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First Vision Controversies: Implications for Accounts of Mormon Origins

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Abstract: The First Vision controversy has generated several options for locating the revival that Joseph Smith described in his 1838 history. Those advocating 1820 or earlier variously locate it in upstate New York generally (Backman), at a Methodist annual conference in 1819 (Staker, Bushman), and/or at one or more Methodist camp-meetings in or around Palmyra (Harper). Note that, in light of the Turner evidence that Smith got “a spark of Methodism in the camp meeting’ somewhere along the road to Vienna,” Walters and Bushman agree this could have been the “seed” of his later accounts. Walters, Marquardt, Hill, and Vogel all locate a revival (not just a camp meeting) in Palmyra in 1824–25. Quinn vigorously defends the 1820 date but thinks Smith blended memories from 1820 and 1824–25.

Whatever happened in 1820 or thereabout, the evidence for a revival in 1824–25 of the sort that Smith described is sufficiently strong that we need to consider it as a possible context in which some of the events he described occurred. It thus opens up interpretive possibilities that -Steven Harper and I did not consider in our published conversation about the First Vision.



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First Vision Controversies

Implications for Accounts of Mormon Origins

Ann Taves

The body of this paper was originally published as “Discerning Supernatural Presences: Experiential Claims and Restorationist Movements in the Burned-Over District,” John Whitmer Historical Association Journal 40, no. 1 (2020).

When I accepted this invitation to speak, I expected that I would focus on the methods that Steven Harper and I used to compare and discuss the different accounts of Joseph Smith’s First Vision. We were both quite pleased with the process because we found that careful juxtaposition of the accounts allowed us to agree on the historical data and present a case for our different interpretations. If you look at the published version of our conversation, however, you’ll see that when we attempted to date events that Smith mentioned in his 1838 history, Steve tended to argue for 1820 and I tended to argue for the 1830s.¹ That’s an oversimplification, but it is fair to say that we didn’t consider dating anything between 1823 and 1828.

That changed for me last summer as I worked on a lecture I gave at the meeting of the John Whitmer Historical Society in September. The theme for their conference was not the First Vision per se, but the emergence of Mormonism in the context of the revivals in upstate New York in the 1820s. Preparing that lecture plunged me into the debates

1. Ann Taves and Steven C. Harper, “Joseph Smith’s First Vision: New Methods for the Analysis of Experience-Related Texts,” *Mormon Studies Review* 3 (2016): 53–84.

that attempted to locate Smith's histories in relation to events of the 1820s and, most specifically, the debate over the dating of the revival that Smith associated with his First Vision. That debate centered to a great extent on whether that revival took place in 1820, as his 1838 account suggests, or in 1824, as Lucy Smith's history would suggest.

In this talk I want to revisit some of the things Steve and I attempted to date—such as when Smith became concerned about which church was right, when he got the idea that he had to inquire of the Lord, and when and to whom he reported his visions and revelations—and reconsider the possibilities in light of the evidence from the 1820s.

Before delving into that evidence, let me indicate the questions and presuppositions that I brought to our discussions, which took place in the context of working on my book *Revelatory Events*.² I wrote the book because I wanted to understand the emergence of new spiritual paths that are premised on claims about unusual experiences or events. I assumed that the meaning of unusual experiences and events is not necessarily obvious to people and typically is a matter of discussion and debate. I wanted to see if I could surface the process of figuring things out—the meaning-making process—as it unfolded. To reconstruct this meaning-making process, though, we can't start with how insiders (or outsiders) *later* interpreted events in light of what they concluded happened; we have to do our best to reconstruct how people interpreted events as they unfolded in their own—often uncertain and conflictual—terms.

This is the way I approached the emergence of Mormonism in *Revelatory Events*. I didn't begin with Smith's histories, which were written in the 1830s, but with the best real-time sources, which were the early revelations, the first of which was recorded in July 1828 in the midst of translating the plates. Participants in the translation process were privy to these revelations as they were received and to the Book of Mormon narrative as it was dictated and transcribed. The publication of the Book of Mormon in March 1830 and the founding of the Church of Christ the next month (April 1830) initiated two major interconnected shifts. The first was from producing new scripture to evangelizing based on it, and the second, from the revelation-guided production of scripture to recounting the history of the Church. In this new context, Smith and his followers had to explain not only how this new scripture and newly

2. Ann Taves, *Revelatory Events: Three Case Studies of the Emergence of New Spiritual Movements* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 17–22.

restored church had come into being but also why they were needed. The Church's history had to offer reasons for insiders and outsiders to accept the new book as revelation, the new church as authentically restored, and Smith's role and function as seer, prophet, revelator, and first elder of the newly founded church. Smith and his followers could not simply claim that all the churches were wrong and that the Bible was incomplete; they had to explain how they knew this.³

This is the context in which I analyzed Smith's histories. For me, the striking thing was that up until 1830, the story began with the appearance of an angel of the Lord who announced the presence of an ancient record preserved on golden plates. This is how Joseph Smith recounted the story in his letter to his father's family in 1828; how his mother, Lucy Mack Smith, recounted it in her letter to her siblings Solomon and Lydia in 1831; and, generally, how it was understood by insiders in the early 1830s.⁴

The first hint of an earlier beginning appears in the Articles and Covenants (ca. April 1830 [D&C 20]), which tell us that, after Smith "had received remission of his sins, he was entangled again in the vanities of the world, but after truly repenting, God visited him by an holy angel."⁵ I argued that Smith started offering more detailed accounts of

3. Taves, *Revelatory Events*, 72–73.

4. In a letter from Jesse Smith (Joseph Smith Jr.'s uncle) to Hyrum Smith in 1829, Jesse refers to a (now-missing) 1828 letter that Joseph Smith Jr. wrote to Asahel Smith. In Jesse's recounting of the earlier letter, the story begins with the discovery of the plates. See Dan Vogel, comp. and ed., *Early Mormon Documents*, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996), 1:551–54. In January 1831, Lucy Mack Smith also began the story with the recovery of the plates in her letter to her brother Solomon Mack and sister Lydia Mack Bill. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:216. According to editors from the Joseph Smith Papers Project, "the history of the church, as it was then generally understood [in the early 1830s], began with the gold plates." Karen Lynn Davidson and others, eds., *Histories, Volume 1: Joseph Smith Histories, 1932–1844*, The Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2012), 6. Sentence appears in Taves, *Revelatory Events*, 73.

