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The Cowdery Conundrum: Oliver's Aborted Attempt to Describe Joseph Smith's First Vision in 1834 and 1835

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THE COWDERY CONUNDRUM: OLIVER'S ABORTED ATTEMPT TO DESCRIBE JOSEPH SMITH'S FIRST VISION IN 1834 AND 1835

Roger Nicholson

Abstract: In 1834, Oliver Cowdery began publishing a history of the Church in installments in the pages of the Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate. The first installment talks of the religious excitement and events that ultimately led to Joseph Smith's First Vision at age 14. However, in the subsequent installment published two months later, Oliver claims that he made a mistake, correcting Joseph's age from 14 to 17 and failing to make any direct mention of the First Vision. Oliver instead tells the story of Moroni's visit, thus making it appear that the religious excitement led to Moroni's visit.

This curious account has been misunderstood by some to be evidence that the "first" vision that Joseph claimed was actually that of the angel Moroni and that Joseph invented the story of the First Vision of the Father and Son at a later time. However, Joseph wrote an account of his First Vision in 1832 in which he stated that he saw the Lord, and there is substantial evidence that Oliver had this document in his possession at the time that he wrote his history of the Church. This essay demonstrates the correlations between Joseph Smith's 1832 First Vision account, Oliver's 1834/1835 account, and Joseph's 1835 journal entry on the same subject. It is clear that not only did Oliver have Joseph's history in his possession but that he used Joseph's 1832 account as a basis for his own account. This essay also shows that Oliver knew of the First Vision and attempted to obliquely refer to the event several times in his second installment before continuing with his narrative of Moroni's visit.

Joseph's Early Writings about the First Vision

Joseph Smith made his first known attempt to write a history of the Church in 1832. Some of the account was written in Joseph's own hand and the rest by Frederick G. Williams. Joseph's history describes his first vision, Moroni's visit, the loss of the 116 pages of manuscript, and the arrival of Oliver Cowdery. Joseph never completed it beyond that point, and it was never published during his lifetime.

A few years later, in 1835, Joseph wrote an account of his First Vision in his journal. He wrote about how he described the vision to a visitor, a non-Mormon stranger, who had stopped by his home. This is the second known account of the vision written in Joseph's own hand. Neither the 1832 account nor the 1835 account appear to have received any public circulation. The formal account of the vision would not be written until 1838. This is the account contained in the Pearl of Great Price.

Between 1832 and 1835, Oliver Cowdery, as editor of the *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* (hereafter *Messenger and Advocate*), determined that he would write an account of the history of the Church and publish it in installments. This account is both curious and confusing because the first and second installments describe clearly recognizable events leading up to Joseph's First Vision and Moroni's visit, but they do not mention the actual visit of the Father and Son. Taken together, the first two installments seem to imply that Joseph's "first" vision was that of Moroni. For example, the Wikipedia article, "First Vision," summarizes the Cowdery account as follows:

Therefore, according to Cowdery, the religious confusion led Smith to pray in his bedroom, late on the night of September 23, 1823, after the others had gone to sleep, to know which of the competing denominations was correct and whether "a Supreme

being did exist.” In response, an angel appeared and granted him forgiveness of his sins. The remainder of the story roughly parallels Smith’s later description of a visit by an angel in 1823 who told him about the Golden Plates. Thus, Cowdery’s account, containing a single vision, differs from Smith’s 1832 account, which contains two separate visions, one in 1821 prompted by religious confusion (the First Vision) and a separate one regarding the plates on September 22, 1822.¹

This summary, of course, is not consistent with the story of the First Vision and Moroni’s visit as two distinct events that Joseph described only two years earlier, nor does it match the account that he wrote in late 1835, less than a year after Oliver’s account was published. What, then, are we to make of Oliver’s convoluted account? Does it really describe a “single vision” as the Wikipedia article claims?

