

news that God had sent an **angel** to him...This young man, some four years afterwards, was visited again by a holy **angel**." (*Journal of Discourses*, Vol.13, pp.65-66)

**1871** Mar. 19—Orson Pratt preached: "He went out to pray, being then a little over fourteen years of age...He saw in this light **two glorious personages**, one of whom spoke to him...saying, 'This is my beloved Son, hear ye him.'" (*Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 14, pp.140-141)

Although Orson Pratt's sermon on March 19, 1871 could be interpreted as either angels or God, his sermon on Dec. 10 of that year clearly identified the messengers as **angels**: "Here was Joseph Smith, a boy...he was only between fourteen and fifteen years of age...Would he stand forth and bear testimony that he had seen with his own eyes a messenger of light and glory, and that he heard the words of his mouth as they dropped from his lips and had received a message from the Most High, at that early age? And then...to have the finger of scorn pointed at him... 'No visions in our day, no **angels** come in our day...' and still continue to testify...that God had sent his **angel** from heaven." (*Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 14, p.262)

**1874** Jun. 23—President Brigham Young was still identifying the personages as messengers rather than God and Christ: "Do we believe that the Lord sent **his messengers** to Joseph Smith, and commanded him to refrain from joining any Christian church...informing him that the Lord was about to establish his kingdom on the earth... Yes, this is all correct." (*Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 18, p.239)

Brigham Young never once mentioned the First Vision of God the Father and his Son in his 30 years of preaching as President of the Church.

**1874** Sept. 20—Orson Pratt preached: "Joseph Smith...was a boy about fourteen years of age at the time the Lord first revealed himself...to him... he saw nothing excepting the light and **two glorious personages**...One of these personages, pointing to the other, said—'Behold my beloved Son, hear ye him.' After this, power was given to Mr. Smith to speak, and...he said that he desired to

know which was the true Church...immediately after receiving it, he began to relate it to some of his nearest friends, and he was told by some of the ministers who came to him to enquire about it, that there was no such thing as the visitation of **heavenly messengers**, that God gave no new revelation...he knew that he had seen this light, that he had beheld these **two personages**, and that he had heard the voice of one of them...and he continued to testify that God had made himself manifest to him..." (*Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 17, pp.278-280)

**1876** Dec. 31—Apostle John Taylor identified the personages in the First Vision as follows: "...the **Father and the Son** appeared to him, arrayed in glory... 'This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased...' " (*Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 18, pp.325-326)

**1879** Mar. 2—John Taylor stated "...Joseph asked the **angel** which of the sects was right...the **angel** merely told him to join none of them..." (*Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 20, p.167) However, later the same day, he declared that the Father and Son appeared to Joseph: "When **the Father and the Son** and Moroni and others came to Joseph Smith, he had a priesthood conferred upon him..." (*Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 20, p.257)

**1879** Dec. 7—John Taylor declared: "**the Lord** revealed himself to [Joseph] together **with his Son Jesus**, and, pointing to the latter, said: 'This is my beloved Son, hear him.'" (*Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 21, p.161; see also p.65 for a similar message)

**1880** Sept. 18—Orson Pratt gave his most specific identification of the personages: "...in the spring of 1820...in answer to his prayers, there was the manifestation of two of the great personages in the heavens—not angels, not messengers, but two persons that hold the keys of authority over all the creations of the universe. Who were they? **God the Eternal Father and his Son Jesus Christ**..." (*Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 21, p.308)

**1882** Oct. 29—Apostle George Q. Cannon seemed to start Joseph's call with the vision of Moroni. He did mention that Joseph saw Jesus and God but did not put those experiences in the framework of the first vision: "He [Joseph] was visited constantly by



**angels**; and the Son of God Himself condescended to come and minister unto him, the Father having also shown Himself unto him; and these various **angels**, the heads of dispensations, having also ministered unto him. Moroni, in the beginning, as you know, to prepare him for his mission, came and ministered and talked to him from time to time..." (*Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 23, p.362)

