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## Censoring the Joseph Smith Story, Conclusion

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# Censoring the Joseph Smith Story

BY HUGH NIBLEY

## CONCLUSION

An exceedingly wild story was attributed to Martin Harris by the *Weekly Visitor* in 1841, a story which Harris was reported to have told back in 1827—what memories these people have! According to this, after a futile attempt to get the plates “Joe went alone in silence home and was met on the way by an angel in the woods: ‘He spoke in a voice of thunder, and forked lightning shot through the trees and ran along the ground. The terror of the Divine messenger’s appearance instantly struck Smith to the earth, and he felt his whole frame convulsed with agony’ . . . the angel upbraided him and disappeared. ‘Smith went home trembling and full of terror. Another Divine communication was made to him, authorizing him to go alone and bring the chest and deposit it secretly under the hearth of his dwelling.’”<sup>76</sup> Again the suggestive and misleading quotes, again the garbled stories; this is another example of how thoroughly corrupted the first vision story can get, but the familiar elements are there: Joseph Smith alone in the silent woods, the light in the treetops, the young man struck to the ground and overcome so that “he felt his whole frame convulsed with agony,” the awesome appearance of “the Divine messenger,” who gives him instructions, the specification that the vision about the plates came later as well as the useful information that this story is being told at the third-hand after a lapse of many years. The authority for this story is an editor of the *Episcopal Recorder* of Philadelphia, who describes in detail how Harris told the tale to him “early in the autumn of 1827.”<sup>77</sup> A very unflattering retelling of the first vision story—what else could one expect?—but at least an early one.

On October 12, 1832, one J. B. Pixley wrote a worried letter to the editor of the *Christian Watchman*, in which he deplored the coming of the Mormons to Missouri. What particularly annoyed this correspondent was that the invaders had not changed any of the crazy ideas they had back in Ohio and New York: “. . . their creed,” he wrote, “appears to have undergone but little change. . . . The Mormons *still* prefer to talk with angels, visit the third heaven, and converse with Christ face to face. They pretend to have discovered where the Ark of the Covenant,

Aaron’s Rod, the Pot of Manna, etc., etc., now remain hid.”<sup>78</sup> Again the free invention—the Ark, the Rod, and the Pot are a unique contribution of the writer; but along with that go the now familiar motifs of angelic visitation and face-to-face conversation with Christ.

Pixley’s complaint is confirmed in the reports of a great mass meeting that was held at Independence, Missouri, on July 20, 1833. There was a report:

“The committee fears that . . . they (the Mormons) will soon have all the offices in the county in their hands; and that the lives and property of other citizens would be insecure, under the administration of men who are so ignorant and superstitious as to believe that they have been the subjects of miraculous and supernatural cures; hold converse with God and his angels, and possess and exercise the gifts of divination, and of unknown tongues.”<sup>79</sup>

The *Missouri Intelligencer and Boone’s Lick Advertiser* of August 10, 1833 reports it thus:

“What would be the fate of our lives and property, in the hands of jurors and witnesses, who would not blush to declare and would not upon occasion hesitate to swear, that they have wrought miracles and supernatural cures; have converse with God and His angels; and possess and exercise the gift of divination and of unknown tongues . . . may be better imagined than described.”<sup>80</sup>

“Of their pretended revelations from Heaven,” an editor comments, “their personal intercourse with God and his Angels—the maladies they pretend to heal by the laying on of hands—and the contemptible gibberish with which they profane the Sabbath . . . we have nothing to say.”<sup>80</sup> Alexander Majors claims to have had a conversation with Joseph Smith in Missouri at this time: “I told him frankly [Majors reports] that it [the trouble with the mobs] grew out of the fact that they claimed to have seen an angel, and to have received a new revelation from God. . . . He then scouted the idea that people would receive such treatment as they did merely because they claimed to have seen angels and talked with God and claimed to have a new revelation.”<sup>81</sup> Whether Majors is gilding the lily or not, it is clear that the one thing that

most enraged the Missourians when the Mormons first came to Missouri in the early 1830's was the Mormon claim that somebody had "seen angels *and* talked with God."

