

## Beginnings: Myth and Reality

According to Joseph Smith, the experiences which led him to produce the Book of Mormon and then start a new church began in 1820 when he was fourteen years old. He began writing an official history of these events in 1838, some eighteen years later. This history was first published in the church's newspaper *Times and Seasons* beginning in March of 1842. It is this history which both the Mormon and RLDS churches have enshrined as their official story.

We cannot, therefore, overstate the importance of this story. It is the bedrock upon which both churches are built. It represents the “first cause” of all Mormon history. Many Mormons and RLDS alike are so familiar with this story that they can quote certain portions of it from memory, as if it were scripture.<sup>1</sup> Their children are taught it in Sunday school at very early ages. Utah Mormons act out certain portions of it in visitor centers throughout the world. It is their defining story—the common denominator for all followers of Joseph Smith.

Because Joseph Smith himself penned this story, its integrity is held as unimpeachable to most Latter Day Saints. They are satisfied that he was God's true prophet, and this represents their prophet's own true story. But in reality, his story *is* impeachable. In fact, practically all of the objective historical evidence from this time period testifies *against* his account. This information is so damaging that the leadership of both Mormon and RLDS churches have kept it suppressed, therefore keeping their membership in ignorance. And understandably so. The nature of the evidence is so startling that most Latter Day Saints cannot deal with it honestly. Most come to the conclusion that it was developed by either apostates or enemies of the church as a means of thwarting the true work of God, and so they dismiss it out of hand. But in so doing they also dismiss many testimonies from the very people who were instrumental in founding the new church, including Joseph Smith himself and members of his own family.

In this chapter I will begin by summarizing this most popular version of Joseph Smith's story, which I refer to as *Myth*. In the second part of the chapter I will present a variety of evidence from other historical sources which I call *Reality*. I will end with some observations in a *Summary and Conclusion*.

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1. To Mormons, Joseph's account actually *is* scripture. They have canonized it in their fourth book of scripture known as *The Pearl of Great Price* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1974). In addition to these *Writings of Joseph Smith*, *The Pearl of Great Price* also contains Joseph's *The Book of Abraham* which will be discussed in chapter 10.

## Myth <sup>2</sup>

### Joseph Smith's First Vision

Born in 1805 in Sharon, Vermont, Joseph Smith moved with his family to Palmyra, New York in 1815 at the age of nine. About five years later he describes a Christian revival which he says swept through this region. While he was impressed with the general excitement associated with this revival, he was also very much confused by the conflicting doctrines of the various denominations represented. This led Joseph into a period of "serious reflection" accompanied by "deep and often pungent" feelings.

In the spring of 1820, in the midst of this reflection, he became deeply impressed by James 1:5 "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him" (KJV). Based upon his present confusion, he felt that no one needed the wisdom of God any more than he did, and so decided to act upon this exhortation to ask of God for himself. So he went to a near-by grove where he could be by himself and began to offer up the desires of his heart. He claims this is the first time he had ever engaged in vocal prayer. Before long he was engulfed in a thick darkness and seized by a supernatural force which he felt was threatening his very existence. In desperation he called upon God for help. In Joseph's own words, here is what then happened.

"Just at this moment of great alarm, I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head, above the brightness of the sun; which descended gradually until it fell upon me. It no sooner appeared than I found myself delivered from the enemy which held me bound. 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 spake to me, calling me by name, and said, (pointing to the other) 'This is my beloved Son, hear him.'

"My object in going to inquire of the Lord was to know which of all the 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 who stood above me in the light, which of all the sects was right, (for at this time it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong), and which I should join.

"I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong, and the personage who addressed me said that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight; that those professors were all corrupt, 'they draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; they teach for doctrine the commandments of men, having a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof.' He again forbade me to join with any of them: and many other things did he say unto me which I cannot write at this time. When I came to myself again I found myself lying on my back, looking up into heaven."

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2. This account has been summarized from Joseph Smith's *History of the Church* (1838) as first published in the church's newspaper *Times and Seasons* where it was titled *History of Joseph Smith* 3:727-728, 748-749, 753-754, 771-773, 785-786, 801-804, 832-833, 853-854, 865-867, 884-885, 897-899, 915-917, 928-931, 943-945, 4:12-13. This history is also included in *RHC* vol. 1, ch. 1-6.

## The Golden Plates are Announced

For the next three-and-a-half years, due in large part to the persecution he claims he was experiencing for telling about his vision, he “fell into many foolish errors and displayed the weakness of youth and the corruption of human nature.” On the evening of September 21, 1823 he had gone to his bedroom to ask forgiveness for these sins when he had another visitation.

“I betook myself to prayer and supplication to almighty God for forgiveness of all my sins and follies, and also for a manifestation to me, that I might know of my state and standing before him: for I had full confidence in obtaining a divine manifestation as I previously had done.

