

## **Chapter 5**

### **The First Vision**

#### **Alleged angelic visitations contemporary with Joseph Smith**

It is true that a number of other figures contemporary with Joseph Smith (e.g., Alexander Campbell) claimed to have had been visited by angels (p. 70-71). Notwithstanding, if this is to cast suspicion on the authenticity of the First Vision, then the portrayal of Jesus in the New Testament must have suspicion thrown onto it, too. Bart D. Ehrman writes:<sup>1</sup>

##### **One remarkable life**

From the beginning, his mother knew that he was no ordinary person. Prior to his birth, a heavenly figure appeared to her, announcing that her son would not be a mere mortal but would himself be divine. This prophecy was confirmed by the miraculous character of his birth, a birth accompanied by supernatural signs. The boy was already recognised as a spiritual authority in his youth; his discussions with recognised experts showed his superior knowledge of all things religious. As an adult he left home to engage in an itinerant preaching ministry. He went from village to town with his message of good news, proclaiming that people should forgo their concerns for the material things of this life, such as how they should dress and what they should eat. They should instead be concerned with their eternal souls.

He gathered around him a number of disciples who were amazed by his teaching and his flawless character. They became convinced that he was no ordinary man but was the Son of God. Their faith received striking confirmation in the miraculous things that he did. He could reportedly predict the future, heal the sick, cast out demons, and raise the dead. Not everyone proved friendly, however. At the end of his life, his enemies trumped up charges against him, and he was placed on trial before Roman authorities for crimes against the state.

Even after he departed this realm, however, he did not forsake his devoted followers. Some claimed that he had ascended bodily into heaven; others said that he had appeared to them, alive, afterward, that they had talked with him and touched him and become convinced that he could not be bound by death. A number of his followers spread the good news about this man, recounting what they had seen him say and do. Eventually some of these accounts came to be written down in books that circulated throughout the empire.

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<sup>1</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *A brief introduction to the New Testament* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 15-16

But I doubt that you have ever read them. In fact, I suspect you have never heard the name of this miracle working “Son of God.” The man I have been referring to is the great neo-Pythagorean teacher and pagan holy man of the first century C.E., **Apollonius of Tyana**, a worshipper of the Roman gods, whose life and teachings are still available for us in the writings of his later (third century) follower Philostratus, in his book *The Life of Apollonius*.

## The Age of Joseph Smith

Joseph Smith reached his fourteenth birthday on December 23, 1819. In the familiar 1838 First Vision account, he said that he was “at this time in my fifteenth year,” and the Orson Hyde account uses these same words (meaning Joseph was fourteen years old). A few paragraphs later in the 1838 account, Joseph said, “I was an obscure boy only between fourteen and fifteen years of age <or thereabouts,>,” the last two words being inserted in the manuscript above the line, possibly at his direction, but deleted before it was published in the *Times and Seasons* in 1841. The words “or thereabouts” should not be taken necessarily to contradict the previous statement of his age when the vision occurred, but, rather, simply as part of a very careful approach to writing history. As edited and then published in 1831, the account reflected what Joseph Smith intended the public to understand.

In three other accounts, Joseph simply said (or was reported to have said) that he was “about fourteen years old” when the First Vision was received, when God first revealed himself to him, “a mere boy” (1835 account) and the 1842 Wentworth letter account says that Joseph was “about fourteen years of age” when he began to reflect upon the importance of his soul’s future state. These uses of the word “about” remind us that the validity of his experience does not hinge on knowing the precise day, month, or year on which that vision occurred, and in light of this slight uncertainty it is interesting to note that the scientifically minded Orson Pratt allowed in 1840 that Joseph Smith was “somewhere about fourteen or fifteen” when his spiritual awakening began.

The only account that cannot be squared exactly with his having been fourteen when the First Vision was received is the earliest draft narrative. There, Joseph Smith wrote that “at about the age of twelve years” his mind became concerned “with regard to all important concerns” of his immortal soul. He then became aggrieved that the various denominations did not “adorn their profession by a holy walk” as required by the Bible, and he pondered in his heart many things concerning the darkness of the world for three years, “from the age of twelve years to fifteen,” culminating with the vision in that year, as he says, when he was “in the 16<sup>th</sup> year of my age” (that is, fifteen years old). Here we learn that Joseph’s personal spiritual concerns began earlier (at the age of twelve) than he might otherwise have supposed, and that his discontent over the contentions, divisions, and abominations around him grew over a period of two to three years. That, in preparing his 1832 draft, he might have thought of those intense struggles as having lasted a year longer than they actually had is readily understandable. After more careful reflection he would consistently report that the answer came in his fifteenth year.