This writer has made no systematic search of "intimations" of the first vision story in early Mormon and anti-Mormon writings. What we have presented here is simply what we have turned up on short notice among a lot of old notes which we gathered years ago with a wholly different project in view; but it is quite enough to refute the claim that not a single intimation that anyone ever heard the first vision story is to be found anywhere between 1820 and 1840. What the present state of the evidence most strongly suggests is that Joseph Smith did tell his story to some of his followers at an early date, that the story got abroad, as such things will, and in the process of being handed around inevitably became contaminated and corrupted beyond recognition, until at last Joseph Smith was obliged to issue a public statement. He did this reluctantly, confining his report to bare essentials. Throughout his life Joseph Smith was never eager to tell the story of his first vision. This is a thing which the publicity-minded writers of anti-Mormon books seem quite incapable of comprehending; hungry for "success" and attention themselves, they find it simply inconceivable that Joseph Smith or any of the prophets should have "kept it close, and told no man of any of those things which they had seen." (Luke 9:36.) For them the complete proof that Joseph Smith had no first vision is that he did not advertise it.

#### *They're Still at It:*

We should not conclude without referring the reader to a mimeographed sheet which was widely circulated in the mail in Utah during the third week of February of the present year (1961), and which brings our little study conveniently up to date.<sup>82</sup> The writing begins with a pompous and resounding declaration: "It had recently been discovered that the teaching that God the Father and his Son Jesus Christ appeared to Joseph Smith in 1820 was not a part of early church doctrine until after the death of Brigham Young." This gives us a new terminal date

for our story—1877! The proof of this sensational claim is as follows:

"Brigham Young said, '*The Lord did not come . . . But He did send His angel to this same obscure person, Joseph Smith, Jun., . . . and informed him that he should not join any of the religious sects of the day, for they were all wrong; . . .*' (Journal of Discourses, Vol. 2, p. 171.)"

What Brigham Young *did* say at the place indicated was:

"But as it was in the days of our Savior, so it was in the advent of this new dispensation. . . . The Lord did not come with the armies of heaven, in power and great glory, nor send His messenger panoplied with aught else than the truth of heaven, to communicate to the meek, lowly, the youth of humble origin, the sincere inquirer after the knowledge of God. But he did send his angel to this same obscure person, Joseph Smith, Jun., who afterwards became a Prophet, Seer, and Revelator, and informed him that he should not join any of the religious sects of the day, for they were all wrong."

By suppressing most of the first sentence, which explains that as in ancient times the Lord did not come himself nor send his messengers *in visible splendor*, our critics make the sentences appear to say that he did not come at all. And by further juggling it is made to appear that the Lord sent an angel instead of coming himself, and that it was the angel who told Joseph Smith that all the religious sects were wrong. Actually the statement "the Lord did not come" is promptly followed by the fuller specification ". . . *nor* sent His messenger," which our critics have carefully omitted, since that makes it perfectly clear that Brigham Young is denying neither class of heavenly manifestation, but simply stating that they did not happen *in a particular way*; for in the next sentence he goes on to specify that God "did send his angel to this same obscure person," and God (not "who!") "informed him that he should not join any of the religious sects. . . ." God both instructed Joseph Smith and sent his angel—but he did not do either in visible splendor.

Next our discoverers (Continued on page 865)



in bringing again to the knowledge of man such vital information.

All who believe in God and delight in the search for truth should prayerfully read and study all that has come to light in these latter days concerning the mission of Christ so that the destructive influences of doubt and skepticism may be rooted out of their lives.

### Censoring the Joseph Smith Story

(Continued from page 813)

quote a passage from Orson Hyde: "Some one may say 'If this work of the last days be true, why did not the Savior come himself and 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." (JD, 6:355.)

Again they have pulled the same stunt, underlining the words that would make it appear that Jesus does not come at all, while what the author actually says is that he did not come "to the world," which is exactly the point that Brigham Young was making: Jesus Christ did not make a public appearance in glory; he did not personally circulate among men, but sent his angels for the reaping and the gathering. The preaching of the gospel and the reaping of the harvest, of which Brother Hyde is speaking, is one aspect of the work of this dispensation, under the direction of the angels; the visit of the Father and the Son is another and totally different aspect; there is no conflict whatever between the two great events, but Orson Hyde is speaking only of the preaching and the gathering, and what he says is perfectly correct.