5. Michael Hubbard MacKay and others, eds., *Documents, Volume 1: July 1828–June 1831*, Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2013), 121, as quoted in Taves, *Revelatory Events*, 73. When Peter Bauder interviewed him in October 1830, some six months later, Smith apparently did not mention this experience. Indeed Bauder reported, "He [Smith] could give me no christian experience, but told me that an angel told him he must go to a certain place in the town of Manchester, Ontario Country, where was a secret treasure concealed, which he must reveal to the human family." Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:17. In her letter to her siblings, Lucy briefly described how the new revelation came forth, rehearsing Moroni's burial of the plates and their recovery by her son Joseph, who, "after repenting of his sins and humbling himself before God[,] was visited by an holy Angel." Taves, *Revelatory Events*, 70.

this experience in which his “sins were remitted” in the context of proselytizing because—as he later elaborates—this was the context in which he said he first started to wrestle with the question of which church was right. Elaborating on this experience, I argued, thus helped him explain to ever wider audiences how he and his followers knew that all the extant churches were wrong and why the Bible, which they already had, was insufficient.⁶

In working with the histories, I saw no reason to doubt that Smith struggled with the question of which church was correct as a young teenager, and I thought his description of the denominational competition for converts in the context of revivals rang true. I also was willing to assume that Smith had a conversion-type experience in the early 1820s that formed the basis for his 1832 account, but I did so without having looked into the First Vision controversies that investigated his accounts in relation to the events of the 1820s. This skewed Steve’s and my discussion. He was most concerned with what happened in 1820, and I was most concerned with what happened in the late 1820s and the 1830s. Neither of us was thinking much about the years between 1823 and 1828. But, as I indicated at the outset, there is a case to be made for locating the revival that Smith associated with his First Vision in 1824 rather than in 1820.

Rather than rehash the evidence in detail, I want to ask what difference it would make for our understanding of the emergence of Mormonism if the revival that Smith was remembering in his 1838 account took place in 1824 instead of 1820. We can think of this as a thought experiment that explores what difference it would make if we were to adopt Lucy’s chronology, which places the revival after the revelation of the plates, rather than Joseph’s timeline, which places it before.

I’m going to argue that the change in order has significant consequences: it maintains 1823 as the beginning of the Mormon story, grounds the story in a visionary treasure-seeking milieu populated with supernatural presences, and brings the problem of discerning “who is present” in the context of religious revivals to the fore. In terms of supernatural presences, Joseph’s history is framed in terms of an encounter with deities (the Father and the Son); Lucy’s draft history is a story of encounters with an intermediary—a messenger who is also an angel, a spirit, and an ancient Nephite. Historically speaking, I think Lucy’s history is closer to the story that insiders—and outsiders—heard as the events unfolded, whether they embraced Smith’s claims or not. Joseph’s history, I would

6. Taves, *Revelatory Events*, 72–73.

argue, reflects an understanding of divine presence that likely emerged in the context of translating the plates and then was used to reinterpret what happened earlier. In relation to Steve's and my discussions of the First Vision, I think the "First Vision controversy" adds more options that need to be considered in relation to the issues we debated.

I'll explore this alternative approach to Mormon origins in three steps. First, I'll review the First Vision controversy to highlight the central role that Lucy Smith's chronology played in the debate. Second, I'll discuss the supernatural appearances in Lucy's history to indicate what Mormon origins looked like from her point of view. Finally, I'll consider competing interpretations of the intermediaries Lucy described and indicate the point at which I think Smith began to claim he was communicating with deities rather than intermediaries.

The First Vision Controversy: A Recap

Here is the description of the revival that Joseph Smith associated with his First Vision in his 1838 account and published in the *Times and Seasons* in 1842.

Sometime in the second year [1821] after our removal to Manchester, there was in the place where we lived an unusual excitement on the subject of religion. It commenced with the Methodist<s>, but soon became general among all the sects in that region of country, indeed the whole district of Country seemed affected by it and great multitudes united themselves to the different religious parties, which created no small stir and division among the people, Some Crying, "Lo, here" and some Lo there. Some were contending for the Methodist faith, Some for the Presbyterian, and some for the Baptist. . . .

I was at this time in my fifteenth year. My Fathersfamily was <were> proselyted to the Presbyterian faith and four of them joined that Church, Namely, My Mother Lucy, My Brothers Hyrum, Samuel Harrison, and my Sister Soph[r]onia.⁷

7. Davidson and others, *Histories, Volume 1*, 208; see also Joseph Smith, "History of Joseph Smith," *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 10 (March 15, 1842): 727. The Joseph Smith Papers editors note that the "excitement [that] commenced with the Methodists" indicates that "Methodists held camp meetings at Palmyra in June 1818 and at Oaks Corners, near Vienna and within six miles of Palmyra, in July 1819." Davidson and others, *Histories, Volume 1*, 208–9 n. 41. Three sources are cited for this: E. Latimer, *The Three Brothers: Sketches of the Lives of Rev. Aurora Seager, Rev. Micah Seager, Rev. Schuyler Seager* (New York: Philips and Hunt, 1880), 12; George Peck, *Early Methodism* (New York: Carlton and Porter, 1860), 502; and Mark Lyman Staker, *Hearken, O Ye People: The Historical Setting for Joseph Smith's Ohio Revelations* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books,

As you presumably all know, Latter-day Saints traditionally assumed this revival took place in 1820, since Smith said he was fifteen at the time. Fawn Brodie called this dating into question with the publication of *No Man Knows My History* in 1945, and Wesley Walters, a Presbyterian minister, marshaled considerable evidence to suggest that the revival in question actually took place in 1824–25.⁸ Walters submitted his article to *Dialogue* in 1967, but it did not appear there until Latter-day Saint historians were prepared to respond to it some two years later. In his recent book on the First Vision, Steven Harper provides a detailed account of Walters's efforts, the consternation it aroused among Latter-day Saint intellectuals, and the immediate efforts made to mobilize Latter-day Saint scholars

