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## Origin of the First Vision

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**Abstract:** This article discusses how the First Vision answered many questions prevalent in the 19th century. The account of that vision agrees with the doctrine of the Church and the Book of Mormon. Those who read the Book of Mormon will know of its truthfulness and authenticity.

# Origin of the First Vision

Proved by the Characteristic Theology of the Church, Including  
the Doctrine of the Godhead, Church Government,  
Salvation for the Living and the Dead

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*By Elder Joseph Fielding Smith, of the Council of the Twelve*

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When Joseph Smith went in the woods to pray, just one hundred years ago, he received a revelation of knowledge, truth and power, which has been of inestimable value and blessing to the world. What was revealed to him there was given for the overthrow of false creeds and traditions of the ages and led ultimately to the restoration of the everlasting gospel as revealed by our Redeemer during his ministry.

For hundreds of years the world was wrapped in a veil of spiritual darkness, until there was not one fundamental truth belonging to the plan of salvation that was not, in the year 1820, so obscured by false tradition and ceremonies, borrowed from paganism, as to make it unrecognizable; or else it was entirely denied. By heavenly direction and command of our Lord Jesus Christ, Joseph Smith restored all these principles in their primitive beauty and power. Let us briefly consider some of the many fundamental doctrines which were thus restored.

In the year 1820, when this glorious manifestation was received, the universal doctrine in the Protestant as well as the Catholic world, relating to the Godhead, in substance, was as follows:

There is but one only living and true God who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions, immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute, working all things according to the counsel of his own immutable and most righteous will. (*Presbyterian Confession of Faith*, Ch. 2).

The vision of Joseph Smith made it clear that the Father and the Son are separate personages, having bodies as tangible as the body of man. It was further revealed to him that the Holy Ghost is a personage of Spirit, distinct and separate from the personalities of the Father and the Son. This all-important truth staggered the world; yet, when we consider the clear expressions of holy writ, it is a most astounding and wonderful fact that man could have gone so far astray. The Savior said, "My Father is greater than I;" and he invited his disciples, after his resur-

rection, to handle him and see that it was he, for, said he, "a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have." The apostles clearly understood the distinct entities of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, to which they constantly refer in their epistles; and Paul informed the Corinthians of the fact that when all things are subjected to the Father, "then shall the Son also himself be subject unto him that put all things under him, that God may be all in all."

Joseph Smith beheld the Father and the Son; therefore he could testify with personal knowledge that the scriptures were true wherein we read: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them." This was to be understood literally, and not in some mystical or figurative sense.

In the year 1820, the universal doctrine in the so-called Christian world was that the canon of scripture is full, that the heavens were closed against further revelation, and that it was folly to look for more. Joseph Smith's vision contradicted all this, for he saw the heavens opened and was ministered to by heavenly messengers sent from the Lord. Who was right, Joseph Smith or the teachers of men? Amos said: "Surely the Lord God will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets" (3:7). Joel said: "And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions" (2:28-29). Isaiah said: "And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together; for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it" (40:5). "Therefore my people shall know my name: therefore they shall know in that day that I am he that doth speak" (52:6). All of these predictions pertain to the latter days, and prove that Joseph Smith is in harmony with the prophets.

Joseph Smith declared that in the year 1820, the Lord revealed to him that all the "Christian" churches were in error, teaching for commandments the doctrines of men. The religious teachers taught that they were in the way of light and truth, notwithstanding their many conflicting creeds. Amos said, speaking of the latter days: "Behold the days come, saith the Lord God, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord" (8:11). Paul said: "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; and they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables" (2 Tim. 4:3-4). "Let no man deceive you by any

means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition," etc. (2 Thess. 2:3). Again we find Joseph Smith in harmony with the Bible truth.

In this regard, however, the evidence of a departure from the true Church is so apparent that many religious teachers have been forced to recognize the fact. They endeavor, however, to justify themselves in the confusion on the ground that the Lord suffers his work to be marred by man. Note this apology for the conflicting conditions which prevail throughout the religious world:

The Church \* \* \* is a divinely organized body, the members of which are knit together amongst themselves, and joined to Christ their Head, by the Holy Spirit, who dwells in and animates it; it is a spiritual but visible society of men united by constant succession to those who were personally united to the Apostles, holding the same faith that the Apostles held, administering the same sacraments, and like them forming separate, but only locally separate, assemblies, for the public worship of God. This is the church according to the Divine intention. But as God permits men to mar the perfection of his designs in their behalf, and as men have both corrupted the doctrines and broken the unity of the church, we must not expect to see the church of Holy Scripture actually existing in its perfection on earth. It is not to be found, thus perfect, either in the collected fragments of Christendom, or still less in any one of these fragments; though it is possible that one of these fragments more than another may approach the Scriptural and Apostolic ideal which existed only until sin, heresy, and schism had time sufficiently to develop themselves to do their work." (*Smith's Bible Dictionary*, article "Church.")