Oliver’s account does indeed raise some questions. Was Oliver unaware of Joseph’s First Vision? Was Oliver in possession of Joseph’s 1832 history? If so, why did Oliver not include the vision in his own history? The answers to these questions may be deduced by examining and comparing Joseph’s 1832 history with Oliver’s 1834/1835 history and with Joseph’s subsequent 1835 journal entry.

Oliver Cowdery’s 1834 History of the Church

In October 1834, Oliver Cowdery, as the editor of the first issue of the *Messenger and Advocate*, talked of the periodical’s intent to document the history of the Church. “We have thought that

1 *Wikipedia*, s.v. “First Vision,” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Vision as of 27 October 2013. Wikipedia articles are often modified, and this text is subject to change. The date “1821” referred to with respect to Joseph’s 1832 account is based upon the insertion by Frederick G. Williams of the phrase “in the 16th year of my age,” thus indicating that Joseph was 15 years of age rather than 14. Joseph, however, later corrects his age to 14 in his 1835 journal entry.

a full history of the rise of the church of the Latter Day Saints, and the most interesting parts of its progress, to the present time, would be worthy the perusal of the Saints.”² In order to ensure its accuracy, Oliver went on to assure his readers that “our brother J. SMITH jr. has offered to assist us. Indeed, there are many items connected with the fore part of this subject that render his labor indispensable. With his labor and with authentic documents now in our possession, we hope to render this a pleasing and agreeable narrative, well worth the examination and perusal of the Saints.”³

What might these “authentic documents” now in the possession of Cowdery have consisted of? One document that we know existed at that time is Joseph’s 1832 attempt at writing the history of the Church, which includes the first known description of his First Vision. It would have made perfect sense for Joseph to give Oliver this document.

Surprisingly, it appears that Joseph was unaware of Oliver’s intent to publicly document the history of the Church in the pages of the *Messenger and Advocate* until he read Oliver’s statement in the October issue of his intention to do so. In a letter from Joseph to Oliver, which was included in the December 1834 issue of the *Messenger and Advocate*, Joseph is clearly interested in accuracy.

BROTHER O. Cowdery:

Having learned from the first No. of the *Messenger and Advocate*, that you were, not only about to “give a history of the rise and progress of the church of the Latter Day Saints;” but, that said “history would necessarily embrace my life and character,” I have been

2 Introduction of Oliver Cowdery to W.W. Phelps, in *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate*, 1/1 (Oct. 1834), 13. http://en.fairmormon.org/Messenger_and_Advocate/1/1. Hereafter this source will be abbreviated to *Messenger and Advocate*.

3 Cowdery to Phelps, *Messenger and Advocate*, 1/1 (Oct. 1834), 13.

induced to give you the time and place of my birth; as I have learned that many of the opposers of those principles which I have held forth to the world, profess a personal acquaintance with me, though when in my presence, represent me to be another person in age, education, and stature, from what I am.⁴

Joseph was clearly concerned that accurate information be provided about his early life, and specifically that he be accurately represented regarding his “age, education, and stature.” Joseph provides this information in his 1832 history, and his spelling and lack of punctuation seems to underscore the point. Joseph notes that his family,

being in indigent circumstances were obliged to labour hard for the support of a large Family having nine children and as it required their exertions of all that were able to render any assistance for the support of the Family therefore we were deprived of the bennifit of an education suffice it to say I was nearly instructtid in reading and writing and the ground <rules> of Arithmatic which const[it]uted my whole literary acquirements.⁵

It is therefore highly likely that Joseph provided Oliver with his 1832 history to use as a basis for publishing his new history. Oliver, as Joseph’s scribe, had plenty of experience rewriting and expanding upon Joseph’s words.

4 Joseph Smith to Oliver Cowdery, in *Messenger and Advocate*, 1/3 ((Dec. 1834), 40, http://en.fairmormon.org/Messenger_and_Advocate/1/3.