2009), 128–30. Latimer, as quoted by D. Michael Quinn, gives evidence of a Methodist camp meeting in Palmyra in June 1818. D. Michael Quinn, “Joseph Smith’s Experience of a Methodist ‘Camp-Meeting’ in 1820,” *Dialogue Paperless*, E-Paper #3, December 20, 2006, 2–3 [*Dialogue Paperless* and this article are no longer available online]. It reads: “I [the Methodist itinerant, Aurora Seager] received, on the 18th of June, a letter from Brother [Billy] Hibbard, informing me that I had been received by the [eastern] New York Conference, and, at my request, had been transferred to the Genesee Conference. On [Friday,] the 19th [of June 1818,] I attended a camp-meeting at Palmyra [nearly fourteen miles from Phelps]. The arrival of Bishop Roberts, who seems to be a man of God, and is apostolic in his appearance, gave a deeper interest to the meeting until it closed. On Monday [at Palmyra’s camp-meeting,] the sacrament was administered, about twenty were baptized; forty united with the [Methodist] Church, and the meeting closed. I accompanied the Bishop to Brother [Eleazer] Hawks, at Phelps, and on the 14th of July [1818,] I set out [from Phelps] with Brother [Zechariah] Paddock for the Genesee conference, which was to hold its session at Lansing, N.Y.” As Quinn indicates, Seager’s home was in Phelps, which is presumably why he wanted to be transferred to the Genesee Annual Conference. The camp meeting in Palmyra was not connected to the 1818 annual conference, which met in Lansing, New York, which is near Ithaca, not Palmyra. The 1819 annual conference was held in Vienna (now Phelps), but there is little evidence for a camp meeting or a revival in conjunction with the 1819 annual conference (for a discussion of this and Staker’s misinterpretation of Peck, see note 22 herein).

The JSP also adds a note on Smith’s family joining the church. It reads, “Lucy Mack Smith and three of her children, Hyrum, Sophronia, and Samuel, attended the Western Presbyterian Church in Palmyra. Lucy wrote that their affiliation began following the death of her son Alvin in November 1823, or near the end of JS’s eighteenth year.” “History, circa June 1839–circa 1841 [Draft 2],” 2 n. 7, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed February 28, 2020], <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-june-1839-circa-1841-draft-2/2#foot-notes>. No attempt is made to reconcile the differences in Smith’s age (and thus the date) in relation to the two presumably connected events (the “excitement” and his family joining the church).

8. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945), 21–25. Wesley P. Walters, “New Light on Mormon Origins from Palmyra (N.Y.) Revival,” *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 10, no. 4 (Fall 1967): 236.

to investigate the early history of the Church in upstate New York.⁹ The results of their research were published in a special issue of *BYU Studies* in 1969.¹⁰ Shortly thereafter, Walters's article was published in *Dialogue*, with a response by Richard Bushman and a reply by Walters.¹¹

If we look at the major histories of early Mormonism, we find that Bushman incorporated the research of the late sixties in *Joseph Smith and Early Mormonism*, published in 1984. In it, he offered a more historically nuanced account of Mormon origins, while preserving the traditional chronology. In doing so, he made two important moves. First, he reconciled the difference between Smith's 1832 and 1838 histories by taking a developmental approach, arguing that by 1838 "aspects [of his First Vision experience] took on an importance they did not possess at first."¹² Second, he maintained the conventional dating of the First Vision by associating the revival with the meeting of the Genesee Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Vienna (later Phelps) near Palmyra in July 1819 and by indicating that Lucy joined the Presbyterian Church in Palmyra "at some unspecified date," probably "before 1823."¹³ He did not mention the evidence for the 1824 revival in Palmyra or Lucy's statement that she joined the church in the context of a revival that took place there after her son Alvin's death in 1823.

Ten years later, Michael Marquardt and Wesley Walters published *Inventing Mormonism*, which summarized the results of their intensive research into Mormon origins.¹⁴ Although Bushman generally applauded their research efforts and their "generous, fair-minded tone" in his review of their book, he highlighted a key instance in which he thought their efforts to separate fact from interpretation fell short. In their timeline, he wrote, "the authors list under 1825 the admission of Lucy and three of the Smith children into the Palmyra Presbyterian church as if this were a well-attested fact. But the authors have no direct

9. Steven C. Harper, *First Vision: Memory and Mormon Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 219–28.

10. The special issue, edited by Truman G. Madsen, contained articles by James B. Allen and Leonard J. Arrington, Dean C. Jessee, Milton V. Backman Jr., Larry C. Porter, T. Edgar Lyon, and Marvin S. Hill. See full issue, *BYU Studies* 9, no. 3 (1969).

11. Wesley P. Walters and Richard L. Bushman, "Roundtable: The Question of the Palmyra Revival," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1969): 59–81.

12. Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 57.

13. Bushman, *Beginnings of Mormonism*, 53.

14. H. Michael Marquardt and Wesley P. Walters, *Inventing Mormonism: Tradition and the Historical Record* (San Francisco: Smith Research Associates, 1994).

evidence that this highly contested event occurred in 1825.”¹⁵ In contrast to Bushman, Latter-day Saint historian Marvin Hill found Lucy Smith’s chronology compelling. As he writes, “[Lucy] said she attended the revival with hope of gaining solace for Alvin’s loss. That kind of detail is just the sort that gives validity to Lucy’s chronology. She would not have been likely to make up such a reaction for herself or the family or to mistake the time when it happened. I am persuaded that it was 1824 when Lucy joined the Presbyterians.”¹⁶

Ten years later, Dan Vogel was also convinced. In *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet*, Vogel followed Lucy’s chronology, arguing that, while Smith may have concluded at an early age that all the churches were corrupt, this would have “conformed to the religious views of both parents.” It was in response to his mother’s decision to join the Presbyterians in the context of the 1824 revival, Vogel contends, that the “subject of which church was true became extremely important.” Vogel thus concludes that “Joseph twice lifted the revival out of its historical context, pushing it back to 1823 [in revising Cowdery’s history], then to 1820 [in his 1838 history].”¹⁷ Vogel also observes that Smith’s statement that a Methodist preacher treated his vision with contempt makes more sense in 1824–25 than in 1820, especially if we consider the possibility that “Smith actually related his 1823 and 1824 encounters with the heavenly messenger”—that is, the revelation of the plates—to the minister rather than the Lord’s forgiveness of his sins.¹⁸

Vogel’s account precipitated a lengthy response from D. Michael Quinn in defense of the 1820 date of the revival, which Vogel found unconvincing.¹⁹ In a 2012 essay, Steven Harper summarized the evidence for dating the “unusual excitement on the subject of religion” in 1820 or earlier in an effort to support the traditional chronology.²⁰ In

15. Richard L. Bushman, “Just the Facts Please,” *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon, 1989–2011* 6, no. 2 (1994): 131, 133.