**1883** William Smith, Joseph's brother, remembered the vision as happening in 1823. He wrote that Joseph went into the woods to pray about which church to join: "**An angel** then appeared to him...He told him that none of the sects were right..." (*William Smith on Mormonism*, by William Smith, 1883, *Herald Steam Book*, Iowa, pp.5-10, as printed on *New Mormon Studies* CD-ROM)

**1884** Jan. 13—Apostle George Teasdale understood the First Vision to be "a vision of the **Father and the Son**." (*Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 25, p.13 & 18)

**1884** Jan. 28—B.H. Roberts related: "In the Spring of 1820, Joseph Smith...was praying in the woods to the Father. He saw a pillar of light descending from heaven...In the midst of this glorious light stood **two personages**... 'This is my beloved son; hear ye him.' --...for **the Father** had revealed **the Son** to him." (*Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 25, p.138)

**1888** LDS assistant Church Historian Andrew Jenson still had the understanding that the first vision was one of angels. He published an account of the First Vision in the paper *The Historical Record*, Jan. 1888, pp.353-357. This account is taken from the *Times and Seasons* account with Jenson's comments summarizing the experience, "**The angel** again forbade Joseph to join any of these churches..." Jenson then reverted Smith's narrative, "Many other things did he (**the angel**) say unto me which I cannot write at this time." Note that Jenson adds the clarifying words "the angel." When Jenson's paper was reprinted a couple of years later this account had been changed in two places. At the spots where he identified the being as an "angel" it was changed to "the Holy Being" and "the Christ."

Thus we see that the details of the First Vision vary in the different accounts. Early LDS leaders usually thought of the vision as one of angels, not God. They did not appeal to the first vision to establish their teaching that God has a body.

**These historical records of the First Vision leave us with more questions than answers:**

- If Joseph Smith's claim to a vision in 1820 had resulted in the kind of public persecution he described, why did the story go completely unnoticed by the public media, and remain absent from the official literature of the LDS Church for 22 years?

- Why is there no mention of the 1820 appearance of the Father and Son in Brigham Young's sermons? As Joseph Smith's successor, he presided over the LDS Church for 30 years, yet never preached that God and Jesus had appeared to Smith. His references to Joseph's First Vision mention only the appearance of "angels."

- If Brigham Young believed Joseph's revised First Vision of the Father and the Son, why would he continue to tell the story of a First Vision wherein the Lord sent his *angels* to tell Joseph not to join any of the churches?

- Why did it take more than 50 years for the revised First Vision of the Father and the Son to overtake the original version of angels as the standard interpretation of the events?

- If President Hinkley's statement is true—"If the First Vision did not occur, then we are involved in a great sham. It is that simple."—are we gambling with our family's eternal destiny by not carefully examining the documented history of the First Vision story?

Our Lord Jesus said, "...And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." (Jn 8:32)

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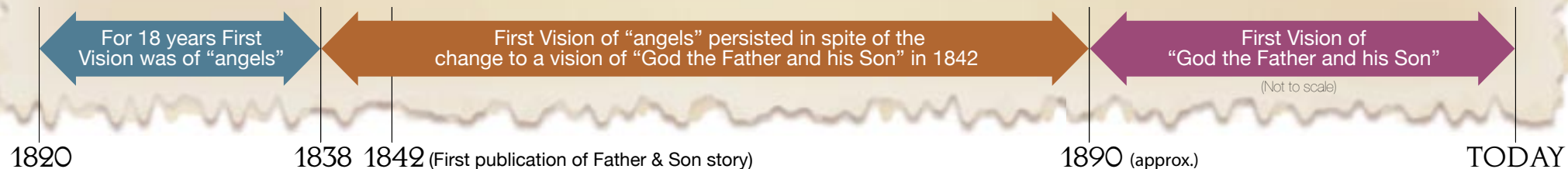
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# DOCUMENTED HISTORY OF JOSEPH SMITH'S FIRST VISION



# EVOLUTION OF THE FIRST VISION STORY



Concerning Joseph Smith's "First Vision", seeing God the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ together, Mormon prophet Gordon B. Hinckley said:



"...this is the pivotal thing of our story. Every claim that we make concerning divine authority, every truth that we offer concerning the validity of this work, all finds its roots in the First Vision of the boy prophet. Without it we would not have anything much to say...This becomes the hinge pin on which the whole cause turns. If the First Vision was true, if it actually happened, then the Book of Mormon is true. Then we have the priesthood. Then we have the Church organization and all of the other keys and blessings of authority which we say we have. If the First Vision did not occur, then we are involved in a great sham. It is that simple. (*Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley*, p.227)

From the above quote, it is obvious that the history of Joseph Smith's First Vision is of paramount importance. For that reason the following documented accounts, beginning in the year 1820, have been compiled to enable the reader to determine how, and when, the First Vision actually came about.

**1820** There are no known references to the First Vision recorded in the year 1820. In fact, until the year 1838, there was no mention of Joseph having seen God the Father and his Son in any newspaper or contemporary writing, including Latter-day Saint (LDS) Church publications; not even in the diaries and journals of Joseph's closest friends and church leaders, like Brigham Young, John Taylor, Wilford Woodruff, Heber C. Kimball, Orson Hyde, George A. Smith, George Q. Cannon and Oliver Cowdery. Nor was there any mention of a vision of the Father and Son in the writings of any of Joseph's many enemies of the period between 1820

and 1840. There is also no evidence that Joseph Smith taught that God and Jesus were separate deities with bodies prior to 1838.

**1832** In Joseph's handwritten first draft of his history, **only Jesus** is mentioned as appearing. (*The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, compiled by Dean Jessee, Deseret Book, 2002, pp. 10-11)



**1832-34** The *Evening and Morning Star* periodical, a major LDS publication, contains no mention of Joseph's having seen the Father and the Son.

**1833** The *Book of Commandments*, a chronology of revelations from God to Joseph Smith was published. This would have been a natural place to include Joseph's first revelation. But there is no mention of the First Vision.

**1834-36** The *Latter-day Saints Messenger and Advocate* claimed that it would be "a full history of the rise of the church" (Vol. 1, p.13) and on page 42 of the same volume we read that it would contain "a correct statement of events." In the February, 1835, issue, Oliver Cowdery told how Joseph Smith made his first contact with God. A "**messenger**" appeared to him in his bedroom. No mention of the Father and the Son.

**1835** Nov. 9—Joseph related his first vision to a Jewish minister. When he went into the grove to pray, **two personages** appeared. The second one "testified unto me that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." He "saw many **angels** in this vision." (*The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, pp.104-5) This account has been deleted from the *History of the Church*, Vol. 2, p.304.

**1835** Nov. 14—Joseph told his story to Erastus Holmes: "...I received the first visitation of **Angels** which was when I was about 14 years old..." (*The*

*Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, p.113) This account has been changed in the *History of the Church*, Vol. 2, p.312. It now reads "my first vision" instead of "visitation of **angels**."

**1835** *Doctrine and Covenants*, a revision of the *Book of Commandments*, was published. Ironically, God the Father is portrayed, not as having a physical body but, as "being a personage of spirit" in contrast to the Son who was "a personage of tabernacle" (body). (*D&C*, 1835, p. 53) This, in spite of the official First Vision which depicts the Father as a physical being.

**1838** Joseph Smith wrote that "I continued to pursue my vocation in life until the twenty-first of September one thousand eight hundred and twenty-three [1820-1823. That's three years since the First Vision, according to the official version.], all the time suffering severe persecution at the hands of all classes of men, both religious and irreligious, because I continued to affirm that I had seen a vision." (*Pearl of Great Price*, Joseph Smith History 1:27) Yet, the *LDS Messenger and Advocate*, 1834-36, which was to be "a full history of the rise of the church," was silent on Joseph's having seen the Father and the Son in a vision.

**1839** Joseph receives a revelation from God proclaiming "a time to come in the which nothing shall be withheld, whether there be one God or many gods they shall be manifest." (*D&C* 121:28) In light of the official version of the First Vision, Joseph should have been aware of more than one God since 1820, making this an unnecessary revelation.