5 Joseph Smith, “A History of the life of Joseph Smith Jr.,” *History*, [ca. summer 1832]; handwriting of Frederick G. Williams and Joseph Smith; six pages; in Joseph Smith Letterbook 1, Joseph Smith Collection, Church History Library, 2. Original spelling retained.

Oliver's First Installment: Events Leading Up to the Vision

When Oliver Cowdery published his first installment of the history of the Church in the December 1834 issue of the *Messenger and Advocate*, he appeared to be relating a story that is very familiar to all Latter-day Saints today. Oliver writes his history in the form of a series of letters to W. W. Phelps. He begins by stating,

You will recollect that I informed you, in my letter published in the first No. of the *Messenger and Advocate*, that this history would necessarily embrace the life and character of our esteemed friend and brother, J. Smith JR. one of the presidents of this church, and for information on that part of the subject, I refer you to his communication of the same, published in this paper. I shall, therefore, pass over that, till I come to the 15th year of his life.⁶

Notice that Oliver has clearly established Joseph's age as fourteen. In his 1832 history, Joseph says that "from the age of twelve years to fifteen I pondered many things in my heart," and that he approached the Lord in prayer "in the 16th year of my age." The phrase "the 16th year of my age" was added between the lines of Joseph's handwriting by Frederick G. Williams *after* the account had been written, as an afterthought. Why would Oliver establish Joseph's age as fourteen rather than fifteen if he possessed the 1832 document? Joseph's letter to Oliver showed that he was quite obviously interested in correcting any inaccuracies regarding his early life. Thus Joseph stated, "I have been induced to give you the time and place of my birth." Joseph appears to have corrected his age.

6 Oliver Cowdery to W.W. Phelps, in *Messenger and Advocate*, 1/3 (Dec. 1834), 42.

Oliver's account continues, "There was a great awakening, or excitement raised on the subject of religion, and much enquiry for the word of life. Large additions were made to the Methodist, Presbyterian, and Baptist churches." Oliver describes the religious fervor that gripped the region:

[A] general struggle was made by the leading characters of the different sects, for proselytes. Then strife seemed to take the place of that apparent union and harmony which had previously characterized the moves and exhortations of the old professors, and a cry—I am right—you are wrong—was introduced in their stead.⁷

This, of course, is the familiar story leading up to the First Vision. Joseph wrote in his 1832 account that

my intimate acquaintance with those of different denominations led me to marvel exceedingly for I discovered that they did not adorn their profession by a holy walk and Godly conversation.⁸

Oliver next describes the effect of the religious fervor on Joseph's family:

In this general strife for followers, his mother, one sister, and two of his natural brothers, were persuaded to unite with the Presbyterians. This gave opportunity for further reflection; and as will be seen in the sequel, laid a foundation, or was one means of laying a foundation for the attestation of the truths, or professions of truth, contained in that record called the word of God.⁹

7 Cowdery to Phelps, *Messenger and Advocate*, 1/3 (Dec. 1834), 42.

8 Smith, "A History of the life of Joseph Smith Jr," 2. Spelling has been modernized. Original spelling: "my intimate acquaintance with those of differant denominations led me to marvel exceedingly for I discovered that <they did not adorn> instead of adorning their profession by a holy walk and Godly conversation."

9 Cowdery to Phelps, *Messenger and Advocate*, 1/3 (Dec. 1834), 42.

Again, this is completely consistent with the events leading up to the First Vision. The “sequel” that Oliver refers to is the next installment of this history in the *Messenger and Advocate*, and he is alluding to a forthcoming description of a *foundational event* in the history of the Church.

Joseph’s 1832 history does not state that his family members joined the Presbyterians, though there is a possible, aborted attempt to do so. In the 1832 history, Joseph originally writes that he:

could find none that would believe the heavenly vision nevertheless I pondered these things in my heart about that time my mother and”¹⁰

Without completing the sentence, Joseph crosses out the phrase “about that time my mother and,” and replaces it with the phrase “but after many days I fell into transgression.” What was Joseph about to say about his family? Since Oliver was very specific about Joseph’s family members uniting with the Presbyterians, he had to have obtained the information from Joseph. Could the aborted phrase have been intended to refer to “about that time” that his mother and other family members were persuaded to unite with the Presbyterians? It would certainly fit into the narrative.