“While I was thus in the act of calling upon God, I discovered a light appearing in the room which continued to increase until the room was lighter than at noonday, when immediately a personage appeared at my bedside standing in the air, for his feet did not touch the floor.

“He had on a loose robe of most exquisite whiteness. It was a whiteness beyond any thing earthly I had ever seen; nor do I believe that any earthly thing could be made to appear so exceedingly white and brilliant; his hands were naked and his arms also a little above the wrist. So also were his feet naked as were his legs a little above the ankles. His head and neck were also bare. I could discover that he had no other clothing on but this robe, as it was open so that I could see into his bosom. Not only was his robe exceedingly white, but his whole person was glorious beyond description, and his countenance truly like lightning. The room was exceedingly light, but not so very bright as immediately around his person.

“When I first looked upon him I was afraid, but the fear soon left me. He called me by name, and said unto me that he was a messenger sent from the presence of God unto me, and that his name was Nephi.<sup>3</sup> That God had a work for me to do, and that my name should be had for good and evil, among all nations, kindreds and tongues; or that it should be both good and evil spoken of among all people.

“He said there was a book deposited written upon golden plates, giving an account of the former inhabitants of this continent, and the source from whence they sprang. He also said that the fullness of the everlasting gospel was contained in it, as delivered by the Savior to the ancient inhabitants. Also that there were two stones in silver bows, and these stones fastened to a breastplate constituted what is called the Urim and Thummim, deposited with the plates, and the possession and use of these stones was what constituted seers in ancient or former times, and that God had prepared them for the purpose of translating the book.

“After telling me these things he commenced quoting the prophecies of the Old Testament, he first quoted part of the third chapter of Malachi; and he quoted also the fourth or last chapter of the same prophecy though with a little variation from the way it reads in our Bibles.

“Instead of quoting the first verse as it reads in our books he quoted it thus, *For behold the day cometh that shall burn as an oven, and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly shall burn as stubble, for they that cometh shall burn them saith the Lord of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root or branch,* and again he quoted the fifth verse thus, *Behold I will reveal unto you the priesthood by the hand of Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord.* He also quoted the next verse differently, *And he shall plant in the hearts of the children the promises made to the fathers, and the hearts of the children shall turn to their fathers; if it were not so the whole earth would be utterly wasted at his coming.*

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3. Joseph contradicts the name of this messenger in *D&C* 26:2 and 110:20 by identifying him as “Moroni.”

“In addition to these he quoted the eleventh chapter of Isaiah saying that it was about to be fulfilled. He quoted also the third chapter of Acts, twenty-second and twenty-third verses precisely as they stand in our New Testament. He said that the prophet was Christ, but the day had not yet come when *they who would not hear his voice should be cut off from among the people*, but soon would come.

“He also quoted the second chapter of Joel from the twenty-eighth to the last verse. He also said that this was not yet fulfilled but was soon to be. And he further stated that the fullness of the gentiles was soon to come in. He quoted many other passages of scripture and offered many explanations which cannot be mentioned here.

“Again he told me that when I got those plates of which he had spoken (for the time that they should be obtained was not yet fulfilled) I should not show them to any person, neither the breastplate with the Urim and Thummim, only to those to whom I should be commanded to show them, if I did I should be destroyed.

“While he was conversing with me about the plates the vision was opened to my mind that I could see the place where the plates were deposited and that so clearly and distinctly that I knew the place again when I visited it.

“After this communication I saw the light in the room begin to gather immediately around the person of him who had been speaking to me, and it continued to do so until the room was again left dark except just around him, when instantly I saw as it were a conduit open right up into heaven, and he ascended up till he entirely disappeared and the room was left as it had been before this heavenly light had made its appearance.”

Joseph claims that this experience repeated itself two additional times that same evening. The next day he collapsed from exhaustion during the day’s work and the scene was repeated once again, whereupon he was instructed to relate the whole experience to his father. After doing so he went in search of the place where the plates were located, in the side of a large hill near by. There he found a buried stone box which contained the plates, the Urim and Thummim and the breastplate. After attempting to remove them from the box the same messenger came and told him it was not yet time. He was told to return at this same time for the next four years, at which times the messenger would meet with him. He returned as he was instructed and each time was given “instruction and intelligence” by this same messenger.

### **Plates Received; Book of Mormon Produced**

At the appointed time, September 22, 1827, Joseph returned to the hill one final time and was given the plates by the messenger. With some financial help from a well-to-do local farmer by the name of Martin Harris, Joseph relocated to Pennsylvania and began translating the Book of Mormon from these plates by means of the Urim and Thummim. Joseph’s wife Emma was his initial scribe, soon replaced by Martin Harris himself. The following year a school teacher by the name of Oliver Cowdery came inquiring after Joseph, having already heard the story of the plates. Before long he would become Joseph’s third scribe in the translation process, which would be completed by August 1829.