In sum, this examination leads to the conclusion that the First Vision, in all probability, occurred in spring 1820, when Joseph Smith was fourteen years of age. The preponderance of the evidence supports that conclusion.<sup>2</sup>

## **No record for twenty years?**

There are many allusions to the First Vision pre-dating 1832, let alone 1838. For example, the 1833 *A Book of Commandments* has a verse contained therein that mentions Joseph being redeemed of his sins by God, a strong allusion to the First Vision where this occurred

For, after that it truly was manifested unto this first elder, that he had received a remission of his sins; he was entangled again in the vanities of the world; But after truly repenting, God ministered unto him by an holy angel, whose countenance was as lightning, and whose garments were pure and white above all whiteness, and gave unto him commandments which inspired him from on high, and gave unto him power, by the means which were before prepared, that he should translate a book [i.e., the Book of Mormon] (*Book of Commandments* XXIV:6-7).

This revelation is dated June **1830**, eight years before the First Vision account that is canonised in the *Pearl of Great Price* and two years before the first version of the First Vision.

Furthermore, the gospels of the New Testament would not fare well with this criticism. After all, most scholars believe that both Matthew and Luke were written after 70 CE, about four decades after the events they describe occurred.

## **Only one Person appeared to Joseph Smith?**

It is true that the 1832 account mentions “the Lord” appearing to the Prophet, without any direct mention of God the Father. However, the authors critique of the apologetic used, that not mentioning something is not the same of something not having occurred, would destroy belief in the Bible. After all, in Matthew 28:5, one angel is mentioned at the tomb, while two are mentioned in John 20:12.

Moreover, they claim that “only” one person appeared to the Prophet in the 1832 account. This, however, is a non sequitur, for Joseph Smith did not claim that “only” Jesus appeared to him in the 1832 account of the First Vision.

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<sup>2</sup> James B. Allen and John W. Welch, “The appearance of the Father and the Son to Joseph Smith in 1820,” in *Opening the Heavens: Divine manifestations 1820-1844*, ed John W. Welch (Provo, Utah: BYU Press and Deseret Book, 2005), 35-76, here pp. 54-55

## Jesus as the Angel of the Lord

The authors claim that Joseph Smith denoting the Father and the Son as “angels,” and the apologetic use of Genesis 48:15-16 and the Angel of the Lord as weak, as “Joseph did not identify any of the personages who appeared to him as the Angel of the Lord” (p. 76). However, this ignores biblical scholarship that identifies *Mal`ak YHWH* with none other than YHWH, the God of the Old Testament, identified as Jesus Christ in the New Testament.

Most of the well-known angel stories in the Hebrew scriptures concern “the angel of the Lord,” which probably does not mean “an angel sent by the Lord,” but rather an appearance of the Lord Himself, a theophany. Before Samson was born, his parents had visions, the angel of the Lord appeared to his mother and she described him as a man of the *`elohim* whose appearance was like an angel of the *`elohim*. The pair eventually realised that the heavenly being, who refused to reveal his name, was the angel of the Lord. When they offered a sacrifice to the Lord, the angel went up to heaven in the flames (Judges 13). This could have been an appearance of the Lord, but the account is ambiguous. The story of Gideon is similar; the Lord and the angel of the Lord appear as two names for the same figure (Judges 6).

The same is true in Zechariah’s vision of heaven, when he was Joshua being given his vestments to serve as the high priest (Zechariah 3). The figure presiding in this scene has three names: the Lord, the angel of the Lord, and the Angel<sup>3</sup>

## Brigham Young and the First Vision

In order to show that the early leaders of the Church did not know much, if anything, about the First Vision, the authors quote Brigham Young in *Journal of Discourses* 1:171 on page 77:

But as it was in the days of the Savior, so was it in the advent of this new dispensation...The Lord did not come with the armies of heaven, in power and great glory...But He did send His angel to this same obscure person, Joseph Smith, jun.

Here we have it from the lips of Brigham Young that “The Lord did not come” to Joseph Smith, “but he did send his angel” to Joseph Smith, leading us to believe that the angel “informed him that he should not join any of the religious sects.”

Of course, according to Joseph Smith’s account of the First Vision, it was Jesus Christ who was informing him. So, we are to believe that Brigham Young didn’t understand

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<sup>3</sup> Margaret Barker, *An extraordinary gathering of angels* (London: MQ Publications, 2004), 266

what Joseph Smith claimed and he thought there was only an angel, not the Father and the Son.

However, let us look at the *entire* quotation from Brigham Young:

**The Lord did not come with the armies of heaven, in power and great glory, nor send His messengers panoplied with aught else than the truth of heaven, to communicate to the meek, the lowly, the youth of humble origin, the sincere enquirer 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; that they were following the precepts of men instead of the Lord Jesus; that He had a work for him to perform, inasmuch as he should prove faithful before Him.”**

So, now we get the full picture. Brigham Young doesn't say that the Lord didn't come ever; he says that He didn't come with the “armies of heaven, in power and great glory.” In other words, He didn't come with a bunch of pomp and circumstance. And, as a matter of fact, when you look closer with the entire quote, Brigham Young specifically says that the Lord did come. It was the Lord who informed him,” not the angel Moroni. Read the sentence, “But He did send His angel...AND [He, the Lord] informed him [Joseph Smith]...” So the quote from Brigham Young that Mike and Ann Thomas use takes on a whole new meaning when you look at the whole thing, a meaning that serves to show how little they truly know about “Mormonism.”