Oliver continues his history by stating that the profession of godliness should have a “benign influence upon the heart.”

After strong solicitations to unite with one of those different societies, and seeing the apparent proselyting disposition manifested with equal warmth from

10 Smith, “A History of the life of Joseph Smith Jr,” 3-4. Spelling has been modernized. Original spelling: “and my soul was filled with love and for many days I could rejoice with great Joy and the Lord was with me but could find none that would believe the hevnlly vision nevertheless I pondered these things in my heart ~~about that time my mother and~~ but after many days I fell into transgressions and sinned in many things.”

each, his mind was led to more seriously contemplate the importance of a move of this kind.... To profess godliness without its benign influence upon the heart, was a thing so foreign from his feelings, that his spirit was not at rest day nor night.¹¹

Compare this to Joseph's 1832 account, in which he talks of the influence that a belief in God should have upon the heart.

When I considered upon these things my heart exclaimed well hath the wise man said it is a fool that saith in his heart there is no God. My heart exclaimed all these bear testimony and bespeak an omnipotent and omnipresent power a being who maketh Laws and decreeth and bindeth all things in their bounds who filleth Eternity who was and is and will be from all Eternity to Eternity.¹²

Oliver then discusses the effect of the religious contention upon Joseph's mind, noting that Joseph feared that "serious consequences" would result if he did not resolve this issue.

To unite with a society professing to be built upon the only sure foundation, and that profession be a vain one, was calculated, in its very nature, the more it was contemplated, the more to arouse the mind to the serious consequences of moving hastily, in a course fraught with eternal realities.¹³

11 Cowdery to Phelps, *Messenger and Advocate*, 1/3 (Dec. 1834), 43.

12 Smith, "A History of the life of Joseph Smith Jr," 3. Spelling has been modernized. Original spelling: "when I considered upon these things my heart exclaimed well hath the wise man said ~~the~~ <it is a> fool <that> saith in his heart there is no God my heart exclaimed all all these bear testimony and bespeak an omnipotent and omnipresant power a being who makith Laws and decreeth and bindeth all things in their bounds who filleth Eternity who was and is and will be from all Eternity to Eternity."

13 Cowdery to Phelps, *Messenger and Advocate*, 1/3 (Dec. 1834), 43.

Joseph's 1832 account talks of his mind being "distressed" because he was "convicted" of his sins.

[M]y mind became exceedingly distressed for I became convicted of my sins, and by searching the scriptures I found that mankind did not come unto the Lord, but that they had apostatized from the true and living faith, and there was no society or denomination that built upon the gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the new testament and I felt to mourn for my own sins and for the sins of the world.¹⁴

Oliver provides this conclusion in preparation for the next installment:

In this situation where could he go? If he went to one he was told they were right, and all others were wrong— If to another, the same was heard from those: All professed to be the true church; and if not they were certainly hypocritical.... [A] proof from some source was wanting to settle the mind and give peace to the agitated bosom. It is not frequent that the *minds* of men are exercised with proper determination relative to obtaining a certainty of the things of God.¹⁵

Latter-day Saints who are familiar with the account of events leading up to Joseph's First Vision as they are described in the Pearl of Great Price will clearly recognize Oliver's story so far. Oliver has quite accurately and thoroughly described the

14 Smith, "A History of the life of Joseph Smith Jr," 2. Spelling has been modernized. Original spelling: "my mind become excedingly distressed for I become convicted of my sins and by searching the scriptures I found that ~~mand~~ <mankind> did not come unto the Lord but that they had apostatised from the true and liveing faith and there was no society or denomination that built upon the gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the new testament and I felt to mourn for my own sins and for the sins of the world."