## The Three and Eight Witnesses

During the translation process, it was revealed that two separate groups were to view the original plates as witnesses. The first group was to be comprised of three special witnesses,<sup>4</sup> and the second group to be comprised of a “few,”<sup>5</sup> which ended up being eight in number. Accordingly, Joseph drafted two separate statements which were signed by a total of eleven witnesses. These two statements are printed in the front of every Book of Mormon as *The Testimony of Three Witnesses* and *And Also the Testimony of Eight Witnesses*. The full text of these statements is included in Appendix A. Key phrases from these statements are “we beheld and saw the plates, and the engravings thereon” and “we did handle [the plates] with our hands: and we also saw the engravings thereon, all of which has the appearance of ancient work, and of curious workmanship.”

By March 1830 the Book of Mormon was in the hands of the printer. And in April 1830 Joseph started his church. By all measures this is an incredible story. It would be even more incredible if it were true.

## Reality

### Joseph’s “First Vision” Story: A Study in Evolution

In 1945 Fawn Brodie published a biography of Joseph Smith entitled *No Man Knows My History*. Most students of Joseph Smith and Mormonism continue to regard it as the best work ever written on him. Mrs. Brodie, professor of history at UCLA and a distinguished biographer, comments perceptively on Joseph Smith’s 1838 *History* which we have just reviewed. “When Joseph began his autobiography, in 1838, he was writing not of his own life but of one who had already become the most celebrated prophet of the nineteenth century. And he was writing for his own people. Memories are always distorted by the wishes, thoughts, and above all, the obligations of the moment.”<sup>6</sup>

Regarding Joseph’s so-called 1820 “First Vision,” Mrs. Brodie notes that virtually no contemporary account of it can be found. No mention of it is made in any family writings of the time period. Nor is it mentioned in any of the local newspapers of the time. These are the same papers which had *plenty* of scandalous things to say about Joseph after he started his church. If, in 1820, Joseph had actually seen God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ, if They had instructed him as he reports, and if he had actually been persecuted as widely as he claims for relating the event, wouldn’t there be *some* record of it by *someone* near the time that it supposedly happened? But of this earth-shaking event we find nothing at all until many years have passed. In summarizing her findings Mrs. Brodie concludes,

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4. *BM*, 2 Nephi 11:133; Ether 2:2–3.

5. *BM* 2 Nephi 11:134.

6. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, p. 25.

“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. The awesome vision he described in later years was probably the elaboration of some half-remembered dream stimulated by the early revival excitement and reinforced by the rich folklore of visions circulating in his neighborhood. Or it may have been sheer invention, created some time after 1830 when the need arose for a magnificent tradition to cancel out the stories of his fortune-telling and money-digging. Dream images came easily to this youth, whose imagination was as untrammelled as the whole West.”<sup>7</sup>

**Multiple Versions.** Not until twelve years later did Joseph (or anyone else) begin recording the experience of this first vision. The problem at this point, however, is that he ended up creating several different versions of it which conflict with each other at significant points. There are at least six different versions of his “First Vision” which begin with Joseph’s combination *Diary/History of the Church* written in 1832, and end with a letter from Joseph Smith to John Wentworth, editor of the *Chicago Democrat* in 1842. For example, these various accounts place Joseph’s age all the way from 14 to 17 years old. And the official dating of the vision, the year 1820, has also been called into serious question by recent documentation that no revival actually took place in Palmyra at that time.<sup>8</sup>

To illustrate the contradictions between these various versions, we will compare the “first vision” portion of Joseph’s *History of the Church*, written in 1838, with that contained in his *Diary/History of the Church*, written in 1832. This first excerpt is from Joseph Smith’s 1838 *History of the Church*.

“Just at this moment of great alarm, I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head, above the brightness of the sun; which descended gradually until it fell upon me. It no sooner appeared than I found myself delivered from the enemy which held me bound. 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 spake to me, calling me by name, and said, (pointing to the other) ‘This is my beloved Son, hear him.’

“My object in going to inquire of the Lord was to know which of all the 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 who stood above me in the light, which of all the sects was right, (for at this time it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong), and which I should join.

“I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong, and the personage who addressed me said that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight; that those professors were all corrupt, ‘they draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; they teach for doctrine the commandments of men, having a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof.’ He again forbade me to join with any of them....” (see above, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision*, emphasis added)

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7. *Ibid.*

8. This documentation was gathered by Mormon researcher Wesley P. Walters and published in *New Light on Mormon Origins From The Palmyra (N.Y.) Revival*, (Utah Christian Tract Society: 1967), reprints of which are available from Utah Lighthouse Ministry, Salt Lake City. Excerpts from this work are also cited in Tanner, *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?*, fifth edition, (Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 1987), p. 156.

