JOSEPH SMITH’S FIRST VISION TESTED

The central pillar of historic belief in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Mormon or LDS Church) has been properly identified as the “First Vision” of Joseph Smith. In brief, it tells of Joseph Smith, Jr.’s, going into the woods as a fourteen-year-old to pray for wisdom in response to a large religious revival, which, according to the story, took place in the spring of 1820. Not knowing what church to join, Smith supposedly decided to ask God. Smith tells of being overtaken by a “power of some actual being from the unseen world,” and just at the point of despair, in his own words, “I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head…When the light rested upon me I saw two Personages…standing above me in the air. One of them spake unto me, calling me by name and said, pointing to the other—This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!” On asking these personages which church he should join, Smith supposedly was told that he should join none, “for they were all wrong…all their creeds were an abomination in his sight; that those professors were all corrupt.”

The importance of this First Vision to the LDS Church cannot be overemphasized. The late Mormon Apostle Bruce R. McConkie wrote: “This transcendent vision was the beginning of latter-day revelation….Through it the creeds of Christendom were shattered to smithereens, and because of it the truth about those Beings whom it is life eternal to know began again to be taught among men.” As Mormon Prophet Joseph Fielding Smith wrote, “Mormonism…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.”

Refutation of the First Vision is not only central to a strong apologetic against Mormon claims; it also gives the believer the opportunity to move into a useful presentation about the living and true God the Mormon needs to come to know.

**Divergent Accounts.** The earliest hand-written account of Smith’s vision reads, “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 from above and rested upon me…and the Lord opened the heavens upon me and I saw the Lord and he spake unto me Joseph my son thy sins are forgiven thee…behold I am the Lord of glory I was crucifyed for the world.” Note that only one personage appears to Joseph in this earliest account of his first vision.

Joseph’s diary entry of November 9, 1835, contains another account, and here Joseph does mention two personages, only this time they testify that “Jesus Christ is the Son of God.” In this account he mentions that angels appeared, but not God the Father or Jesus Christ! What makes this account even more fascinating is the fact that in the Documentary History of the Church, under the date of November 14, 1835 (only 5 days after the above account), we have another mention of this “vision.” When the account was printed in serial form in the Deseret News on May 29, 1852, it recounted Smith’s telling of his experiences “from six years up to the time I received the first visitation of angels, which was when I was about fourteen years old.” Since this contradicts the modern story, however, recent editions of the Documentary History have changed the wording to “from six years old up to the time I received my first vision, which was when I was about fourteen years old.” Given the close proximity in time of the above diary account that mentions angels to the editing of the original 1835 form of the entry reproduced in the Documentary
History of the Church in an apparent attempt to cover up this fact, it seems to be clear that the First Vision story has undergone a substantial amount of evolution.

Is it really possible that Joseph made up the story as he went along, adding God the Father only in the late 1830s? Maybe he did not realize that by doing so he was violating his own revelation in Doctrine and Covenants 84:21.22, where he says that no man can see God the Father without receiving the priesthood and live. Joseph supposedly did not receive the “priesthood” until 1829!

Different Revivals. In 1967, the Rev. Wesley Walters published an article entitled New Light on Mormon Origins from the Palmyra (NY) Revival. In this article, Walters revealed the results of his study of a question that had not yet been addressed fully: was there really a revival in Manchester in 1820 as Joseph Smith claimed? By going to the original sources themselves, Walters was able to determine that there were definitely revivals in the area in 1816–17 and in 1824–25, but none in 1820. He notes that early Mormon convert and compatriot of Joseph Smith, Jr., Oliver Cowdery’s story says that a revival broke out in 1823 under the Rev. George Lane, a Methodist minister. William Smith, Joseph Smith’s younger brother, wrote an account that likewise dates the revival to 1824. Both of these sources (Cowdery and Smith), by mentioning the different ministers, help us to find the date, for both of the ministers they mentioned were not assigned to that area until after 1822.

