricated story indeed!

The twentieth century was ushered in by T. W. Young's remarkable work, which tells us that when Joseph Smith was fifteen years old no church would receive him as a member, since he "pretended to have revelations and visions, and to have received visits from John the Baptist, and the apostles Peter, James, and John. It is hardly to be expected that any sensible church would receive such a disreputable character. His pretended revelations made him the butt of the community. . . . He finally left home to escape ridicule." Four years later, according to this high authority, Smith returned to Palmyra and was visited there by Moroni."

In a work published in Utah, and therefore recommended as highly authentic, Josiah Gibbs in 1908 announced that "Mormon chronology begins in 1823," and proceeds to tell
of Joseph Smith and the founding of the Church with no mention whatever of the first vision, though he has a great deal to say about the nature of God as set forth in the King Follett Discourse. In 1911 two writers played an identical trick with the first vision story. G. Townsend told Joseph Smith's version down to "... standing above me in the air," and continued as follows: "One of them spoke to me... When I came to myself I found myself lying on my back looking up into heaven. Three years later he had two similar experiences." And D.H.C. Bartlett uses the useful little dots to the same effect: "Thick darkness gathered around me, and it seemed to me for a time as if I were doomed to sudden destruction... When I came to myself again, I found myself lying on my back, looking up into heaven." Is it pure coincidence that the dot technique should be thus twice employed in a single year? Anti-Mormon writings have a way of following a changing pattern through the years.

The Reverend J. Q. Adams published an influential little anti-Mormon book in 1916. In it he tells of the revivals, which took place according to him in 1821: "At this time, Joe gave himself up to prayer, so he said, for many days 'agonizing' to know the truth. [Shades of Mrs. Dickinson! Did he really say 'agonizing'?] Suddenly his chamber was illuminated and an angel appeared and told him there was no true church on earth. It is easy to prophesy now. The angel assured him that his prayers were heard, and he was dearly beloved of the Lord, and should be commissioned a prophet after the order of Melchizedek, organizing a church of faithful persons in that line to receive the Lord in the Millennium." In a second visit he was further told that the truth should spring out of the earth; and then, or at a later time, that the earth was the hill Comorah [sic], near his home." Mr. Adams lifts from Mrs. Dickinson as freely as Mrs. Brodie later does from him ("It was easy to prophesy now"), and yet he insists that this mishmash "briefly sums up a long story as told by Joe and later Mormon authorities." And then the Rev. Adams makes a significant comment: "A decent reverence for the Holy God ought to forbid the repetition of these stories, such as, for example, that the Father appeared in human form and introduced his Son Jesus Christ to Joseph Smith. But reverence has never been a Mormon characteristic." This is an enlightening statement of policy: Decent, reverent people should on principle never mention the story of the first vision.

This is bad enough, but what shall we say of a master's thesis written in 1929 on Joseph Smith and his work, which can report: "After a series of visions in which two angels appear and converse with him, a being 'surrounded with a light like that of day... materialized. Smith was directed by this apparition whom he afterwards says is Mormon, to a stone box of 'golden plates'?"

For artful dodging, the doctor's dissertation of George Arbaugh surpasses the mere master's thesis of
Miss Pancoast by as much as the glory of the doctorate surpasses that of the Magister Artium. Here we have a Ph.D. thesis from the University of Chicago, reprinted as late as 1950, devoted entirely, as the title proclaims, to the subject of Revelation in Mormonism, and the first vision is only mentioned in one sentence, where it is diligently buried:

"How different was the official account worked out at Nauvoo, containing artificial visions and pious platitudes and generous Scripture quotations! Riley amazingly assumed the historicity of the official story. Meyer recognized that the vision in which the Father and Son appear is borrowed from the transfiguration of Christ, but he mistakenly supposed that Riley's interpretation was, in general, sound."18

And that, if you please, is the only mention in Arbaugh's whole book on Mormon revelation of the first vision, the most important revelation of all. If Riley's position is so "amazing," and if a scholar of Eduard Meyer's eminence accepts it, why doesn't Arbaugh tell us just what is wrong with it? That should be the proper business of his thesis, and yet he will not even touch it. Nor will he consider Meyer's very good reasons for accepting 1820 as the date for the first vision, whatever might have happened. For Eduard Meyer, who knew perhaps more about the history of religions than any other man of our century, was convinced that the first vision furnished a reliable key to Joseph Smith's career: without the first vision nothing Smith does makes sense, with it, everything he does makes very good sense.19

In 1957 Arbaugh returned to the fray with an impartial little book called Gods, Sex, and Saints, the Mormon Story, in which he has this to say of the first vision: "In 1820, according to divine plan, two gods, the Father (Adam) and Jesus, appeared to Joseph Smith near his home in New York. They revealed to him the Nephite scriptures which in time were restored to him by Moroni."20 The gratuitous touches about Adam and the Nephite scriptures are Mr. Arbaugh's own invention; he cannot simply repeat the story without disfiguring it with gross inaccuracies. Why is that?
Does he suspect that the original story makes very good sense, so that the ordinary reader cannot be trusted with it? Arbaugh's irresponsibility is apparent in the opening blast of his new book: "About 1830, in the state of New York, a new sect was founded by Joseph Smith. . . ."61 About 1830? Can't he do better than guess the year?