16. Marvin Hill, “The First Vision Controversy: A Critique and Reconciliation,” *Dialogue* 15, no. 2 (Summer 1982): 39. Hill adds, “Indicating that the angel had told Joseph of the plates prior to the revival, Lucy added that for a long time after Alvin’s death, the family could not bear any talk about the golden plates, for the subject had been one of great interest to him and any reference to the plates stirred sorrowful memories.”

17. Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004), 60.

18. Vogel, *Making of a Prophet*, 64.

19. Quinn, “Joseph Smith’s Experience of a Methodist ‘Camp-Meeting’ in 1820.” For Vogel’s response, see Dan Vogel, “What Is a Revival?” *Dialogue* 41, no. 4 (Winter 2008): viii–x.

20. Steven C. Harper, “Evaluating Three Arguments against Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 2 (2012): 25–26.

Rough Stone Rolling, Bushman incorporates Smith's 1835 history without significantly altering the account of Mormon origins he proposed in his earlier work. He also acknowledges the 1824 revival and debates over the First Vision in the notes but doesn't discuss them in the text.²¹

Here is a brief summary of the evidence for each date. In 1820, Presbyterians, Baptists, and Methodists were present in the Palmyra area. The 1819 Methodist Annual Conference was held in nearby Vienna. The Rev. George Lane, who is mentioned in Cowdery's account and was then the presiding elder for the Susquehanna District (in Pennsylvania), was present at the 1819 annual conference. Annual conferences brought all the preachers together to receive their new assignments, but revivals were more often associated with the quarterly conferences of the circuits than with annual conferences of the itinerant preachers.²² Lane also

Harper mistakenly cites the Seager diary as evidence for "a weekend camp meeting in Palmyra in June 1820," although the diary actually states it took place in 1818 (for more on Seager's diary, see note 7 herein).

21. See Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 35–41. For his acknowledgement of the debates, see 570 nn. 27, 30.

22. Marquardt and Walters, *Inventing Mormonism*, 29. They add, "In 1826, when a camp meeting was actually held, the conference minutes contain reference to the ministers who were put in charge of the arrangements for the meeting. No indication of any such arrangement appears in the 1819 minutes." Peck provides a summary of proceedings of the annual meetings of the Genesee Conference, which involved the passage of resolutions on church matters and, above all, the review and reassignment of the itinerant preachers who were members of the conference. Peck, *Early Methodism*, 496–512. With the establishment of geographically defined annual conferences in 1796, they became closed meetings, largely limited to the itinerant preachers. This limited the potential for associated revivals. Russell Richey, *The Methodist Conference in America: A History* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1996), 52–61. It is possible, as Bushman indicates, "that either during the conference or as it broke up, these ministers preached in nearby towns." Richard L. Bushman, "The First Vision Story Revived," *Dialogue* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1969): 89.

After 1800, revivals of religion were typically associated with quarterly meetings, which were held four times per year on every circuit. They brought together all the members of the society, including the local preachers, exhorters, and class leaders (none of whom were members of the annual conference), along with the presiding elder for the district and the itinerants assigned to the circuit. Itinerants from neighboring circuits might attend as well. Some business was conducted, but most of the two-day meeting was devoted to preaching and worship, including typically communion and a love feast. Nonmembers, who were welcome at all but the business meeting and the love feast, often participated in large numbers. In suggesting that the revival Smith described could have taken place in conjunction with the 1819 annual conference in Vienna, Staker conflates annual and quarterly conferences, noting that "one devout woman regularly traveled forty or fifty miles to attend *these conferences* every chance she could." Staker, *Hearken, O Ye People*, 130, emphasis added. The source actually states, "She [Mrs. Lee]

participated in a meeting in Richmond on the Bloomfield Circuit (about thirty miles from Palmyra) on his way to the 1820 annual conference in Lower Canada.²³ The Methodists did hold camp meetings on the Vienna Road just outside of Palmyra, and as Bushman notes, “Orsamus Turner, a newspaperman in Palmyra who knew the Smiths personally, recalls that Joseph caught ‘a spark of Methodism in the camp meeting’ somewhere along the road to Vienna.”²⁴ In his response to Bushman, Walters agreed that Turner likely made these observations prior to 1822 and suggests that a camp meeting experience “may have provided the one core of truth around which [Smith] later wove his various vision stories.”²⁵ From the Williams diaries, we also know that claims to have experienced the presence of God were not all that rare at the time. Finally, Lucy Smith indicates that she changed her course, presumably in relation to joining a church, when her oldest son, presumably Alvin, “attained his 22nd year,” which would have been in 1820, but she does not offer any details.²⁶

was present at all *the quarterly meetings* within her reach, often going forty and fifty miles, and driving her own carriage, or riding on horseback.” Peck, *Early Methodism*, 317, emphasis added. For a discussion of quarterly meetings, see Lester Ruth, *A Little Heaven Below: Worship at Early Methodist Quarterly Meetings* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2000); and Russell Richey, “From Quarterly to Camp Meeting,” *Early American Methodism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 21–32.

23. Benajah Williams diaries, American Religions Collection (ARC Mss 85), Special Collections, University of California at Santa Barbara. Benajah Williams was a Methodist preacher who was assigned to the Bloomfield circuit in 1820. The Bloomfield circuit was adjacent to, but did not include, Palmyra, where the Smiths were living. The Williams diaries not only illuminate the revival context but also include a reference to Rev. George Lane, the minister to whom some historians have speculated Joseph Smith recounted his First Vision. Though Williams does not mention a communion service or business meeting, this two-day meeting, which included preaching, exhorting, a prayer meeting, and a love feast, had the general form of a quarterly meeting.

24. Bushman, “The First Vision Story Revived,” 89. Bushman adds, “Since Turner left Palmyra in 1822, we can presume that the camp meeting and Joseph’s awakening occurred before that date. All told, there can be little doubt that the Methodists were up to something in 1819 and 1820.” The full quote, as cited in Marquardt and Walters, *Inventing Mormonism*, 29, reads, “After catching a spark of Methodism in the camp meeting, away down in the woods, on the Vienna road, he [Smith] was a very passable exhorter in evening meetings.”

25. Wesley P. Walters, “A Reply to Dr. Bushman,” *Dialogue* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1969): 99.