15 Cowdery to Phelps, *Messenger and Advocate*, 1/3 (Dec. 1834), 43.

events in Joseph's life that led him to call upon God, the details of which are entirely consistent with Joseph's 1832 description as well as matching detail of Joseph's later descriptions of the events leading up to the First Vision. Oliver is clearly priming his readers for the next installment, which the present-day reader might assume will reveal the actual details of Joseph's First Vision.

This was not, however, to be the case.

Oliver's Second Installment: An Abrupt Change in Direction

When Oliver published his second installment two months later, in February 1835, he did a very curious thing — *he skips over the description of the actual First Vision*. Oliver even “corrects” Joseph's age from fourteen to seventeen, then proceeds to tell the story of Moroni's visit. The story of Moroni's visit is, of course, also included in Joseph's 1832 account.

Oliver begins the February 1835 installment with an apology and a statement that “it was not my wish to be understood that I could not give the leading items of every important occurrence.”

In my last, published in the 3d No. of the Advocate I apologized for the brief manner in which I should be obliged to give, in many instances, the history of this church. Since then yours of Christmas has been received. It was not my wish to be understood that I could not give the leading items of every important occurrence, at least so far as would effect my duty to my fellowmen, in such as contained important information upon the subject of doctrine, and as would render it intelligibly plain; but as there are, in a great house, many vessels, so in the history of a work of this magnitude, many items which would be interesting to those who follow, are forgotten. In fact, I deem every manifestation of the

Holy Spirit, dictating the hearts of the saints in the way of righteousness, to be of importance, and this is one reason why I plead an apology.¹⁶

Joseph no doubt recognized Oliver's detailed description of the events leading up to Joseph's 1832 description of his vision. During the intervening eight weeks, did Joseph indicate to Oliver that he was not ready to publish the details of his theophany? Something happened that caused Oliver to change his approach, for after he apologized for his apparent haste in documenting the history, he wrote:

You will recollect that I mentioned the time of a religious excitement, in Palmyra and vicinity to have been in the 15th year of our brother J. Smith Jr's, age—that was an error in the type—it should have been in the 17th.—You will please remember this correction, as it will be necessary for the full understanding of what will follow in time. This would bring the date down to the year 1823.¹⁷

The claimed “error in type” allowed Oliver to skip from Joseph's history at age 14 to age 16, although in 1823, Joseph would have actually been 17. He skipped over Joseph's 1832 account of seeing the Lord, and moves straight to Joseph's vision of Moroni.

Not only does Oliver skip the First Vision, but he also now seems to feel it necessary to *minimize the importance* of the religious excitement that he so thoroughly described in his first installment, stating,

I do not deem it to be necessary to write further on the subject of this excitement. It is doubted by many

16 Oliver Cowdery to W.W. Phelps, *Messenger and Advocate*, 1/5 (Feb. 1835), 77-78, http://en.fairmormon.org/Messenger_and_Advocate/1/5.

17 Cowdery to Phelps, *Messenger and Advocate*, 1/5 (Feb. 1835), 78.

whether any real or essential good ever resulted from such excitements, while others advocate their propriety with warmth.¹⁸

After taking great pains to describe the religious excitement leading up to the significant *foundational event* alluded to in the previous installment, Oliver is now *diminishing* its importance before he continues his story. Oliver appears to be doing what we would today call “damage control.”

Yet, before fully proceeding with a description of Moroni’s visit, Oliver apparently feels that he cannot ignore the event completely and obliquely continues to describe events related to the First Vision, only now describing something that *has already occurred in the past*.

