

First Vision

~ Part 1 of 2

(February 27, 2007)

<p>Email insights:</p> <p>I get some regular emailers who seem to think they are so enlightened that when I read their rhetoric, I'm gonna change my tune and just, well, do what they want.</p> <p>One person, who goes by the name of Eric Johnson. Eric is LDS. Listen to the acceleration of anger Eric experienced as he repeatedly bombards me with emails:</p> <p>A couple also posted their comments on the website to me:</p> <p>On a good note, we also get emails like this:</p>	
<p>Have you ever heard the saying: "You can't cheat an honest man?"</p> <p>It means that when somebody gets cheated, they usually deserved it because they had faulty ambitions in the first place.</p> <p>Con men and women – grifters, scam artists, players – are successful because they have learned to promise people things that play upon their egos, their greed, or their inordinate desire for belonging or success.</p> <p>Con men and women commit fraud by</p>	

making exorbitant promises of certainty where certainty does not exist, by offering the highest returns on an investment, the greatest revelations known to man, a glimmer of the highest hopes, and the ability to possess and obtain the unknowable.

In June of 1998, in the Desert News, page 7, LDS President Gordon B. Hinckley said that the Mormon Church is:

“the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth.”

THIS IS AN EXTREME CLAIM.

Later, while visiting Switzerland, and in reference to those outside Mormonism who say that the LDS do not believe in the “traditional Christ,” Gordon B. Hinckley, when asked if he believed in the traditional Christ said . . .”

“No, I don’t. The traditional Christ of whom they speak is not the Christ of whom I speak. For the Christ of whom I speak has been revealed in this dispensation of the Fullness of Times. He, together with His Father, appeared to the boy Joseph Smith in the year 1820, and when Joseph left the grove that day, he knew more of the nature of God than all the learned ministers of the gospel of all the ages.”

ANOTHER VERY AGGRESSIVE AND EXTREME CLAIM.

Speaking of Joseph Smith's first vision, Hinckley later said, in October 7th 2002 and as quoted in the Salt Lake Tribune, that

"Our whole strength rests on the validity of that (first) vision . . . it either occurred or it did not occur. If it did not, then this work is a fraud. If it did, then it is the most wonderful and important work under the heavens."

If this, then that.

If this, then that.

The prophet of the LDS Church, in an attitude of "no one can prove the first vision false," states that If the first vision occurred, it's the most important thing to ever happen. But if it didn't, then it is a fraud!

I take this as a direct challenge to test the evidence.

But how can we tell if Joseph Smith's claims of a First Vision were genuine or fraudulent?

How can we discern the truth from error, the hyperbole from the reliable, the con from the trustworthy?

I suggest that we can discover the reality in the same manner that a detective can tell if a criminal is telling the truth – by their testimony, by the proofs they provide, by the things they say over a period of time.

Gordon B. Hinckley is not the

first prophet of the Mormon Church to lay out an “If/Then” argument for whether Joseph Smith was genuine or a fraud.

In *Doctrines of Salvation*, (Volume 1, page 188), President Joseph Fielding Smith gave an even better “either/or” for the members of this church. He said:

“Mormonism, as it is called, must stand or fall on the story of Joseph Smith. He was either a prophet of God, divinely called, properly appointed and commissioned OR he was one of the biggest frauds this world has ever seen.

There is no middle ground.

If Joseph Smith was a deceiver, who willfully attempted to deceive people, then he should be exposed; his claims should be refuted, and his doctrines to be shown false, for the doctrines of an imposter cannot be made to harmonize in all particulars with divine truth.

If his claims and declarations were built upon deceit and fraud, it would be easy to find errors and contradictions.”

So we’re faced with a challenge which comes directly from the mouth of the LDS prophets – prove Joseph a fraud if he’s a fraud or prove him truthful if there are no errors and contradictions to be found.