Having with great fanfare fired off these two duds, the experts now bring their atomic cannon into play. The Great Discovery is a quotation from the *History of Joseph Smith* as published in the *Deseret News* of May 29, 1852:

"This afternoon, Erastus Holmes, of Newbury, Ohio, called on me to inquire about the establishment of the church, and to be instructed in doctrine more perfectly. I gave him a brief relation of my experience while in my juvenile years, say from six years old up to the time I received the first visitation of angels,

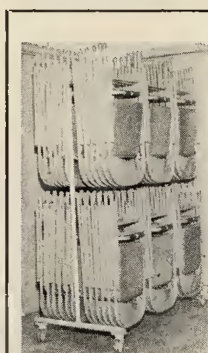


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which was when I was about *fourteen years old*; also the revelations that I received *afterwards* concerning the Book of Mormon, and a short account of the rise and progress of the church up to this date."

The discoverers of this passage have been at pains to underline the parts of it which make it clear that the Prophet *is* speaking of the first vision and nothing else. They have *not*, however, taken pains to point out that the date of this interview is Saturday, October 14, 1835—which makes a hash of the prevailing Party Line that Joseph Smith invented all his vision stories in Nauvoo some years later. This date of 1835 leads desperate contrivers to cry forgery, surmising that the date was slyly interpolated into the *Deseret News* account. But here we have an excellent control, for if the editors of the paper were free to invent stories and dates to suit their fancy, it is hardly conceivable that they would run the risk of a misunderstanding by using the ambiguous term "angels" when for many years it had been uniformly taught by the Church that the two visitors were the Father and the Son. The peculiarity of the language vouches for the authenticity of the story.

Nor have our searchers bothered to note that exactly one week previous to his interview with Holmes, Joseph Smith had another visitor, as reported in the *Deseret News* just two weeks before the above item appeared:

"I was this morning introduced to a man from the east. After hearing my name he remarked that I was nothing but a man, indicating by that expression, that he had supposed that a person to whom the Lord should see fit to reveal his will, must be something more than a man. . . . And indeed, such is the darkness and ignorance of this generation, that they look upon it as incredible that a man should have any intercourse with his Maker."<sup>83</sup>

Since all Christians have always believed that a man can have intercourse with his Maker through prayer, meditation, or mystical experiences, it must have been something very different to which the Prophet and his visitor were alluding. As we have noted, Joseph Smith did not choose to discuss these matters; indeed, he told Erastus Holmes very briefly of his





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“juvenile years . . . up to the time I received the first visitation of angels,” resuming again with “the revelations that I received afterwards concerning the Book of Mormon. . . .” This could mean, and seems to imply, that he actually skipped the part about his first vision.

But to return to our shrewd discoverers. “This statement of Joseph Smith,” they triumphantly announce, “refutes the teaching that the Father and the Son appeared to him in the first vision of 1820. . . .” Refutes it? Does he say that the Father and Son did *not* appear to him? That would be a refutation. Does he say who the angels were, or how many?

THE YOUNG PIANIST

BY KAY CAMMER

*The inner beauty of a child  
Is seen in every note she plays.  
The music stored within her soul  
Reflects in all the tender ways  
She curls her fingers—moves her  
head;  
Time is forgotten—problems fled;  
Pursued by sound the tension scatters—  
She's lost in a world where music  
matters.*

If our experts had taken the trouble to consult a good dictionary, they would have made another startling discovery, namely that an angel is “1. A ministering spirit or divine messenger. . . . 2. Any messenger of God, as a prophet, or preacher. . . . 3. A messenger generally. . . .” (Oxford Dictionary.) The word *angel* in English has “acquired a special meaning, particularly in the singular, as the designation of a supernatural bearer of a divine revelation. The transition was then easy to the sense of a generic name for the beings of the heavenly world. . . .”<sup>64</sup> That is to say, *any* heavenly being is properly an angel. Messrs. Schaff and Herzog spare us the trouble of a long excursion into the *Patrologia* by admitting, though reluctantly, that it was “assumed by the Greek Fathers, the older Lutheran dogmaticians, and Hengstenberg” that Jesus Christ, the Logos, was an angel, and that in the Bible “the distinction between the angel and Yahweh does not hinder from making



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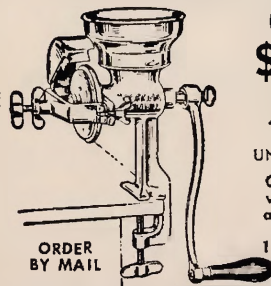
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the angel speak as Yahweh or from speaking of the angel as Yahweh," that is to say, Jehovah himself in his capacity of a messenger to men is an angel, just as, in the same capacity but in an evil sense, "Satan... is reckoned among the angels."<sup>84</sup> Even Elohim, when he visits the earth, has been called an angel.<sup>85</sup> Not to labor the point, it is perfectly correct usage to refer to *any* heavenly visitor as an angel. So when Joseph Smith, reviewing the past in "a brief relation" to a stranger, passes over the first vision as his "first visitation of angels" he is being both correct and evasive. Remember that this was some years before he was finally "induced" to come out with a public statement about the first vision; but all the time the story is there.