So, also, the church of England in the *Sermons or Homilies* to be read in churches "in the time of Queen Elizabeth," has testified as follows:

"So that laity and clergy, learned and unlearned, all ages, sects, and degrees of men, women, and children of whole Christendom (an horrible and most dreadful thing to think) have been at once drowned in abominable idolatry, of all other vices most detested of God and most damnable to man, and that by the space of eight hundred years or more." (*Homily against the Perils of Idolatry*, page 253, ed. of 1890.)

In this manner the religious teachers have been forced to confess to the truth which Joseph Smith the Prophet declared the Lord revealed to him when he was but fourteen years of age.

Joseph Smith testified to the world that the Kingdom of God, like all other kingdoms, is governed by law; that order reigns there, and "all beings who abide not in those conditions are not justified." The religious teachers in the world teach that the Lord justifies, or permits, man to mar his work, and we are not to expect anything but confusion and division among his followers. The Savior commanded his disciples to be one, as he and his Father are one. Thus we see that

Joseph Smith is again in harmony with, while others are in opposition to, the teachings of our Lord.

The fact, so conclusively proved, that there has been an apostasy, shows the necessity of a restoration of the gospel. It is a remarkable fact that Martin Luther, John Knox, John Calvin, the Wesleys, and the other "reformers" who attempted to correct the evils of the Catholic church, did not think of this great truth. It was left for Joseph Smith to make the wonderful discovery. It is also strange that the "reformers" did not discover the necessity for the restoration of the Church as in primitive days with its divine authority, but assumed to take the authority upon themselves to organize churches and societies of their own. It was reserved for Joseph Smith to teach the world the necessity for these things. In the year 1820, the doctrine prevailed that apostles and prophets were no longer needed, that their mission ended with the establishment of the Church following the ministry of our Lord. They also taught that the gifts and blessings of the gospel manifest in primitive times were no longer needed. Joseph Smith revealed to the world that the organization of the Church was intended to be the same always, and endure to the end of time. Paul said that apostles and prophets were to continue in the Church "for the perfecting of the Saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ; till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ: that we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine." Joseph Smith taught that all the offices, gifts and blessings were to continue in the Church and were necessary, while the religious world said that the gifts and many of the offices were abolished. Paul taught that all these are necessary, and that one part could not say to another, "I have no need of thee."

The scriptures say that no man should take honor unto himself to officiate, or minister, in the name of Christ. The religious teachers of the nineteenth century declared that he who felt called, was called to this ministry, without any direct revelation and command "as was Aaron." Joseph Smith said he received his divine calling by ordination under the hands of ancient prophets and apostles who were sent to him from the heavens for that purpose. Thus he was clothed with authority and power again to establish the Church upon the earth, that the gospel might be preached in all the world, as a witness before the end of unrighteousness should come. John testified that he saw "another angel fly in the midst of heaven,

having the everlasting gospel to preach unto them that dwell on the earth, and to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people." Joseph Smith declared that the angel appeared to him and committed to him the keys of this ministry and commanded him to send forth the word unto all the world in fulfilment of this prediction. No one else ever thought of the necessity of this thing; for, if the heavens were closed, as man taught, how could there be any more appearing of angels?

The religious world said, at the time the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was organized, that all infants should be baptized. The Lord taught Joseph Smith that baptism was for the remission of sins, and since little children could not sin, there was no call for them to repent. Hence they were redeemed through the blood of the Lamb. He taught that baptism of infants was an abomination in the sight of God because it denied the mercy of the Redeemer, who said: "Suffer little children, and forbid them not to come unto me; for of such is the kingdom of heaven." Again, a great religious falsehood, in conflict with the mercies of the atonement of our Lord, was shattered. Moreover, the ministers of men taught that all those who died without a knowledge of the gospel—who never called upon the name of Christ nor believed in him—were eternally barred from the kingdom of God. The Lord taught Joseph Smith that all who died without a knowledge of the gospel would have the opportunity in the spirit world, for there the gospel would be preached to them and they would be given an opportunity. He taught that all who there received it, who were denied that privilege here, were heirs of the Celestial kingdom. The world taught no salvation for the dead. Yet this doctrine was clearly established by our Lord (John 5:25-29), and proclaimed by Peter, the chief apostle (I Peter 3:18-20; 4:6).