	<p>There is no middle ground, they say!</p> <p>Mormonism claims that it is the only true Church on the face of the earth and . . .</p> <p>Gordon B. Hinckley claims that Mormonism has <i>“a perfect knowledge of the nature of God which came through the first vision of Joseph Smith”</i> and remember, he also said that, <i>“when Joseph left the grove that day, he knew more of the nature of God than all the learned ministers of the gospel of all the ages.”</i></p> <p>I say we test these claims with all the available information at our disposal.</p>
<p>Now in a court of law, one of the most reliable ways to tell if a person is a trustworthy witness is by the consistency of their story.</p> <p>You will often hear detectives and police say things like, “Well, we got suspicious when the suspect started changing their story,” or “When they started adding in details we had never heard before we knew something was wrong.”</p> <p>As parents we know something is fishy the minute we hear conflicting details.</p> <p>And we know as liars that our story needs to be consistent.</p> <p>We are going to begin to examine what I think is one of the biggest smoking guns in the fraud in Joseph Smith’s Mormonism today – the first vision.</p>	

<p>I do this at the invitation of the prophets of the church, who claim Joseph Smith's vision was either true or it was fraudulent and to prove it either way.</p> <p>Now Joseph Smith's first vision is VITAL to Mormonism for two very important reasons:</p> <p>First, it establishes the credibility of Joseph Smith and his experiences as either fraudulent con or genuine prophet.</p> <p>Second . . .</p> <p>It is the basis for the LDS claim that the trinity is a ridiculous construct of man because by virtue of Joseph's first vision he claimed that God the Father has a body of flesh and bone – a concept that is absolutely foreign to what the Bible claims!</p> <p>Tonight, we are just going to cover the credibility of the First Vision claims. I think you are going to be shocked with what the evidence reveals.</p> <p>Next week, we will examine the problems with early Mormon teachings about God.</p>	
<p>To give us some bearings, it is important to hear the official version of the First Vision that is told in the LDS Church today.</p> <p>This is the standard story told in Church and it is what the LDS missionaries teach all around the world as truth.</p> <p>You can read it in full in the LDS scripture called the Pearl of Great Price under History of Joseph Smith.</p> <p>The official version says, in effect that . . .</p> <p>In 1820, when Joseph Smith was a <i>fourteen</i></p>	

year old boy, there was “no small stir” among the people of his community who were debating which church was true.

Joseph himself described it as a time of religious revival, where the “*Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists . . . were “in the midst of a war and tumult of opinions.”* Joseph wrote that “*I often asked myself, “What is to be done?”*”

And after reading a powerful passage in the Bible (James 1:5) he retired to a grove of trees to pray.

While in prayer, he was overcome by a dark and powerful spirit, and then a pillar of light appeared exactly over his head, which was brighter than the noon-day sun.

Smith recorded:

“When the light rested upon me I saw two personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the air. One of them spoke unto me, calling me by name and said, pointing to the other – “This is my beloved Son, hear Him.”

Now remember, this is the official version that is found in the Pearl of Great Price, is taught throughout the Church today, and is replicated in all of its manuals.

The story goes on with Smith saying:

“My object in going to inquire of the Lord was to know which of all sects was right, that I might know which to join. No sooner , therefore did I get possession of myself, so as to be able to speak, than I asked the personages that stood above me in the light, which of all the sects was right (for at this time it had never entered my heart that they were all wrong) and which I should join. I was answered that I must join none of them, for

<p><i>they were all wrong; and the personage who addressed me said that all their creeds were abomination in His sight; that those professors were all corrupt.” (PoGP JS History 1:17-19)</i></p> <p>In this official account Joseph Smith mentions his age (14) where he was living (Manchester), and that there was a great revival in the area.</p>	
	<p>Let’s start with these basics of this official story and work our way through, testing and comparing the claims to the evidences we now have.</p> <p>First, let’s look at Joseph Smith’s dating of 1820, the year he would have been a 14 year old boy.</p> <p>Microfilm records of road repairs prove that the Smith’s could not have lived in the area described by Joseph until after April 1822 – when Joseph was at least 16 years old, not 14.</p> <p>The only recorded and recognized revivals in the area, based on the newspapers and Church conversion records, were in 1824-1825 – when Joseph would have been 17 years old, not 14.</p> <p>Property assessment records show that a cabin was built on the land that Smith describes between 1822 and 1823 – when Joseph was between 16 and 17 years old.</p> <p>Remember, Joseph said that the revivals took place two years</p>

after moving to the Manchester area, which would have made the year 1824–1825 and Joseph a minimum of 18 – 19 years of age, not 14.