The following two excerpts are taken directly from Joseph's handwritten 1832 *Diary*. The spelling and punctuation may seem awkward, but they accurately reflect the manuscript. <Angle brackets> indicate above-the-line insertions; words stricken from the manuscripts are shown as **strike-out**. *Italics* have been added for emphasis. In explaining the events which led up to the first vision Joseph says,

“At about the age of twelve years my mind become seriously imprest with regard to the all important concerns for the welfare of my immortal Soul which led me to searching the scriptures...thus from the age of twelve years to fifteen I pondered many things in my heart concerning the situation of the world of mankind the contentions and divi[si]ons the wicke[d]ness and abominations and the darkness which pervaded the ~~of the~~ minds of mankind my mind become exceedingly 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.*”

He goes on to describe the first vision.

“*When I considered all these things and that <that> being [God] seeketh such to worship him as worship him in spirit and in truth therefore I cried unto the Lord for mercy for there was none else to whom I could go and ~~to~~ obtain mercy and the 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 ~~fire~~ light above the brightness of the sun at noon day come down from above and rested upon me and 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.*”<sup>9</sup>

***Fundamental Conflict with the Official Version of 1838.*** In September 1832 Joseph received a spiritual message concerning priesthood and church government. This message was later canonized and today is Section 83 of the RLDS *Doctrine & Covenants*. Paragraph 3c of Section 83 reads, “Therefore, in the ordinances thereof the power of godliness is manifest; and without the ordinances thereof, and *the authority of the priesthood*, the power of godliness is not manifest unto men in the flesh; *for without this, no man can see the face of God, even the Father, and live*” (emphasis added).

Joseph claims that the priesthood was not “restored” until 1829.<sup>10</sup> But in his *History of the Church* (1838) he very clearly says that he saw the Father during his first vision experience, in 1820. We have to ask ourselves how this was possible in 1820, since Joseph claims that no priesthood yet existed on the earth.

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9. Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1984), pp. 4–6. Spelling and punctuation as in the original handwritten manuscript. This *Diary* is also included in Scott H. Faulring, *An American Prophet's Record: The Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith*, (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), pp. 4–6.

10. This event is described more fully in chapter 11.

**Joseph's Motivation for Praying.** In his 1838 *History of the Church* Joseph claims, "My object in going to inquire of the Lord was to know which of all the sects was right that I might know which to join." But in his 1832 *Diary* he says, "and when I considered all these things and that <that> being [God] seeketh such to worship him as worship him in spirit and in truth therefore I cried unto the Lord for mercy for there was none else to whom I could go and ~~to~~ obtain mercy and the Lord heard my cry in the wilderness." In 1832 his motivation was seeking mercy for his sins. But in 1838 his motivation was to ask which church was right. This leads into another contradiction.

**"All Churches are Wrong."** In Joseph's 1838 *History* it was the "personages" who first alerted him to the fact that all churches were wrong, "...for at this time it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong." But in his 1832 *Diary* he claims that he had already reached this conclusion for himself based on his own study of the scriptures, "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."

This evolution of his story makes sense. It would sound much more convincing if "the personages" told him that all churches were wrong than to say that he had already reached that conclusion based merely on his own studies. By the way, speaking of "personages"...

**How Many Personages?** In his 1838 *History* Joseph claims that he saw and conversed with "two personages" in the pillar of light, one of whom pointed to the other saying, "This is my beloved Son, hear him." These personages could only be thought of as God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ. If this experience had actually transpired, we can think of no more significant a feature than having actually seen both the Father and the Son *at the same time*.

Joseph's claim of having seen both the Father *and* the Son in bodily form—and at the same time—is certainly at variance with orthodox Biblical theology. And this distorted concept of God has accordingly added much confusion and speculation to RLDS thinking regarding the Godhead.

But this evolved concept of "two personages" is not at all present in Joseph's 1832 *Diary* version of his first vision. There he simply says that, "*The <Lord> opened the heavens upon me and I saw the Lord and he spake unto me.*" Throughout the entire story there is not even a hint of more than one entity involved. It seems very clear that Joseph's embellished version of 1838 was, as Fawn Brodie says, "distorted by...the obligations of the moment."

## The Smith Family: Occult Practitioners

It is impossible to understand Joseph Smith, his Book of Mormon or the church he produced without first realizing that he and his family were heavily steeped in the occult. The Smiths were part of a class of people in New England for whom occultism was a way of life. They practiced a variety of magical arts including sooth-saying, divination, crystal-gazing, fortune telling,

necromancy (communication with the dead) and magic circles.<sup>11</sup> According to pastor and researcher Wesley Walters:

“Joseph’s use of such magic devices in his early years gave his mother concern in later life that the family not be thought of as having devoted their *entire* time to such occult matters. In the preliminary draft of her history of that early period (but omitted from the printed version) she wrote:

‘... let not the reader suppose that...we stopt our labor and went at trying to win the faculty of Abrac, drawing magic circles, or sooth saying, to the neglect of all kinds of business. We never during our lives suffered one important interest to swallow up every other obligation.’

“Thus it seems quite clear from all sides that Joseph wove occult religious material into his money digging practices, and this led the communities where he dug for treasure to associate him with divination, necromancy, and wizardry.”<sup>12</sup>

Walters’ footnote to the above quote provides additional insight.