Oliver remarks on Joseph’s desire to know if a “Supreme being” existed during the period of religious excitement, stating,

And it is only necessary for me to say, that while this excitement continued, he continued to call upon the Lord in secret for a full manifestation of divine approbation, and for, to him, the all important information, if a Supreme being did exist, to have an assurance that he was accepted of him.¹⁹

Oliver then alludes to the First Vision by saying,

This, most assuredly, was correct—it was right. The Lord has said, long since, and his word remains steadfast, that for him who knocks it shall be opened, & whosoever will, may come and partake of the waters of life freely.²⁰

18 Cowdery to Phelps, *Messenger and Advocate*, 1/5 (Feb. 1835), 78.

19 Cowdery to Phelps, *Messenger and Advocate*, 1/5 (Feb. 1835), 78.

20 Cowdery to Phelps, *Messenger and Advocate*, 1/5 (Feb. 1835), 78.

Oliver is saying that something of significance happened in Joseph's life *prior* to the events that Oliver would be describing next, and he assures the reader that "this, most assuredly, was correct." Joseph asked, and the Lord answered.

"With a Joy Unspeakable"

Still not satisfied that he has adequately covered the period of the vision, Oliver continues to elaborate:

The Lord never said—"Come unto me, all ye that labor, and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest," to turn a deaf ear to those who were weary, when they call upon him. He never said, by the mouth of the prophet—"Ho, every one that thirsts, come ye to the waters," without passing it as a firm decree, at the same time, that he that should after come, should be filled with a joy unspeakable.²¹

Note Oliver's use of the phrase "with a joy unspeakable" in association with Joseph receiving knowledge from the Lord. In his November 1835 journal entry, Joseph actually uses Oliver's words in his 1835 First Vision description, in which he states, "a pillar of fire appeared above my head, it presently rested down upon me, and filled me with joy unspeakable."²²

Not only did Joseph associate the phrase with the First Vision in his 1835 account, but he uses the word *joy* only a single time in his 1832 history, and it too is associated only

21 Cowdery to Phelps, *Messenger and Advocate*, 1/5 (Feb. 1835), 78.

22 Joseph Smith, Jr., "Sketch Book for the use of Joseph Smith, jr.," *Journal*, Sept. 1835–Apr. 1836; handwriting of Warren Parrish, an unidentified scribe, Sylvester Smith, Frederick G. Williams, Warren Cowdery, Joseph Smith, and Oliver Cowdery; 195 pages; Joseph Smith Collection, Church History Library, 25. Spelling modernized. Original spelling: "a pillar of fire appeared above my head, it presently rested down upon my <me> head, and filled me with joy unspeakable...." <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/journal-1835-1836?dm=image-and-text&zm=zoom-inner&tm=expanded&p=25&s=undefined&sm=none>.

with the description of the First Vision. Upon concluding his description of the First Vision, Joseph states that “my soul was filled with love and for many days I could rejoice with great Joy and the Lord was with me.”²³ The phrase “joy unspeakable” is never associated with Moroni’s visit in any of these accounts. Clearly, Joseph associated such joy with the experience of the First Vision.

Oliver continues with yet another example:

Neither did he manifest by the Spirit to John upon the isle—“Let him that is athirst, come,” and command him to send the same abroad, under any other consideration, than that “whosoever would, might take the water of life freely,” to the remotest ages of time, or while there was a sinner upon his footstool.²⁴

Here Oliver is talking about a manifestation “by the Spirit” to the apostle John when he sought guidance from the Lord. Oliver is referring to the vision that John had of Jesus Christ on the Isle of Patmos. Once again, Oliver is indicating that *the Lord responds* to those who seek guidance. This is yet another allusion to Joseph’s First Vision experience.