Joseph's brother William, one of the original 12 apostles of the Church, said that "the revival of the area" was led by a reverend Lane in 1823, again when Joseph would have been 17, not 14.

Additionally, church records of the Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians show a marked increase of memberships in 1824 – when Joseph was 17 to 18 years of age – and nothing but a dearth of growth in the year 1820.

Based on Joseph Smith's age-claims verses the substantiated evidence, the story fails the test of authenticity with regard to his age.

Even if there had indeed been a first vision, Joseph could not have been 14 years old. He had to have been at least 16 – and was more probably 17 when such a vision was to occur.

This becomes very important because when Joseph was 17 years of age the year would have been 1823.

And 1823 is the year that the Church officially claims the Angel Moroni visited Joseph and told him about the Gold plates.

	<p>It is also the year many early church leaders state that everything in Mormonism began.</p> <p>I suggest, and will later show through the evidence, that there was no first vision of God the Father and His Son in the year 1820 when Joseph was a 14 year old boy, but instead the real “first vision” was actually the event where Joseph claimed an angel came and visited him.</p> <p>But for continuity, let’s stay on task relative to Joseph Smith’s claims.</p>
<p>The first Church sanctioned version of the First Vision was published in <u><i>The Times and Seasons</i></u> in 1842 – 22 years after Joseph Smith claimed that it first occurred!</p> <p>Joseph said in this official version that he had confided in a minister about the vision and was told that it “<i>was of the devil.</i>” He added that</p> <p><i>“I soon found, however, that my telling the story <u>excited a great deal of prejudice against me among professors of religion, and was the cause of great persecution, which continued to increase; and though I was an obscure boy, only between fourteen and fifteen years of age, and my circumstances in life as to make a boy of no consequence in the world, yet men of high standing would take notice sufficient to excite the public mind against me, and create a bitter persecution; and this was common among all the sects – all united to persecute me.</u></i>”</p> <p>So we have another claim by Joseph Smith (which he provided 22 years after it supposedly occurred). It was that</p> <p>Joseph, back in 1820, told men of “high</p>	

standing” about his vision of God the Father and Jesus Christ appearing to him, that caused “great persecution,” which “increased over time,” “sufficient enough to excite the public mind” and “created bitter persecution among all the sects” against him.

But guess what?

There is no record of any of this from any other source!

None!

No journal records a 14, 15, 16, or 17 year old boy who claimed he saw God the Father.

No biography or autobiography mentions it.

Where the town and people and papers were all over the fact that he had claimed that there were golden plates, no newspaper clipping or article said anything about a “first vision” of God and Jesus!

Not even a record from Joseph Smith himself made such a claim until almost 2 decades later!

Even the first published Mormon history, collaborated on by Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery in 1834, ignored the event all together!

Gordon B Hinckley says that “*the Churches whole strength relies on the validity of this vision*” and nobody in Mormonism really even knew about it until well after 1838! Eighteen years after it was supposed to have happened!

And, and, and here is a real clincher: Most of the early church and its leaders even believed that the first vision was when Moroni came to pay Joseph a visit!

They thought – and based on the evidence, they thought correctly – that either there was no “first vision” of God the Father and Jesus Christ appearing to Joseph OR they believed that the first vision was when the angel Moroni came a visited Joseph in 1823 to tell him where the plates were.

Listen!

Listen!

In 1845, Lucy Mack Smith, Joseph’s Mother, started her autobiography. In her preliminary draft she made no mention about Joseph ever having a first vision of God and Jesus!

None!