The Savior taught Nicodemus that a man could not enter the kingdom of God, unless he was "born of water and of the Spirit," which means baptism in water and baptism of the Spirit, by the laying on of hands. Peter, Paul, and the other apostles taught the same doctrine, which was largely denied as an essential doctrine, in the year 1820. Since a man must receive baptism in order to enter the kingdom of God, the Lord revealed to the primitive Saints the doctrine of baptism for the dead, which they practiced (I Cor. 15:29).

The Lord revealed the same principle to Joseph Smith, and through him established baptism for the dead in this dispensation for the salvation of all those who died without a knowledge of the gospel.

Malachi testified that the Lord would send Elijah the

prophet, before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord, and he would turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest he come and smite the earth with a curse. Why Elijah should come, and the nature of his mission, are not even now understood in the world among those who believe that the visitation of angels has ceased and that the heavens are closed. It is true that in recent years men have risen claiming to be Elijah reincarnated, but such claimants have been utterly ignorant of the mission which Elijah was to perform. Joseph Smith has given the only consistent and reasonable view. He declared that in the year 1836 Elijah appeared to him in the Kirtland Temple and committed to him the keys of this power of turning the hearts of the children to their fathers. Oliver Cowdery, who was with him at that time, has likewise testified to that visitation. They have taught the world that the mission of Elijah was to restore the sealing power, by which ordinances of the gospel are performed in behalf of both the living and the dead in the Temples of our God, by which the dead may be saved as well as the living. It is the power to bind on earth and in heaven both the living and the dead from generation to generation in the great family organization which shall exist in the Celestial kingdom of our Father. And if this were not done, the earth would be smitten with a curse, for then the glorious plan of salvation would be frustrated and the souls of men would not be saved. It is a remarkable fact that since—and not before—the year 1836, when Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery made this announcement to the world, the hearts of the children have been turned to the fathers who are dead. Now there are hundreds of societies and thousands of individuals who are devoting their time to searching out the records of the dead, both in our own land and in lands beyond the sea. In the temples thousands are laboring “as saviors on Mount Zion” for the dead, performing for them every saving ordinance necessary for their exaltation in the kingdom of heaven, which pertains to this life and which they were not privileged to receive when living on the earth. This is a new doctrine to the world, but one that is destined to bring to pass the universal salvation of the human family, and the exaltation of all who are worthy to receive it whether they be living or dead. Thus Joseph Smith taught to the world the great love and mercy of our heavenly Father, who was pictured in the creeds of men as manifesting delight in the salvation of some and the eternal damnation of many others without any merited offense, simply because they were unfortunate enough not to have heard the name of Christ. Moreover, the Lord revealed

to Joseph Smith that in his mercy he would save, through the blood of his Only Begotten Son, all those who died without law, and that they should come forth" in the first resurrection and it would be tolerable for them." The heathen nations are to be redeemed and enter into the Terrestrial kingdom with a salvation beyond our mortal comprehension. Even the wicked, who have not "sinned unto death," shall be saved in the Telestial kingdom after they have paid their debt in hell, for even "they shall be heirs of salvation." The righteous, who keep the law and love the Lord are to become sons and daughters unto God and "all things are theirs \* \* \* and they shall overcome all things," and enter the presence of the Father to partake of the fulness of his kingdom. Such is the theology of the true Christian Church which the Lord revealed to the Prophet Joseph Smith. How grand, inspiring, and glorious are such thoughts in comparison with the perverted doctrine which prevailed in the world in the year 1820!

The Lord taught Joseph Smith the doctrine of the eternity of the marriage covenant and the perpetuity of the family after death. This revelation has proved a wonderful, if not terrible, shock to the believers in the doctrine that at death a man and his wife are for ever separated and the family relationship comes to an eternal end. Yet there are very few, if they have natural feelings, who do not hope that the eternity of the family may prove to be a fact. It was part of the mission of Elijah to make known this truth, which is in full accord with the teachings of Paul, that man is not without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord. (I Cor. 11:11.) However, all of these things are based on law, and must be done in order. No sealing will be of any avail unless it is done by authority of the holy Priesthood, which Joseph Smith received and conferred on others. For "no man shall come unto the Father," said the Son, "but by me, or by my word, which is my law."