Since these articles began to appear in the Era, the writer has been drenched by a steady drizzle of letters from people who seem to make an avocation of searching for anything that might be interpreted as an inconsistency in the record. There is something comical in these laborious attempts to prove a negative and override living revelation by exploiting--while ignoring--the first principle of textual criticism. That principle (only too well known to the conscientious genealogist) is, that *no* written record of any length is free of serious errors. "The reader of a written document," the greatest living authority on documents has said, "never perceives more than a shadow of reality."

The sources of LDS church history, like all human chronicles, bristle with errors; the only way of approximating certitude is to check them against one another. If among a hundred fairly consistent reports of the first vision story three or four differ radically, that is simply to be expected; their existence does not discredit the consensus. And where such intimate and personal things as unique revelations to individuals are concerned it would be very strange indeed if wild aberrations and wide discrepancies did not appear in the reports. We know the policy of the early leaders regarding the reporting of revelations. A favorite theme of Brigham Young's was the tangible, personal nature of God, which he *never* illustrates by any mention of the first vision. Why not? He has explained at length:

... that man who cannot know things without telling any other living being upon the earth, who cannot keep his secrets and those that God reveals to him, never can receive the voice of his Lord. . . . Should you receive a vision of revelation from the Almighty . . . you should shut it up and seal it as close, and lock it as tight as heaven is to you, and make it as secret as the grave. The Lord has no confidence in those who reveal secrets, for he cannot safely reveal Himself to such persons. . . . If a person understands God . . . and the Lord reveals anything to that individual no matter what, unless he gives per-

FOR KATHY

BY ELEANOR ALLETTA CHAFFEE

*Why aren't you asleep?  
You've had your warm milk,  
Your story of castles,  
The princess in silk.  
Your toes have been counted,  
Your songs have been sung;  
Across snowy sheets  
Your blanket is flung.  
Why aren't you asleep?  
Because like small birds  
I wanted again  
Your wonderful words. . . .*

mission to disclose it, it is locked up in eternal silence." (JD, 4:287f.)

The youthful and impulsive Joseph Smith was sometimes lax in this regard, and we all know how terribly he suffered for it in the case of the 116 pages. When he told a minister of the first vision, it only made trouble. Did he later deliberately disguise important revelations to keep them from the world? The code names occasionally used in the Doctrine and Covenants to designate persons and things show that (speaking by revelation) he did. If William Smith and Oliver Cowdery give confusing accounts of the first vision, we must remember that the Prophet knew from the first that those men were not to be trusted with too much information. The vanity and ambition of Cowdery were rebuked as early as 1829 (D&C 9), and George Albert Smith, Sr. commenting on "the conduct of William Smith in the days of Joseph and afterwards," describes it as a



campaign "to annihilate and destroy the principles which the Prophet taught to the nations of the earth." (JD 5:101f.) Were such men to be trusted with a full account of the first vision before it was officially given to the world?

Constantly beset by the designing and over-curious, Joseph Smith was often obliged to put his questioners off, just as the Lord himself did. Whether it was the sly schoolmen ever striving to catch him in a contradiction or his earnest disciples seeking to know the mysteries, Jesus would put them off, sometimes with a flat rebuke, sometimes with half-answers, but most often with words of hidden meaning: "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!" As a result, people were constantly puzzled and offended by what he taught them—his disciples wrangled, and the public rioted. The trouble was, as Brigham Young often points out, that Christ was speaking of the things of eternity to people wholly in thrall to the things of this world. It was utterly impossible to understand the Son without the spirit of revelation from the Father. Once one has that spirit, the truth of things is made clear no matter how deplorable the state of the documents may be; without it, all the "scholarship" in the world is of no avail to determine what really happened.