Walters also discovered the story of the revival written by Rev. George Lane. All of the details of the revival that broke out in September of 1824 match with Joseph’s own story about a revival in 1820—hundreds of people joined the churches—Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian (401 to be exact), and it lasted through the spring of 1825. When we look to the records relevant to 1820, however, we find no evidence of revival at all: rather than having hundreds joining the Methodist church, the records for the entire circuit show that there were membership losses of twenty-three for 1819, six for 1820, and forty for 1821. The Baptist Church in Palmyra gained only six by baptism in 1820 (compare to ninety-four for 1825), and other local Baptist churches listed losses of four, five, and nine for the year. Add to this the fact that although the denominational publications had devoted many pages to the “glowing reports” of the revivals in both 1816–17 and 1824–25, none of them mention anything about any revivals in 1820.

Disparate Dates. In 1988, Walters released new information from his research, putting together records photocopied by Brigham Young University in 1970, newly discovered land assessment records from Manchester township, and the records of the Smith’s being “warned out” from Norwich, Vermont. “Warning out” was a common occurrence during the early 1800s, when towns were responsible for taking care of the poor within their borders. When a family moved in that appeared to be less than affluent, they were “warned out,” not as a means of forcing them to leave town, but so that the town would not have to take responsibility for them should they come into need. In the Smith’s case, this occurred on March 15, 1816.

The Mormon story up until this point had been that the Smiths lived in Norwich, Vermont, from 1814 to 1816, when they moved to Palmyra, New York. They lived there until 1818, at which time they moved to Manchester, New York, where, as Smith states, a revival broke out and the First Vision took place (two years later in 1820). As the warning out normally happened very shortly after arrival, and had to take place at most one year after arrival for the town to be legally absolved of its responsibility to the family, this indicates that the Smiths lived in Norwich from 1816 to 1818.

The road-tax records from Palmyra indicate that the name of Joseph Smith, Sr., appears from 1817 through 1822. As all men twenty-one years of age and older as of April were required to be listed, Alvin Smith, Joseph Smith’s older brother, appears as well in 1820. It is evident that Joseph Smith, Sr., moved to Palmyra before the rest of his family, who joined him there at a later date, because Alvin’s name appears only in 1820, and if he had been there earlier, it would have appeared earlier. Furthermore, the land assessment records show they didn’t build a house until that later time frame. It is important to note that Joseph Smith, Sr., is listed as living in Palmyra until 1822—despite the LDS claim that he moved from there four years earlier in 1818.
Further information came to light in the land assessment records for Manchester township. These records make it clear that the Smiths did not contract to buy the one-hundred acres of land for their farm in Manchester county until after June of 1820, for the tax rolls at that time show that all of the land was taxed to the original owners. In the tax rolls of 1821, however, we see that Joseph Smith, Sr., is taxed for one-hundred acres at $7 an acre—the price of raw, unimproved land at the time. The land is given the same value in the 1822 assessment, but in 1823 the value rises to $1,000, a jump of forty percent, even though the other land values only went up an average of four percent in the area.

This indicates that, for the first time, improvements were made to the land, including the construction of a home. This suggests that the Smiths moved onto the land and lived there after the summer of 1822 and before the summer of 1823, which perfectly meshes with the data provided from all other sources, especially the road-tax records from Palmyra. Recall that Joseph Smith himself said that it was “two years” after their move to Manchester (1822–23) that the revivals took place (1824–25). This corresponds to the information that shows that the revival Smith described took place in 1824–25.

What then can be said of all of this? The First Vision as recorded in LDS scripture is the very heart of the Mormon doctrine of God, and the historical basis for Smith’s evolving story is subject to refutation from not just one or two angles, but from dozens. Every Mormon knows this story and places great faith in its historicity. In opposition to the falsehoods of the American “prophet,” the Christian has the consistent witness of the prophets and apostles to the fact that there is only one true God, who said, “Before me there was no God formed, neither shall there be after me” (Isa. 43:10 KJV).

— James R. White

NOTES
1. Joseph Smith History 1:16 in the Pearl of Great Price. This account was written in 1838.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
8. Documentary History of the Church, 2:312.