26. In her draft history, Lucy Mack Smith indicates that, while they were still living in Vermont, she “covenanted with God [in the context of a serious illness] if he would let me live I would endeavor to get that religion that would enable me to serve him right whether it was in the Bible or where ever it might be found even if it was to be obtained

The 1824–25 revival in Palmyra—by way of contrast—is attested by Presbyterian, Baptist, and Methodist membership records.²⁷ Rev. Lane, who was appointed as presiding elder of the Ontario District (that included Palmyra) in 1824, published a lengthy account of the revival the following year.²⁸ Not only does Lucy place the revival and her decision to join the church in the wake of Alvin’s death in 1823,²⁹ but Joseph’s brother William said Joseph got the idea of asking God what church he should join from a sermon preached by Rev. Lane in the context of “a joint revival in the neighborhood between the Baptists, Methodists and Presbyterians . . . [in which] the question arose which church should have the converts.”³⁰ According to William, the Presbyterian minister Rev. Stockton said that “they ought to join the Presbyterians,” but the next night, Rev. Lane “preached a sermon on ‘what church shall I join?’ And the burden of his discourse was to ask God, using as a text [James 1:5].”³¹ Denominational sources for 1824 confirm that Stockton was the minister of the Western Presbyterian Church in Palmyra. Neither Stockton nor Lane had appointments anywhere near Palmyra prior to 1824.

from heaven by prayer and Faith.” Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:240. After much searching, she concluded, “there is not on Earth the religion which I seek.” As a result, she decided, “I will hear all that can be said read all that is written but particularly the word of God shall be my guide to life and [salvation which] I will endeavor to obtain if it is to [be] had by diligence in prayer[.] This course I pursued for many years till at last I [concluded] that my mind would be easier if I were baptized and I found a minister who was [willing] to baptize me and leave me free from membership in any church after which I [pursued] the same course [to “continued to read the Bible as formerly” (1853 ed.)] until my oldest attained his 22nd year.” Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:242. She does not indicate what she did after this time.

27. For an extended discussion of the evidence, see Marquardt and Walters, *Inventing Mormonism*, 15–27.

28. George Lane, “Revival of Religion on Ontario District: Letter from the Rev. George Lane, dated Wilkesbarre, January 25, 1925,” *Methodist Magazine* 8 (1825): 158–61.

29. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:306–7.

30. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:513.

31. According to Alexander Neibaur, Smith—at times anyway—linked his First Vision with the revival meeting in which his mother and siblings “got religion,” but he did not and, instead, thinking of James 1:5, went to the woods to pray: “Br Joseph tolt us the first call he had a Revival Meeting his Mother & Br & Sister got Religion, he wanted to get Religion too wanted to feel & shout like the Rest but could feel nothing, opened his Bible the first Passage that struck him was if any man lack Wisdom let him ask of God who giveth to all Men liberallity & upbraidet not went into the Wood to pray.” “Alexander Neibaur, Journal, 24 May 1844, extract,” [23], Joseph Smith Papers, accessed December 21, 2019, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/alexander-neibaur-journal-24-may-1844-extract/1>.

Two things surprised me when I dug into these sources. Above all, I was surprised at how much evidence there was for a revival in 1824 of the sort Smith described in his 1838 account, especially given how little I had heard about it and how sketchy the evidence was for 1820. Beyond that, I was surprised at how long it took me to realize that I didn't have to privilege Joseph's histories over Lucy's or seek to reconcile them. I could use her account to help me think through alternatives to the official origin story.³²

Mormon Origins: Lucy's Version

If we compare Joseph's and Lucy Smith's histories, both depict Joseph as wrestling with a similar problem, that is, determining which church was right, and in both cases, one or more supernatural beings appeared, and in one way or another, Joseph learned that all the churches were wrong. They differ, however, with respect to the number of events, the context in which the issue arose, when and how he learned all the churches were wrong, and the number and type of supernatural being(s) that appeared. Most notably, in Joseph's history, these things take place in two events: one in 1820 and one in 1823; in Lucy's history there is only one event, in 1823.³³

32. The seeds of this approach were planted by a paper on Lucy Smith given by Rachel Cope at a conference on Joseph Smith's translations in 2014; it has just been published in Michael Hubbard MacKay, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Brian M. Hauglid, eds., *Producing Ancient Scripture: Joseph Smith's Translation Projects in the Development of Mormon Christianity* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2020).

33. See the source notes and introduction to Lucy's history in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:227–30, and the source notes and historical introductions to the draft version and the extant fair copy of Lucy Mack's history published by the Joseph Smith Papers. "Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845," Joseph Smith Papers, accessed February 6, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1844-1845>; "Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1845," Joseph Smith Papers, accessed February 6, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1845/1>. According to the Joseph Smith Papers, Lucy Mack Smith dictated a rough-draft version of her history to Martha Jane Knowlton Coray (with some additional scribal help from Martha's husband, Howard) beginning in 1844 and concluding in 1845. In 1845, the Corays used the rough draft and other notes and sources to create two revised, or "fair," copies. The sole extant fair copy is titled "The History of Lucy Smith Mother of the Prophet." The other fair copy (no longer extant) was printed in England under the title *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet, and His Progenitors for Many Generations, by Lucy Smith, Mother of the Prophet* (Liverpool: S. W. Richards, 1853). The draft version—Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845; handwriting of Martha Jane Knowlton Coray and Howard Coray; 240 pages—is held by the Church

Joseph Smith's three versions of his history, although differing in specifics, all distinguish between a "First Vision" in which deities appeared and a subsequent event in which an "angel of the Lord" informed him of the existence of the ancient records. All the accounts of the First Vision indicate that Smith was distressed in the context of contention between the churches, albeit for different reasons. In the earliest account, he was distressed because he was "convicted of [his] sins" and turned to the Lord for mercy because, based on Smith's own reading of scripture, he concluded that all the churches had apostatized. In his 1835 and 1838 accounts, he was "wrought up . . . respecting the subject of religion" because he didn't know "who was right and who was wrong" (1835). In 1838, this uncertainty arose in the context of the revival we have been discussing. In the latter two accounts, he didn't search the scriptures for an answer; instead, he had "a realizing sense" that he should "ask of God" which of the churches was right. In the first account, he figures out that all the churches were wrong based on his own reading of scripture; in the later accounts, he acquired this information on much higher authority: two divine personages—the Father and the Son—weighed in to proclaim that all the churches were wrong.³⁴

In Lucy's draft history, there is only one vision, and the question of which church was right was a topic that had long interested both her and her husband and was a topic of discussion within the family the evening the angel appeared. As she tells the story:

One evening [in September 1823] we were sitting till quite late conversing upon the subject of the diversity of churches that had risen up in the world and the many thousand opinions in existence as to the truths contained in scripture[.] . . . After we ceased conversation he [Joseph] went to bed <and was pondering in his mind which of the churches were the true one.> ~~an~~ but he had not laid there long till <he saw> a bright <light> entered the room where he lay[.] He looked up and saw an angel of the Lord ~~stood~~ <standing> by him.³⁵

History Library in Salt Lake City. The draft version is printed in parallel with the published version in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:227–450. The draft version and the fair copy are available on the Joseph Smith Papers website at the above links.