In its original form, the present study was burdened by quotations from more than fifty important anti-Mormon writings, all of which were guilty of deliberately disfiguring the first vision story. To save space this monotonous catalog has been cut in half, so that we have presented above only twenty-five of the list, and herewith consign to the decent obscurity of a footnote the other sources, which the reader may consult at his leisure.62 All of them will be found busily censoring Joseph Smith's story by calculated distortion and omission, and invariably by deleting the all-important words which identify the heavenly visitors. The writers from whose works we have just quoted are by no means obscure or minor figures in the field; in fact, we know of no really important anti-Mormon writer who is not mentioned in this article—if we have overlooked some (which is quite possible), the fact still remains that the above twenty-five include the really big names in anti-Mormon literature, i.e., it is a genuinely representative list. All of these writers were acquainted with the official history of the first vision, and most of them explicitly assert that they are simply reporting that history; yet not one of them mentions the key episode of the story as the Mormons told it, the words underlined in the original, so that nobody could possibly miss them, the words that identify the Father and the Son.

There are indeed anti-Mormon books that report the crucial part of Joseph Smith's story, but they are the exception that proves the rule. A Government Handbook of Religious Denominations in the United States for the year 1844 actually printed Joseph Smith's own story without comment.63 But the reader will search many a day without finding another book that can pass such a test for honesty. At least this writer has still to discover one. In 1861 the Edinburgh Review broke down and quoted the key lines from Joseph Smith's story: "Scarcely had he uttered this prayer, when his tongue, he says, became paralyzed and he fell into a state of profound depression [He says?]. . . . One of them, calling him by name said, pointing to his companion—This is my well-beloved Son: hearken to him." At last the all-important words are out (though inaccurately reported), but their effect must be instantly expunged by the acid of editorial comment: "This alleged vision is an excellent sample of the poverty of invention and impudent audacity by which all the visions or revelations of the prophet were characterized."64 If it is such an excellent example, why don't anti-Mormon writers welcome it instead of avoiding it? Because there is nothing they can say to disprove it, though some of them try hard, as when Mrs. Brodie, after quoting Joseph Smith's story at length, hastens to add: "Lesser visions than this were common in the folklore of the area" (so what? we dare say people even had dreams), and follows this up with a typical insinuation: "Oddly enough, however, the Palmyra newspapers, which in later years gave him plenty of publicity, took no notice of Joseph's vision either at the time it was supposed to have occurred or at any other time."65 We are to understand that there is something very odd about that newspaper silence, something very suspicious. Only Mrs. Brodie has overplayed her hand, for it is she who tells us that "in later years" when the newspapers "gave him plenty of publicity and when they certainly knew all about the first vision they still did not mention it—. . . either at the time it was supposed to have happened or at any other time." Thus her argument of silence is worthless as proving ignorance on the part of the newspapers, for they preserved the same silence at a time when they definitely knew Joseph Smith's story.

Stimulated by the reading of this article in manuscript, Dr. Milton Backman of BYU recently undertook a search through all available histories of the United States and of religion in America, and discovered that all writers who mention the first vision without a single exception have distorted Joseph Smith's account, even while they profess to be following it. It would be hard to match such thorough and wholesale abuse of a document in the whole history of historiography.

(To be continued)

**FOOTNOTES**

63 American Whig Review, June 1851, p. 257.
65 W. J. Conybeare, in The Edinburgh Review, April 1854, p. 162, see also ibid., 1863, p. 7.
66 John Reynolds, My Own Times, embracing also, the History of My Life (Illinois, 1855), p. 585.
75 C. Fenwick Ward, Mormonism Exposed: The Founder of Mormonism an Infamous Impostor, (Manchester: Wm. Kemp, 1897).
84 Eva L. Fanceou, Mormons at Kirkland


"E. Meyer, op. cit., pp. 29-33, 47, 16f.


"Ibid., p. 9.


"E. M. Brode, op. cit., pp. 22f.