Finally, after what appears to be an extended effort to do his best to describe the importance of the First Vision without actually giving any details about the vision itself, Oliver states, “But to proceed with my narrative....”²⁵ Oliver then proceeds to describe the visit of Moroni to Joseph Smith, which continues to correlate with Joseph’s 1832 history. Joseph writes,

I fell into transgressions and sinned in many things which brought a wound upon my soul and there were many things which transpired that cannot be

23 Smith, “A History of the life of Joseph Smith Jr,” 3.

24 Cowdery to Phelps, *Messenger and Advocate*, 1/5 (Feb. 1835), 78.

25 Cowdery to Phelps, *Messenger and Advocate*, 1/5 (Feb. 1835), 78.

written and my Fathers family have suffered many persecutions and afflictions and it came to pass when I was seventeen years of age I called again upon the Lord and he shewed unto me a heavenly vision for behold an angel of the Lord came and stood before me.²⁶

According to the 1832 history, Joseph once again, several years after having received a forgiveness of his sins during the First Vision, felt a need to seek a forgiveness of his sins. Oliver writes,

On the evening of the 21st of September, 1823, previous to retiring to rest, our brother's mind was unusually wrought up on the subject which had so long agitated his mind—his heart was drawn out in fervent prayer, and his whole soul was so lost to every thing of a temporal nature, that earth, to him, had lost its claims, and all he desired was to be prepared in heart to commune with some kind messenger who could communicate to him the desired information of his acceptance with God.... While continuing in prayer for a manifestation in some way that his sins were forgiven; endeavoring to exercise faith in the scriptures, on a sudden a light like that of day, only of a purer and far more glorious appearance and brightness, burst into the room.²⁷

Joseph's 1832 account also acknowledges that Moroni conveyed a forgiveness of sins, noting that "he said the Lord had forgiven me my sins and he revealed unto me that in the Town of

26 Smith, "A History of the life of Joseph Smith Jr," 4. Spelling has been modernized. Original spelling: "I fell into transgressions and sinned in many things which brought a wound upon my soul and there were many things which transpired that cannot be written and my Fathers family have suffered many persicutions and afflictions and it came to pass when I was seventeen years of age I called again upon the Lord and he shewed unto me a heavenly vision for behold an angel of the Lord came and stood before me...."

27 Cowdery to Phelps, *Messenger and Advocate*, 1/5 (Feb. 1835), 78-79.

Manchester Ontario County N.Y. there was plates of gold upon which there was engravings.”²⁸ Oliver said that the angel “then proceeded and gave a general account of the promises made to the fathers, and also gave a history of the aborigines of this country, and said they were literal descendants of Abraham.”²⁹

Why Did Oliver Not Mention the First Vision?

There is a substantial correlation between Oliver’s history and Joseph’s 1832 history, indicating that Oliver had it in his possession. The 1832 history most definitely describes the First Vision. Why, then, did Oliver give such an accurate description leading up to the First Vision and then not mention the vision itself? It seems, based upon his efforts to avoid describing the vision in the second installment, that he understood the importance of the event but was not allowed to describe it specifically. One possibility is that Joseph saw where Oliver was going with the first installment of the story and then decided that he was not ready to have Oliver introduce the story of his First Vision publicly. At this time, the story of Moroni’s visit and the coming forth of the Book of Mormon was already well known among Church membership. It would be expected that this event be included. There is clearly no reason for him to have skipped such an important foundational event in the prophet’s life unless the Prophet requested it of him. By 1835 Joseph was clearly relating the story of the First Vision to others, but the story of the First Vision would not become formally published until several years later.

Prior to the discovery of Joseph’s 1832 history and 1835 journal entries, Oliver’s unusual 1834/1835 account had been used by critics as evidence that Joseph made up the story of the First Vision, since, when the two installments are considered

28 Smith, “A History of the life of Joseph Smith Jr,” 4. Original spelling retained.

29 Cowdery to Phelps, *Messenger and Advocate*, 1/5 (Feb. 1835), 80.

together, it appears that Oliver is relating the religious excitement to Moroni's visit. It has been claimed that Joseph did not solidify the details of the First Vision story until 1838 in order to establish himself more firmly as prophet during a Church leadership crisis in Kirtland. However, a careful look at Oliver's history in conjunction with Joseph's 1832 and 1835 accounts shows that Oliver was quite consistent with the details. Oliver, it appears, knew more than he was allowed to write about at the time.

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