34. For a comparison and discussion of the versions, see Taves and Harper, "Joseph Smith's First Vision." An annotated list of many of the primary accounts of Smith's First Vision is available online: "Primary Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision of Deity," Joseph Smith Papers, accessed February 6, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/site/accounts-of-the-first-vision?p=1&highlight=first%20vision>.

35. "Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845," [10], bk. 3.

In her account, Joseph did not search scripture or ask of God. The “angel of the Lord” simply appeared and said to him, “I perceive that you are enquiring in your mind which is the true church[.] there is not a true church on Earth[.] No not one Nor <and> has not been since Peter took the Keys <of the Melchisedec priesthood after the order of God> into the Kingdom of Heaven[.] the churches that are now upon the Earth are all man made churches.”³⁶

In Lucy’s draft account, “an angel of the Lord” appeared because Joseph was “pondering in his mind,” and the angel informed him not only that there was no true church on earth but also that there was a record that he must recover buried in a nearby hillside that was “to bring forth that light and intelligence which has long been lost in the Earth.”³⁷ In the final (1853) version of Lucy’s history, the editors inserted the *Times and Seasons* account of Joseph’s vision of the Father and Son that gives the impression that she described two visions and two Palmyra revivals, one in 1820 and another after Alvin’s death in November 1823.³⁸ Moreover, the 1853 edition of her history substituted Joseph’s account of his 1823 vision for Lucy’s, eliminating her description of the family’s discussion. It simply stated that “he retired to his bed in quite a serious and contemplative state of mind,” whereupon he “betook himself to prayer and supplication to Almighty God.”³⁹

If, at the time of the 1824 revival, Joseph’s encounters with this messenger were foremost in his mind, Vogel’s suggestion that Smith might have related this visionary encounter to Rev. Lane seems worth considering. If Smith told a Methodist minister that an angel of the Lord had informed him that there was no true church on earth and that he had been instructed to recover an ancient record that would restore the true church, the minister would most likely have told him, “Sorry, the Methodists have things right, the canon of scripture is closed, and no new revelation is needed.”

If we now turn to the supernatural appearances in Lucy’s book, we find that an “angel of the Lord” is the primary supernatural being that appears and speaks to Joseph. There are references to God and the Lord, but they do not appear or speak directly. At most, they speak through an angel, which she sometimes refers to as a “personage” or a “divine messenger.”⁴⁰

36. “Lucy Mack Smith, *History, 1844–1845*,” [10], bk. 3.

37. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:289–90.

38. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:288 n. 87.

39. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:289.

40. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:297. She also reports that “a personage” appeared to Lucy Harris in a dream and showed her the plates, such that she “then

The first set of references to the angel appears in Lucy's discussion of the revelation of the buried record in 1823.⁴¹ The angel appeared again in 1827 to chastise Joseph for his negligence in recovering the buried record.⁴² The angel then appeared in conjunction with the actual recovery of the record,⁴³ at which point the angel directed him to keep it safe from "wicked men." The next set of references occurs after Joseph and Martin Harris began translating the record in Harmony, Pennsylvania, and Joseph allowed Harris to take the translated portion of the manuscript home to Palmyra. While Harris was away, Emma Smith gave birth to their first child, who died the same day. But Emma, worried about the lack of news from Harris, encouraged Joseph nonetheless to go to Palmyra to find out what had happened. At the dining table in the Smith's home in Manchester, Harris confessed that the manuscript had disappeared, and Lucy provided a graphic eyewitness account of Joseph's anguished realization that he had disobeyed the angel's instructions.⁴⁴

Two months later, in September 1828, Lucy and Joseph Sr. visited Harmony to find out what had happened after Joseph returned. According to Lucy, Joseph recounted, "After I arrived here I commenced humbling myself in mighty prayer before the Lord and [as] I poured out my soul in supplication to him that if possible I might obtain mercy at [his] hands and be forgiven of all that I had done which was contrary to his will—As I was doing this an Angel stood before me and answered me saying that I had sinned in [delivering] . . . the manuscript into the hands of a wicked man."⁴⁵ Lucy then adds, "Soon after this he received [a following] revelation from the Lord," whereupon the text of the July 1828 revelation, published as Doctrine and Covenants 3 (1844 edition), is inserted into both the draft and edited versions of Lucy's history.⁴⁶

An angel continued to play a critical role in Lucy's history, laying the plates before the Three Witnesses,⁴⁷ transporting the plates from one place to another, and generally withdrawing and returning them as needed.⁴⁸

described the record minutely," after which she offered Joseph "28 dollars that her mother gave her just before she died when she was on her death bed." Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:347–48.

41. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:289–98.

42. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:325.

43. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:338.

44. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:356–65.

45. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:369–70.

46. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:370, and n. 179.

47. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 5:347.

48. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:370–71, 391.

Distinguishing Presences in a Folk Christian Treasure-Seeking Milieu

Although Lucy's history was recounted long after the events occurred, Joseph's histories and the first-person accounts of his brother William also refer to an angel, messenger, and/or personage.⁴⁹ In light of the crucial role the angel played in the events Lucy recounted, we can ask who she thought the angel was and how it was characterized by others. Although the later tradition identifies the angel as Moroni, one of the ancient Nephites, he remains unnamed in Lucy's draft history. Joseph's 1838 account of the angel's appearance, which was inserted into the edited version, indicates "his name was Nephi."⁵⁰ Since Lucy reports that Joseph regaled the family with accounts of the "ancient inhabitants" of the Americas that the angel had presumably recounted to him, Lucy probably assumed that the angel was an ancient Nephite, whether Nephi or Moroni. She also indicated that an "ancient Nephite," presumably also an angel, brought the plates to the grove so that the Eight Witnesses could handle them.⁵¹

There has been extensive discussion on whether Smith initially understood the personage who he claimed appeared to him in 1823 as an angel, a spirit, or a treasure guardian.⁵² Willard Chase testified in 1833 that "in the month of June, 1827, Joseph Smith, Sen., related to me the following story: 'That some years ago, a spirit had appeared to Joseph his son, in a vision, and informed him that in a certain place there was a record on plates of gold, and that he was the person that must obtain them.'"⁵³ According to Chase, Smith's father said the spirit was "the spirit of the prophet who wrote this book, and who was sent to Joseph Smith, to make known these things to him."⁵⁴ Abigail Harris, Martin Harris's sister-in-law, offered similar testimony based on a conversation with Joseph's parents at Martin Harris's house in winter 1828. According to Abigail, the Smiths said that "the report that Joseph, jun. had found golden plates,

49. For Joseph's references, see Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:28–30, 44, 66; for William's, see Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:478–79, 496.