**1841** Orson Pratt published a booklet titled, *An Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions*. He related that when Smith was "about fourteen or fifteen years old" he was praying in the woods when "**two glorious personages**" appeared. There was no indication that they were the Father and Son.

**1842** Mar. 1—In a letter from Joseph Smith to John Wentworth, "**Two glorious personages**" appeared and informed him that none of the churches "was acknowledged of God." There was no indication that they were the Father and Son. (*Times and Seasons*, Vol. 3, no.9, p.707)

**1842** Mar. 15—Joseph's 1838-39 version of the First Vision was published for the first time. **Two personages** appeared. One pointed to the other and said, "This is my beloved Son, hear him." (*Times and Seasons*, Vol. 3, no. 10, p. 748)

**1845** In the first draft of her autobiography, Joseph's mother, Lucy Smith, remembered Mormonism starting with a visit, in 1823, by "**an angel**" who told him "...there is not a true church on the Earth." Later, in the published version, she said nothing about her own recollection of the vision but simply inserted Joseph's account from *Times and Seasons*. (First draft of Lucy Smith's family history, p.46, Church Archives; *Early Mormon Documents*, Vol. 1, p.289-290)



**1854** Speaking at the April Conference, Apostle Orson Hyde stated: "Some one may say, 'If this work of the last days be true, why did not the Saviour come himself to communicate this intelligence to the world?' Because to the **angels** was committed the power of reaping the earth, and it was committed to none else." (*Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 6, p.335)

**1855** Feb. 18—LDS President Brigham Young taught: "...The Lord did not come with the armies of heaven...But He did send His **angel** to...Joseph Smith jun...and informed him that he should not join any of the religious sects of the day..." (*Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 2, p.171)



**1855** Feb. 25—Apostle Wilford Woodruff preached: "That same organization and Gospel that Christ died for...is again established in this generation. How did it come? By the ministering of an holy **angel** from God...The **angel** taught Joseph Smith those principles which are necessary for the salva-

tion of the world...He told him the Gospel was not among men, and that there was not a true organization of His kingdom in the world..." (*Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 2, pp.196-197)

**1857** Nov. 8—LDS Apostle Heber C. Kimball seemed to be oblivious to any vision where Joseph saw God and Christ: "Do you suppose that God in person called upon Joseph Smith, our Prophet? God called upon him; but God did not come himself and call, but he sent **Peter** to do it. Do you not see? He sent **Peter** and sent **Moroni** to Joseph, and told him that he had got the plates." (*Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 6, p.29)

**1863** Mar. 1—Apostle John Taylor explained in a sermon: "How did this state of things called Mormonism originate? We read that **an angel** came down and revealed himself to Joseph Smith and manifested unto him in vision the true position of the world..." (*Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 10, p.127)

**1863** Nov. 15—LDS Apostle George A. Smith preached: "When Joseph Smith was about fourteen or fifteen years old...the Lord answered his prayer, and revealed to Joseph, by the ministration of **angels**, the true condition of the religious world. When the holy **angel** appeared, Joseph inquired which of all these denominations was right and which he should join, and was told they were all wrong..." (*Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 12, pp.333-334)

**1864** Nov. 15—A year later, Apostle Smith seemed to be describing the vision in a more traditional way: "When the Lord appeared to Joseph Smith...He [Joseph] thus describes the incident: 'In the spring of 1820...I saw a pillar of light...I saw **two personages**...This is my beloved son, hear him.'" (*Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 11, pp.1-2)

**1869** Jun. 20—Apostle Smith again referred to Smith's First Vision: "He sought the Lord by day and by night, and was enlightened by the vision of an holy **angel**. When this **personage** appeared to him, of his first inquiries was, 'Which of the denominations of Christians in the vicinity was right?'" (*Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 13, p.77-78)

**1869** Dec. 19—Orson Pratt taught: "By and by an obscure individual...proclaimed the startling