Not only did Elijah appear to Joseph Smith and commit unto him the keys he held, but Moses came also and committed into his hands the keys of the gathering of Israel in these latter days. The doctrine of the gathering is clearly set forth in the scriptures, yet it remained for Joseph Smith to make this matter known. In fulfilment of the promise of the Lord to his ancient people, Elders were sent to the Holy Land, with authority to dedicate it for the return of the Jews and the house of Israel their fellows. May we not in truth believe that the Zionist movement and other efforts to restore the Jews to the promised land, are natural results of this visit of Moses to the Prophet Joseph Smith?

The world had no conception of the statements in the



Scriptures wherein Zion and Jerusalem are spoken of as two distinct places, until the Lord revealed it to Joseph Smith. He declared that America is Zion, a choice land above all other lands which was given to Joseph, son of Jacob, who was separated from his brethren. He, his father said, was like a bough near a well, whose branches run over the wall. So Joseph was blessed with a double portion, and America—Zion—became an inheritance for his children. To this land Ephraim is now being gathered, since the visitation of Moses, and the Jews are preparing to gather to Jerusalem. The great day of the Lord is near at hand when “out of Zion shall go forth the law and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.”

To Joseph Smith the Lord revealed the Book of Mormon, which is the record of the house of Joseph whose children dwelt on this hemisphere. This book is the “stick of Joseph in the hand of Ephraim and the tribes of Israel his fellows,” spoken of by Ezekiel, which was joined by Joseph Smith, in fulfilment of this prophecy, to the stick of Judah, that they became one in his hands. And now that they are joined together, they have gone forth unto the ends of the earth as a witness unto all nations that the Lord is preparing to restore Israel again “from among the heathen, whither they be gone,” unto their own land.

All who have sincerely read the Book of Mormon have been impressed with the inspired contents of its pages. The promise is made in the book unto all who “ask with a sincere heart with real intent, having faith in Christ,” that he “will manifest the truth of it by the power of the Holy Ghost.” Thousands are prepared to testify that this is true, for they have received this knowledge through the power of the Holy Ghost. The Book of Mormon is the sacred history of the ancient inhabitants of the American continent, and contains the predictions of their prophets, the commandments of the Lord to them, and the history and destiny of those ancient peoples. It is the American volume of scripture, and is just as sacred and inspired as is the Bible, which contains the sacred records of the Hebrew race on the eastern hemisphere. No other book has been so sharply, bitterly, and relentlessly attacked as the Book of Mormon. Yet, like gold tried many times in the furnace, it has passed through all attacks unscathed. Every weapon raised against it has perished, and the wisdom of the self-righteous who have attacked it has come to naught. There is an inspiration and feeling of peaceful joy and satisfaction which accompany the sincere and prayerful reading of this book. Its doctrines and literary merit are in keeping with the writings of the Jewish prophets. The sincere student who is willing to put Moroni’s promise to the test is forced to say, “Surely this is the work of the Lord and not

the work of man, for no man could have written it." So likewise must testimony be borne of the revelations given to Joseph Smith, the youthful prophet of the nineteenth century, who was called of God and divinely commissioned to usher in the Dispensation of the Fulness of Times, in which Paul said, our Savior "might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth, even in him."

When we stop to consider that the Prophet Joseph Smith was but fourteen years of age when his first announcement of revelation from the heavens was declared, and that his ministry covered the brief space of only fourteen years from the organization of the Church until his martyrdom, at the age of thirty-eight years, what he accomplished for the salvation of man is wonderful to behold. He was not trained in the schools of his time, and he was considered by his enemies to be an unlearned man; yet, in the light of his life's labors we are forced to say indeed that what he did has proved to be "a marvelous work and a wonder." Thus through the weak things of the world have come forth strength and power which have broken down the mighty and the strong ones, whose wisdom has perished and whose understanding has been hid.



*Remodeled former home of Joseph Smith, the Prophet, in Kirtland, Ohio*



JOSEPH SMITH MONUMENT, SHARON, VERMONT

*Dedicated Dec. 23, 1905, the centenary anniversary of the birth of the Prophet, by President Joseph F. Smith, in the presence of a large audience, many of whom had come from Utah and other distant states. It is of granite, 50 feet high, and stands on a foundation of concrete, twelve feet square. The shaft is 38½ feet high, a foot for each year of the Prophet's life—surmounted by a pyramid cap three feet high. The inscription reads: "Sacred to the Memory of Joseph Smith the Prophet. Born here, 23rd December, 1805. Martyred, Carthage, Ill., 27th June, 1844."*