50. For evidence that Joseph used the names Nephi and Moroni interchangeably as late as 1838, see D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, rev. and enlarged ed. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998), 198–99, 508–9 n. 186.

51. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:395–96.

52. For an overview of the discussion, see Mark Ashurst-McGee, "Moroni as Angel and as Treasure Guardian," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon, 1989–2011* 18, no. 1 (2006): 77–100.

53. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:66.

54. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:67.

was true, and that he was in Harmony, Pa. translating them.” Joseph’s parents explained that the plates were “revealed to him by the spirit of one of the Saints that was on this continent, previous to its being discovered by Columbus.”⁵⁵ Quinn also cites local newspaper accounts from 1829 that reported that Smith claimed to have been visited by a “spirit.”⁵⁶

Mark Ashurst-McGee points out, however, that Jesse Smith’s letter of 1829 is the earliest relevant source.⁵⁷ Jesse’s letter indicates that in 1828 either Joseph or his father had written that “the Angel of the Lord has revealed to him [Joseph] the hidden treasures of wisdom and knowledge, even divine revelation, which has lain in the bowels of the earth for thousands of years.”⁵⁸ But as Michael Quinn notes and others generally agree, “It was not customary to use ‘angel’ to describe a personage who had been mortal, died, and was returning to earth to deliver a message to someone.”⁵⁹ Although insiders’ initial characterizations may have vacillated between “spirit” and “angel,” the earliest sources nonetheless indicate that by the time the plates were recovered, Joseph and his parents viewed the messenger as the spirit of a long-deceased person—an ancient Nephite—who was in some way connected to the Lord, whether as a prophet, saint, or an angel, and to “hidden treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”

The Smiths’ claims did not go uncontested. Two alternative interpretations of what they had found or done allow us to embed the process of discernment more deeply in the revival context: thus, some claimed that he had simply found treasure, which led them to characterize the supernatural presence as a “treasure-guardian” or “treasure-spirit.” Others claimed that he was engaging in necromancy, which led them to characterize it as a “ghost.”

Some of Smith’s fellow treasure seekers held the first view. When Willard Chase and other local treasure seekers brought in a “conjurer” to help find the plates,⁶⁰ and when Willard’s sister Sally Chase claimed to have found the plates with her “green glass,”⁶¹ they were viewing the plates simply as “gold treasure” (not as a “gold bible”) and using established

55. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:32.

56. Quinn, *Early Mormonism*, 138.

57. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:55.

58. Ashurst-McGee, “Moroni as Angel and as Treasure Guardian,” 56. See also “Letterbook 2,” 59, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed February 6, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letterbook-2/64>.

59. Quinn, *Early Mormonism*, 140.

60. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:331.

61. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:342–43.

folk practices for locating it. From a treasure-seeking perspective, the supernatural entity that revealed and guarded the treasure was likely conceived as a “treasure-spirit,” and Smith’s initial inability to recover the plates was chalked up to “enchantment.”⁶² Treasure seekers did not necessarily view their efforts as antithetical to Christianity. The Chases were Methodists, and it does not appear that they viewed treasure seeking per se as incompatible with their religion.⁶³ For orthodox Christians, the heterodoxy lay in Smith’s claim that he had recovered a “gold bible” and, thus, new scripture.

Others viewed Smith as engaging in necromancy, that is, attempting to conjure up the spirits of the dead. This was the view of some in Smith’s extended family, including Emma’s Methodist cousins Joseph and Heil Lewis and Joseph’s devoutly Calvinist uncle Jesse. Emma’s cousins, who were slightly younger than Joseph, lived near her parents in Harmony when Joseph and other treasure seekers boarded at the Hales in 1825 and when Joseph and Emma returned to live there from December 1827 until June 1829. Her cousins, like the rest of her family, were Methodists, and her cousins’ parents hosted class meetings in their home. When Smith attended one of these Methodist class meetings in June 1828 shortly after the death of his son, he apparently added his name to the Methodist “class book.” Emma’s cousins were appalled. As they wrote many years later, they “thought it was a disgrace to the church to admit a practicing necromancer, a dealer in enchantments and bleeding ghosts” and told him that they would initiate an investigation of his conduct if he didn’t withdraw his name from the Methodist class book.⁶⁴ Joseph’s uncle Jesse had similar thoughts. In his 1829 letter to Joseph’s brother Hyrum, Jesse claimed the “gold book [was] discovered by the necromancy of infidelity, and dug from the mines of atheism.” Jesse Smith was incensed to learn that he had interacted with, and perhaps even conjured up, spirits of the dead that Jesse viewed as “[of the] Devil” rather than “of the Lord.”⁶⁵

Whether they initially used “spirit” and “angel” interchangeably, the immediate Smith family clearly shifted to “angel” as the preferred

62. On treasure seeking and enchantment, see the 1826 court record and the account of Smith’s father-in-law, Isaac Hale. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 4:251, 284.

63. Lucy Smith indicates that Willard Chase was a Methodist class leader. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:331. After the Wesleyan Methodists broke with the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1844, Chase was ordained as a Wesleyan Methodist preacher. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:64.

64. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 4:311.

65. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:552.

designation for the manifestations of long-dead “ancient Nephites,” who had once inhabited the Americas. They did so most likely because references to “spirits” more easily conjured up notions of “necromancy” while “angel,” and especially “angel of the Lord,” emphasized the messenger’s connection to deity. Angels, however, were still intermediaries, and I think that the real-time evidence offered by the earliest recorded revelations suggests that it was in 1829 that Smith began recounting revelations that he claimed came directly from the Lord rather than through intermediaries.