She does recount, however that in the “third harvest” (which was in 1823) that the family had discussed the contentions among the various churches one night and that Joseph, later that evening had ‘an angel’ appeared to him and say (quote)

“I perceive that you are enquiring in your mind which church is true. There is not a true church on earth.”

When Lucy Mack Smith’s Biographical Sketches was finally published in 1853, she personally said nothing about her son’s claims to a first vision but only inserted Josephs’ account of it from the newspaper article in the Times and Seasons.

Fawn Brodie, who wrote the book “No Man Knows my History,” said therein:

“If something happened that Spring morning in 1820, it passed totally unnoticed in Joseph’s home town, and apparently did not even fix itself in the minds of members of his own family.”

George Albert Smith, Prophet of the LDS Church said in November of 1863 (JOD Vol 12 page 333-334)

“When Joseph Smith was about 14 or 15 years old, he went humbly before the Lord and inquired of him, and 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 as to which of all these denominations was right and which he should join, and was told they were all wrong.”

In 1834, Oliver Cowdery, who was a scribe to Joseph Smith, published the first Mormon History in the LDS paper *Messenger and Advocate* at Kirkland Ohio.

He began Smith’s story in 1823 – not 1820 - with the boy in his bedroom being visited by the angel Moroni, not God the Father and Jesus Christ.

He wrote that during a time of religious excitement that Smith prayed to know “if a supreme being did exist, to have an assurance that he was accepted of him.”

Cowdery went on to write that Joseph’s prayer was answered on September 21st of 1823 when a “messenger” appeared to him in his bedroom “to deliver a special message, and to witness to him that his sins were forgiven, and that his prayers were heard.”

This is a far different version than the revisionist story Joseph concocted years later that included the notion that “He saw God the Father with a body of flesh and bone and His Son Jesus Christ standing above him in the air.”

LDS Apostle George Albert Smith in 1869

(JOD Vol. 11 page 1-2) said of the first vision: "He sought the Lord by day and by night, and was enlightened by the vision of a holy angel. When this personage appeared to him, of his first inquiry was, "Which of the denominations of Christianity in the vicinity was right."

In 1869, Orson Pratt taught: "By and by and obscure individual, a young man, rose up and, in the midst of all Christendom, proclaimed the startling news that God had sent him an angel to him . . . and four years afterwards was visited by a holy angel again!"

LDS Apostle John Taylor, speaking in 1879, identifies the personages as angels.

"Joseph asked the angel which of the sects was right, the angel merely told him to join none of them."

The evidence seems to indicate that the people alive during the time of Joseph Smith were under the impression that the first vision consisted of angelic visitations – like that of Moroni in 1823, and not of deity in plural or singular form.

But this is only the beginning.

In 1965, BYU graduate student Paul Cheesman published an account of the first vision which was recorded in Joseph Smith's own handwriting.

So there is no question of authenticity, this document has been authenticated by LDS scholars and historians as from the hand of Joseph Smith.

James B. Allen, who later became an LDS church historian said that:

"one of the most significant documents of that period is a handwritten manuscript by Joseph

Smith. It . . . includes the story of the first vision."

Dean L. Jessee, of the Church Historians Office, made these public statements confirming the authenticity of the manuscript in question:

"The 1831-32 history transliterated here contains the "earliest known account of Joseph Smith's first vision."

Now I am begging you to prayerfully ask yourself a question here.

If you had seen God the Father standing above you in a body of flesh and bones and His Son next to Him in a separate Body of flesh and bones, and you spoke with them, asked them questions, and they spoke back to you, how would you write the account of the experience if it happened this way?

Now listen to the earliest, most authentic, account of what Joseph called the first vision and compare it to what the official, retrofitted account says.

Ready?