“In the Historical Department, LDS Church, Salt Lake City, p. 77 of Xerox copy, punctuation mine [regarding Mrs. Smith’s history]. Abrac derives from Abracadabra and Abraxas, both of which were used by the Gnostics on magic amulets. To make the charm work required a knowledge of how the amulet was to be used. The Masonic Lodge of the 18th century claimed they knew how to conceal ‘the way of obtaining the faculty of *Abrac*’ (James Hardie, *The New Freemason’s Monitor*, N.Y., 1818, p. 203). Since Joseph’s brother Hyrum claimed membership in the Palmyra Masonic Lodge, the Smiths may have been encouraged in some of their occult lore from that source.”

Joseph’s mother, Lucy Smith, provides us another most interesting reflection from their early family life. You will recall that Joseph claimed that a spiritual visitor guided him to the Book of Mormon plates in September 1823. From that time on his family began gathering each evening to hear of the various revelations he was continuing to have. In the course of these family gatherings “Joseph would occasionally give us some of the most amusing recitals that could be imagined. He would describe the ancient inhabitants of this continent, their dress, mode of traveling, and the animals upon which they rode; their cities, their buildings, with every particular; their mode of warfare; and also their religious worship. This he would do with as much ease, seemingly, as if he had spent his whole life with them.”<sup>13</sup>

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11. The involvement of the Smith family in such occult practices is extensive and has been heavily documented. Accounts can be found in Fawn M. Brodie’s *No Man Knows My History*, Jerald and Sandra Tanner’s *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality and Mormonism, Magic and Masonry*, (Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 1988), and Wesley P. Walters “From Occult to Cult with Joseph Smith, Jr.,” *The Journal of Pastoral Practice*, vol. 1, no. 2, (Summer 1977), pp.121–137, (reprinted by permission by Utah Lighthouse Ministry, Salt Lake City).

12. Wesley Walters, *From Occult to Cult with Joseph Smith, Jr.*, pp. 126–127.

13. Lucy Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet, and His Progenitors for Many Generations*, (Liverpool, England: S.W. Richards, 1853), p. 85. (A photomechanical reprint of this original edition is available from Jerald and Sandra Tanner’s Utah Lighthouse Ministry, Salt Lake City, Utah).

It should be noted that these interesting tales began occurring in 1823–1824—over three years before Joseph was supposedly granted possession of the Book of Mormon plates in order to begin “translating” them. We have to ask ourselves, then, from what source this information came. (Actually, it seems clear that Joseph borrowed from a variety of sources to produce the Book of Mormon. A number of these sources will be examined in detail in chapter 6.) But regardless of the actual source of his information, it is very clear that (1) it was *not* based on the Book of Mormon plates and (2) Joseph had sufficient prior data and imagination to concoct the Book of Mormon story himself—without any help at all from the brass plates—as we shall soon see.

### **Money-digging, “Glass-looking” and Joseph’s Peep-stone**

The Smith family often utilized a variety of occult devices to engage in a practice called “money-digging.” The spirit world would make known certain treasures hidden in the earth, giving these money-diggers the confidence that they could find them. This would often involve charging a landowner for the services of finding the treasure, with the promise of sharing the ultimate proceeds with him. From all accounts it seems that this business of money-digging consumed a large portion of the Smith’s time.

In the course of his money-digging Joseph Smith would on occasion practice blood sacrifice in order to appease the spirit which controlled the treasure. One account of such sacrifice is given by William Stafford, a neighbor of their’s from Palmyra.

“Old Joseph and one of the boys came to me one day, and said that Joseph Smith Jr. had discovered some very remarkable and valuable treasures, which could be procured in only one way. That way, was as follows:—That a black sheep should be taken on to the ground where the treasures were concealed—that after cutting its throat, it should be led around a circle while bleeding. This being done, the wrath of the evil spirit would be appeased: the treasures could then be obtained, and my share of them was to be four fold. To gratify my curiosity, I let them have a large fat sheep. They afterwards informed me, that the sheep was killed pursuant to commandment; but as there was some mistake in the process, it did not have the desired effect. This I believe, is the only time they ever made money-digging a profitable business.”<sup>14</sup>

One of the more popular money-digging techniques during this period was generically referred to as “glass-looking,” another term for the ancient practice of crystal-gazing. This is what a medium does when looking into a crystal ball. “Crystal-gazing is an old profession and has been an honored one. Egyptians stared into a pool of ink, the Greeks into a mirror, the Aztecs into a quartz crystal, and Europeans into a sword blade or glass of sherry—any translucent surface that made the eyes blur with long gazing.”<sup>15</sup> In the early 1800s glass-looking included the use of “peep-stones” or seer stones. These stones would be placed in a hat whose brim was then pulled up tight around the subject’s face to exclude all light. In this darkness the stones would

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14. Sworn affidavit of William Stafford as cited in Fawn Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, p. 434. For additional accounts of Joseph’s blood sacrifices, including recommended *human* sacrifices, see Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Mormonism, Magic and Masonry*, pp. 32–37.

15. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, p. 21.

reveal things to their holders, whether past, present or future. Joseph Smith's father, Joseph Smith, Sr. made use of such a stone in his own money-digging business.<sup>16</sup>

In 1822 Joseph Smith, Jr. followed his father's lead and acquired his own stone. He and his brother Alvin had been hired by Willard Chase to dig a well. According to Chase,

“After digging about twenty feet below the surface of the earth, we discovered a singularly appearing stone, which excited my curiosity. I brought it to the top of the well, and as we were examining it, Joseph put it into his hat, and then his face into the top of his hat...The next morning he came to see me, and wished to obtain the stone, alleging that he could see in it; but I told him I did not wish to part with it on account of its being a curiosity, but would lend it. After obtaining the stone, he began to publish abroad what wonders he could discover by looking in it.”<sup>17</sup>

Against Mr. Chase's wishes Joseph retained this stone and began using it in his money-digging activities.

### **Joseph Smith's 1826 Glass-looking Trial**

Before long Joseph had acquired a considerable reputation as a seer by use of this stone. Because of this reputation he was sought out by a Pennsylvania farmer by the name of Josiah Stowel (Stoal). According to Joseph's mother Mr. Stowel was interested in him “...on account of having heard that he possessed certain keys, by which he could discern things invisible to the natural eye.”<sup>18</sup> Mr. Stowel became quickly impressed by a display of Joseph's supernatural talent and immediately hired him to search for a lost silver mine. After several months of effort Joseph failed to produce the treasure, or anything else of value. In reaction to this series of failures Mr. Stowel's nephew, Peter Bridgman, swore out a warrant for Joseph's arrest, charging him with being a disorderly person and an imposter. *The Revised Laws of 1813* in force at the time included a *Vagrant Act* which specifically defined *Disorderly Persons* as “...all persons who, not having wherewith to maintain themselves, live idle without employment...” and included “...all jugglers, and all persons pretending to have skill in physiognomy, palmistry, or like crafty science, or pretending to tell fortunes, or to discover where lost goods may be found.”<sup>19</sup>

Accordingly, Joseph was arrested, jailed and brought to trial on March 20, 1826. Apart from the incriminating testimony of others, Joseph makes a number of most interesting confessions in the course of his own testimony at this trial. He admits that he had been “employed in looking for mines” and that,

“He had a certain stone, which he had occasionally looked at to determine where hidden treasures in the bowels of the earth were; that he professed to tell in this manner where gold-mines were a distance under ground, and had looked for Mr. Stowel several times, and informed

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16. Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Mormonism, Magic and Masonry*, pp. 18–21.

17. From the sworn affidavit of Willard Chase published by E.D. Howe in *Mormonism Unveiled*, (Painesville, Ohio: self-published, 1834), pp.240–247, also cited in Tanner, *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?*, p. 40.

18. Lucy Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, pp. 91–92.

19. Wesley Walters, *From Occult to Cult with Joseph Smith, Jr.*, p. 124.

him where he could find those treasures, and Mr. Stowel had been engaged in digging for them; that at Palmyra he pretended to tell, by looking at this stone, where coined money was buried in Pennsylvania, and while at Palmyra he had frequently ascertained in that way where lost property was, of various kinds; that he has occasionally been in the habit of looking through this stone to find lost property for three years, but of late had pretty much given it up on account its injuring his health, especially his eyes—made them sore.”<sup>20</sup>

After hearing these confessions directly from Joseph and then some confirming testimonies from a few others the court quickly found him guilty as charged. But because he was a minor at this time (20 years old) “and thinking he might reform his conduct, he was designedly allowed to escape” without sentencing.<sup>21</sup>

### Book of Mormon Plates Found by Joseph’s Peep-stone

In Joseph’s 1838 *History* he claims that a spiritual visitor announced the existence of the Book of Mormon plates and ultimately guided him to their exact location. Historical evidence, however, indicates that Joseph actually used his peep-stone to find the plates.

Among Joseph’s very earliest converts was a man by the name of Martin Harris. Martin was a prosperous farmer who lived nearby the Smiths. It was Martin who financed Joseph’s migration to Pennsylvania and his stay there while the Book of Mormon was being produced. After Joseph’s wife, Emma, Martin became the second person to act as his scribe as he dictated the book. And when the book was complete he became one of only three men to sign *The Testimony of Three Witnesses*, which vouched for the book’s authenticity. Here is what Martin said in an interview with *Tiffany’s Monthly*:

“These plates were found at the north point of a hill two miles north of Manchester village. Joseph had a stone which was dug from the well of Mason Chase, twenty-four feet from the surface. In this stone he could see many things to my certain knowledge. It was by means of this stone he first discovered these plates.