If we look at the first recorded revelation, which Smith proclaimed in July 1828 in the wake of the loss of the manuscript, we find that the speaker does not disclose its identity. It addresses Smith directly in the first person but refers to God and the Lord in the third person. The speaker refers ambiguously to “my People the Nephities [*sic*] and the Jacobites and the Josephites and the Lamanites.”⁶⁶ If “my people” refers only to the Nephites and not to all the peoples listed, it suggests that the speaker is a Nephite. In subsequent revelations announced by Smith in March and April 1829, the speaker explicitly self-identifies as the Lord, God, or Jesus Christ,⁶⁷ leading some to assume that the Lord was speaking in the first revelation as well.⁶⁸

According to the passage already quoted from Lucy’s history, however, Joseph told her that when he returned to Harmony and humbled himself in prayer “before the Lord,” asking to be forgiven for all that “[he] had done which was contrary to his will[,] . . . *an Angel stood before me and answered me* saying that I had sinned in that [I] had delivered the manuscript into the hands of a wicked man.”⁶⁹ After recounting this appearance of the angel, Lucy inserted the text of the 1844 version of Doctrine and Covenants 3. In his 1838 history, Smith himself indicated that “*the former heavenly messenger*” mediated this first revelation by appearing and handing him “the Urim and Thummin [*sic*],” which then enabled him to “enquire of the Lord through them.”⁷⁰

Rather than viewing the appearance of the intermediary and the revelation as two separate events, I think it is more likely that the text of the July 1828 revelation was obtained through a prayer-induced visionary experience of “a heavenly messenger.” Such an interpretation is

66. MacKay and others, *Documents, Volume 1*, 9.

67. MacKay and others, *Documents, Volume 1*, 39.

68. For a fuller discussion, see Taves, *Revelatory Events*, 26–33.

69. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:369–70, emphasis added.

70. Davidson and others, *Histories, Volume 1*, 246, emphasis added.

congruent with the third-person references to “God” and “the Lord” in the recorded revelation, with Lucy’s account of an angelic appearance, and with Joseph’s account of the appearance of “the former heavenly messenger,” that is, the ancient Nephite who appeared in his 1823 vision.

If this reconstruction is accurate, there is then a marked difference between the first recorded revelation and those Smith proclaimed in March and April 1829. In July 1828, I am suggesting, Smith portrayed his revelation as being *from* an ancient Nephite (a “heavenly messenger” and “an angel of the Lord”) much as he did in September 1823. By the following spring, his revelations were portrayed instead as coming directly from the Lord, God, or Jesus Christ, thus receiving revelations *like* an ancient Nephite.

Other scholars, including Jan Shippo, Richard Bushman, and Dan Vogel, also view the crisis precipitated by the loss of the manuscript as a major turning point.⁷¹ However, they note the shift in Smith’s status and self-understanding without linking it to a shift in the identity of the supernatural speaker and, by extension, the source of the revelation. If we don’t assume that Smith claimed from the outset that he was in direct communication with deity, as the later introduction of the First Vision suggests, we can detect a shift in who was communicating in early 1829. Prior to that time, the Smiths and their close collaborators were directly engaged with lesser beings—intermediaries—whose identity was hotly disputed by others. When the translation resumed in 1829 with the arrival of Oliver Cowdery, Smith began reporting revelations that came directly from the Lord. Lesser beings still appeared to Smith and his followers, but the authenticity of such appearances could be checked by directly inquiring of the Lord himself.

Historians have acknowledged that Joseph’s self-understanding changed over time, that he made a transition first from a village seer, to a seer who was greater than a prophet or revelator, and then to a prophet. But under the weight of Joseph’s histories, which launch the Church’s history with the First Vision, they haven’t acknowledged that the supernatural beings who were said to appear changed over time as well. Lucy’s history brings this to the fore and suggests that the Lord began speaking directly in 1829, not 1820. This shift in who was speaking, I argue, led in time to a reimagining of Mormon origins such that the Lord—not an angel—spoke to Smith directly from the start.

71. See Jan Shippo, “The Prophet Puzzle: Suggestions Leading to a More Comprehensive Interpretation of Joseph Smith,” *Journal of Mormon History* 1 (1974): 17; Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, 69; Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet*, 129.

Conclusion

The First Vision controversy has generated several options for locating the revival that Joseph Smith described in his 1838 history. Those advocating 1820 or earlier variously locate it in upstate New York generally (Backman), at a Methodist annual conference in 1819 (Staker, Bushman), and/or at one or more Methodist camp-meetings in or around Palmyra (Harper). Note that, in light of the Turner evidence that Smith got “a spark of Methodism in the camp meeting’ somewhere along the road to Vienna,” Walters and Bushman *agree* this could have been the “seed” of his later accounts. Walters, Marquardt, Hill, and Vogel all locate a revival (not just a camp meeting) in Palmyra in 1824–25. Quinn vigorously defends the 1820 date but thinks Smith blended memories from 1820 and 1824–25.

Whatever happened in 1820 or thereabout, the evidence for a revival in 1824–25 of the sort that Smith described is sufficiently strong that we need to consider it as a possible context in which some of the events he described occurred. It thus opens up interpretive possibilities that Steven Harper and I did not consider in our published conversation about the First Vision. The table below indicates the possibilities we discussed (in regular type) and the new possibilities opened up by the First Vision controversy (in italics).

Interpretive Possibilities Opened by the First Vision Controversy

When did Joseph Smith become concerned about which church was right?

- pre-1823; in the context of early revivals/camp meetings (Joseph’s 1838 history) *or from his parents (Lucy’s history)*
- 1823; *family discussion (Lucy’s history)*
- 1824; *Palmyra revival (William’s recollection of Lane’s sermon)*
- *All of the above*

Who told him visions and revelations had ended with the apostolic age? On what grounds?

- 1820; Lane or some other Methodist—on grounds Methodism was right; on grounds of seeing God the Father and God the Son (Harper)
- 1824; *Lane; in context of Palmyra revival based on recounting of 1823 revelation of plates—on grounds Methodism was right and no new revelation*

- 1828; *Methodists in Harmony* who kicked him out of class meeting—on grounds that he was conjuring up spirits of the dead (necromancy) and claiming new revelation
- 1830s; critics of new revelation who thought their church was right (Taves)

When did Smith get the idea he had to “inquire of the Lord,” rather than just consult scripture?

- 1820 (Harper)
- 1823–24; *Lucy’s history and William’s recollection of Lane sermon*
- 1830s (Taves)

When he inquired, who responded? Who did he think was present?

- pre-1828 (D&C 3); the presences were lesser beings, whose identity was hotly disputed—that is, ancient Nephites, messengers of the Lord, angels, spirits, ghosts.
- 1828 and after; the Lord, God, or the Son as attested in subsequent revelations.

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