Joseph Wrote, in 1832, twelve years after the event was said to have occurred:

. . . and Lord heard my cry in the wilderness and while in the attitude of calling upon the Lord in the 16th year of my age a pillar of light above the brightness of the sun at noon day come down from above and rested upon me as I was filled with the spirit of god and the Lord opened the heavens upon me and I saw the Lord and he spake unto me saying Joseph my son thy sins are forgiven thee, go thy way walk in my statutes and keep my commandments behold I am the Lord of glory I was crucified for the world that all those who believe on my name may have eternal life

behold the world lieth in sin at this time and none doeth good no not one they have turned aside from the gospel and keep not my commandments they draw near to me with their lips while their hearts are far from me and my anger is kindling against the inhabitants of the earth to visit them according to this ungodliness and to bring to pass that which hath been spoken of by the mouth of the prophets and apostles behold and lo I come quickly as it was written of me in the cloud clothed in the glory of my father.”

This first version, this version that was written 18 years after the supposed date it was to have occurred, this version that scholars call the most reliable . . .

Says NOTHING about two personages.
Says NOTHING about God the Father.
Says nothing about Him having a body of flesh and bones.
Say nothing about all the churches being an abomination.
Says nothing about “This is my beloved Son, Hear ye Him.”

All of this was developed and added later as Joseph Smith rewrote a history that would cover all of his evolving theological standings.

That would make his theology whole.

It is from the first vision that Mormons believe the absolutely non-biblical stance that God the Father has a body of flesh and bone and this was not even included in the most reliable we have of what Joseph claims to have seen!

There are at least six other versions of the first vision that have been recorded and provided over the years.

All of them are progressive.

All of them build and elaborate on Joseph's growing ideas about the ontology of God.

All of them morph from Him seeing angels, to Him seeing only Jesus, to Him seeing messengers, to Him finally seeing God the Father and the Son in bodies of flesh and bone!

This is evidence of fraud, brothers and sisters!

Fraud of the worst kind.

Want to hear another version?

Dean C. Jessee of the Church Historical department in the Spring of 1971 provided another first vision account, as recorded in the Prophet's 1835-1836 Diary by one Warren Parrish.

The important part of the account reads as follows:

"I called on the Lord in mighty prayer, a pillar of fire appeared above my, it presently rested down upon me, and filled me with joy unspeakable, a personage appeared in the midst of this pillar of flame which was spread all around, and yet nothing consumed, another personage soon appeared like unto the first, he said unto me "thy sins are forgiven thee" he testified unto me that Jesus Christ is the Son of God; and I saw many angels in this vision. I was about 14 years old when I first received this communication."

It is interesting to note that Joseph Smith's 1835 Diary was used as the basis for much of his History of the Church, but this version of the First Vision was omitted.

Let me summarize:

18 years after the first vision was supposed to

have occurred, JS suddenly provided the world some details of the event.

There is no supportive witness to Joseph's claims of having had a first vision in 1820 – not from family, not from personal journals, not from newspapers, not from enemies of Joseph Smith's claims.

Based on a mound of solid evidence, the details regarding his age and the religious environment are spurious.

LDS leaders taught for decades after his death that the first vision was actually a visitation from an angel or angels.

In 1834 the LDS Church magazine printed an account of the beginnings of Mormonism but did not mention Joseph Smith's 1820 vision in the sacred grove. Instead it began with Moroni's visit in 1823.

In 1835, Joseph related the vision in the grove, but only mentions angels appearing, not Jesus or God the Father.

Early newspaper articles which criticized Joseph Smith never mention the 1820 first vision or the idea that God the Father is flesh and bone.

Unlike Gordon B Hinckley, early LDS leaders never used the first vision to illustrate the idea that God and Jesus were separate entities possessing bodies of flesh and blood.

The LDS Church has consistently altered, withheld, and edited information regarding the first vision.

For example

The Deseret News, quoted from Joseph Smith History in 1852 exactly what was written:

"I received the first visitation of angels when I was about fourteen years old . . ."

The History of the Church (Vol 2. page 312) edited the *visitation of angels* part out to where it now reads

"I received my first vision, which was when I was about 14 years old."

If, as Gordon B Hinckley says, the *whole strength of Mormonism rests on the validity of that (first) vision*, I would look to a far less suspect accounting for who God is – like the Bible.