“Joseph had before this described the manner of his finding the plates. He found them by looking in the stone found in the well of Mason Chase. The family had likewise told me the same thing.”<sup>22</sup>

That Joseph actually used his peep-stone to find the Book of Mormon plates is also attested by the Mormon Hosea Stout. “President [Brigham] Young exhibited the seer’s stone with which The Prophet Joseph Smith discovered the plates of the Book of Mormon, to the regents this evening. It is said to be a silecious granite dark color almost black with light colored stripes somewhat resembling petrified poplar or cotton wood bark. It was about the size but not the

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20. The complete court record may be found in Fawn Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, pp. 427–8, and Tanners, *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?*, p. 32.

21. From an account of the trial written by Dr. Abram Willard Benton of South Bainbridge, New York in *Evangelical Magazine and Gospel Advocate*, April 9, 1831, p. 120, as cited in Walters, *From Occult to Cult*, p. 123.

22. “Interview with Martin Harris,” *Tiffany’s Monthly*, (New York, NY: 1859), pp. 163–165, 167, 169, also cited in Tanner, *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?*, pp. 40–41. Martin’s testimony is consistent with the sworn affidavit of Willard [Mason] Chase himself, see E.D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, p. 246.

shape of a hen's egg."<sup>23</sup>

Joseph's early claims of having found the Book of Mormon plates by use of his peep-stone revived community sentiments against his money-digging activities and led to another warrant for his arrest and subsequent trial on July 1, 1830, three months after he had organized his church. This time twelve witnesses were called to testify against him. "During the trial it was shown that the Book of Mormon was brought to light by the same magic power by which he pretended to tell fortunes, discover hidden treasure, &c."<sup>24</sup>

### **Book of Mormon Produced by Use of the Stone**

In Joseph's 1838 *History* he claims to have translated the Book of Mormon plates by direct use of the ancient Urim and Thummim, which he had discovered along with the plates. We tend to see Joseph sitting at a table in front of the plates and viewing them through the Urim and Thummim, which he describes simply as "...two stones in silver bows, and these stones fastened to a breastplate."<sup>25</sup> As the Urim and Thummim would convert each Reformed Egyptian hieroglyphic into English we envision Joseph dictating the translation to a scribe on the other side of the table who thus created the actual manuscript. Based on Joseph Smith's 1838 *History*, this is how practically all of his present followers, Mormon and RLDS alike, view his process of producing the Book of Mormon.

The amazing thing is that virtually every *other* person connected with the book's production, including his own wife, testifies to an altogether different process. And by now I'm sure you can guess what was involved in that other process. That's right—Joseph's use of his peep-stone buried in a hat!

***Testimony of David Whitmer.*** The most detailed description of this process is given to us by David Whitmer. David Whitmer became acquainted with Joseph part way through the translation process, and his family, according to Joseph, "...assisted us very much in writing during the remainder of the work..." and "...became our zealous friends and assistants."<sup>26</sup>

"I will now give you a description of the manner in which the Book of Mormon was translated. Joseph Smith would put the seer stone into a hat, and put his face in the hat, drawing it closely around his face to exclude the light; and in the darkness the spiritual light would shine. A piece of something resembling parchment would appear, and on that appeared the writing. One character at a time would appear, and under it was the interpretation in English. Brother Joseph would read off the English to Oliver Cowdery, who was his principal scribe, and when it was written down and repeated to Brother Joseph to see if it was correct, then it would disappear, and

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23. Hosea Stout, *On The Mormon Frontier, The Diary of Hosea Stout*, vol. 2, p. 593, entry dated Feb.25, 1856, as cited in Tanner, *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?*, p. 41.

24. Dr. Benton, *Evangelical Magazine and Gospel Advocate*, April 9, 1831, p. 120.

25. *RHC*, 1:13.

26. *RHC*, 1:42–43.

another character with the interpretation would appear. Thus the Book of Mormon was translated by the gift and power of God, and not by any power of man.”<sup>27</sup>

It is significant to note that the final portion of the Book of Mormon was actually produced in David Whitmer’s own house, where Joseph and Emma Smith, Martin Harris and Oliver Cowdery had taken up residence. When the time came David was selected along with Martin Harris and Oliver Cowdery to sign *The Testimony of Three Witnesses* which was to vouch for the authenticity of the book. He remained a staunch believer in the Book of Mormon throughout his entire life, even though he became sharply critical of Joseph Smith and his practices. And so while David Whitmer was not an actual scribe for Joseph, he was very closely associated both with the process itself as well as with all those who actually were scribes.

***Testimony of Emma and William Smith.*** Joseph’s wife Emma was the first of three people to scribe for him, followed by Martin Harris and then Oliver Cowdery. In 1879 she was interviewed by her son, Joseph Smith, III, who was then president of the RLDS church. The interview was first published in the RLDS magazine *Saints’ Herald* and later included in their official history.<sup>28</sup> Here are two excerpts from that interview.

“Q.—[Joseph Smith, III doing the questioning] What of the truth of Mormonism?