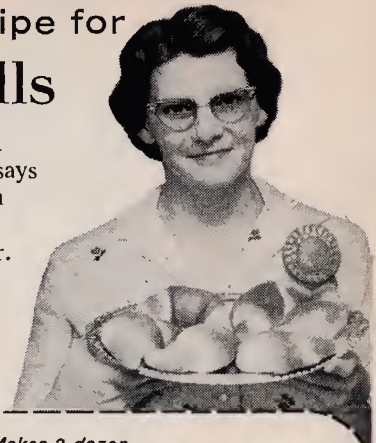
**FOOTNOTES**

- <sup>76</sup>Weekly Visitor, London, 1841, p. 61 (Hist. Off. 089.1 #3391).
- <sup>77</sup>J. A. Clark, *Gleanings by the Way* (Philadelphia: W. Simon, 1842), pp. 222ff.
- <sup>78</sup>Cit. *Missouri Intelligencer & Boone's Lick Advertiser*, April 13, 1833. (Hist. Off. 089.1 #10767.)
- <sup>79</sup>*Jeffersonian Republican*, Mo., Aug. 17, 1833, p. 8.
- <sup>80</sup>*Mo. Intell. & Boone's Lick Adv.*, Aug. 10, 1833.
- <sup>81</sup>A. Majors, *op. cit.*, p. 50.
- <sup>82</sup>A mimeographed sheet circulated by Mr. & Mrs. Jerald Tanner, 319 No. 5th West, S.L.C.
- <sup>83</sup>*Deseret News*, Sat., May 15, 1852, Vol. II, No. 14.
- <sup>84</sup>Schaff-Herzog, *Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, I, 174-6.
- <sup>85</sup>Ps. viii, 5. Most commentators interpret the Elohim of Gen. xxxii, 28-30 as "the angel."

*We love peace, as we abhor pusillanimity; but not peace at any price. There is a peace more destructive of the manhood of living man war is destructive of his material body. Chains are worse than bayonets.*  
—Douglas Jerrold

## Gold Ribbon Cook at Arizona State Fair gives you her winning recipe for Best Crescent Rolls

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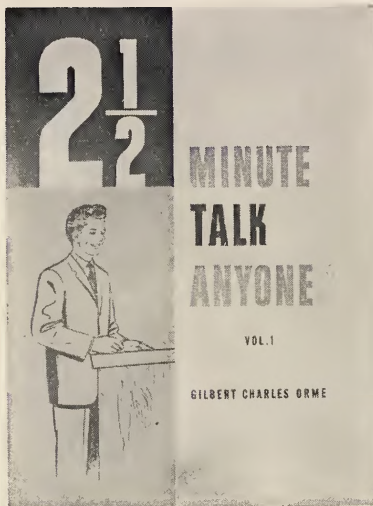
- $\frac{3}{4}$  cup milk
- $\frac{1}{4}$  cup sugar
- $\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoon salt
- $\frac{1}{4}$  cup very warm water
- 1 package or cake Fleischmann's Yeast, active dry or compressed
- $\frac{1}{4}$  cup Planters Peanut Oil
- 3 cups sifted flour (about)

Scald milk; stir in sugar and salt; cool to lukewarm. Measure very warm water into large bowl. Sprinkle or crumble in Fleischmann's Yeast; stir to dissolve. Stir in lukewarm milk mixture, Planters Peanut Oil and  $1\frac{1}{2}$  cups sifted flour; beat until smooth. Stir in remaining flour to make soft dough. Turn onto lightly floured board; knead until

smooth, about 8 minutes. Place in greased bowl; turn once to grease top. Cover; let rise in warm place, free from draft, until doubled in bulk, about 1 hour. Punch dough down; divide in half. Roll each piece into 12-inch circle. Cut into 12 pie-shaped pieces. Roll up from rounded edge. Place on greased baking sheet, point underneath. Cover; let rise in warm place until doubled, about 45 minutes. Bake at 425°F. 12-15 minutes until golden brown. Brush with melted margarine.



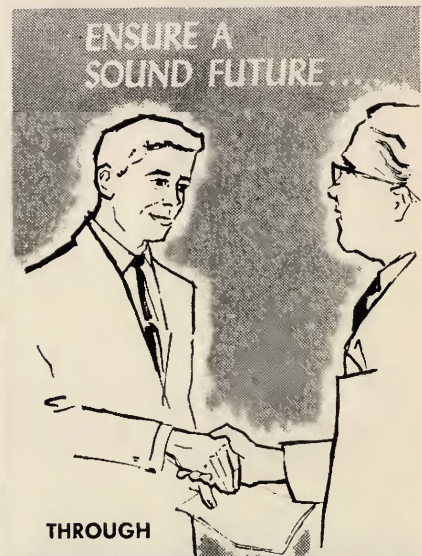
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