‘A.—I know Mormonism to be the truth; and believe the church to have been established by divine direction. I have complete faith in it. In writing for your father I frequently wrote day after day, often sitting at the table close by him, he sitting with his face buried in his hat, with the stone in it, and dictating hour after hour with nothing between us.

‘Q.—Are you sure that he had the plates at the time you were writing for him?

‘A.—The plates often lay on the table without any attempt at concealment, wrapped in a small linen tablecloth which I had given him to fold them in.’ ”

Writing in the *Saints’ Herald* in 1962 James E. Lancaster comments on an 1876 letter from Emma which also describes this process.

“How can the testimonies of Emma Smith and David Whitmer, describing the translation of the Book of Mormon with a seer stone, be reconciled with the traditional account of the church that the Book of Mormon was translated by the ‘interpreters’ found in the stone box with the plates? It is the extreme good fortune of the church that we have testimony by Sister Emma Smith Bidamon on this important issue...a woman...wrote to Emma Bidamon, requesting information as to the translation of the Book of Mormon. Emma Bidamon rep[lied]...March 27, 1876. Sister Bidamon’s letter states in part:

‘Now the first that my husband translated, was translated by use of the Urim and Thummim, and that was the part that Martin Harris lost, after that he used a small stone, not exactly black, but was rather a dark color....’

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27. David Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ*, (Richmond, Missouri: 1887), p. 12. This booklet has been photomechanically reprinted by Pacific Publishing Co., (Concord, California: 1960–1981) as well as by Tanner’s Utah Lighthouse Ministry of Salt Lake City. It is also cited in Tanner’s *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?*, p. 41 and Brodie’s, *No Man Knows My History*, p. 61.

28. *Saints’ Herald*, Oct. 1, 1879, pp. 289–290; *RHC*, 3:352–358.

“Sister Bidamon’s letter indicated that at first the Book of Mormon was translated by the Urim and Thummim. She refers to the instrument found with the plates. However, this first method was used only for the portion written on the 116 pages of foolscap which Martin Harris lost. After that time the translation was done with the seer stone.”<sup>29</sup>

Both Emma and Martin Harris refer to Joseph’s use of the Urim and Thummim during only the *initial stage* of the process, for the first 116 pages. Martin’s wife was not a believer in any of the Book of Mormon business and was upset over Martin’s involvement. Consequently, when Martin showed this first 116 pages to her she retaliated by confiscating and then either hiding or destroying them. These 116 pages have not been seen since. Because of this loss, Joseph claims the Urim and Thummim were taken from him. Emma and David Whitmer say they were never returned. Mr. Lancaster confirms this further along in the same *Saints’ Herald* article cited above by quoting an interview with David Whitmer first published in the *Chicago Inter-Ocean*, Oct. 17, 1886.

“By fervent prayer and by otherwise humbling himself, the prophet, however, again found favor, and was presented with a strange, oval-shaped, chocolate-colored stone, about the size of an egg, only more flat, which, it was promised, should serve the same purpose as the missing Urim and Thummim (the latter was a pair of transparent stones set in a bow-shaped frame and very much resembles a pair of spectacles). With this stone *all of the present Book of Mormon was translated.*” (emphasis added)<sup>30</sup>

Whatever role the so-called “Urim and Thummim” had, if any, it is clear that it was only used early on. The entire *surviving* portion of the Book of Mormon—the only part that we have today—was produced by Joseph’s use of his peep-stone in a hat. Part of the confusion over the use of the “Urim and Thummim” is that over time people began using that phrase when referring to Joseph’s peep-stone. This is clearly reflected in the testimony of Joseph’s brother, William Smith regarding the production of the Book of Mormon. “The manner in which this was done was by looking into the Urim and Thummim, which was placed in a hat to exclude the light, (the plates lying near by covered up), and reading off the translation, which appeared in the stone by the power of God.”<sup>31</sup>

In addition to confirming Joseph’s use of his peep-stone in a hat to produce the Book of Mormon, Emma’s interview with her son, Joseph III, and the testimony of Joseph’s brother William also make it clear that the plates themselves were not used in the process *in any way whatsoever*. At various times during the production process the plates would be covered up on the same table, perhaps be in another room of the house, and at still other times would even be hidden out in the woods! We have to ask ourselves what the point was of having the plates in the first place if they were not to be used. We can only conclude that they were merely a prop in Joseph’s attempt to convince the world that his Book of Mormon originated somewhere other than his own fertile imagination, or through his money-digging peep-stone.

29. *Saints Herald*, (Nov. 15, 1962, p.15), as cited in Tanner, *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?*, p. 42.

30. *Saints’ Herald*, (Nov. 15, 1962), p. 16, as cited in Tanner, *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?*, p. 42.

31. William Smith, *William Smith on Mormonism*, (1883), p. 11, reprinted by Francis W. Kirkham, *A New Witness for Christ in America*, (Independence, MO: 1942), vol. 2, p. 417, as cited in Tanner, *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?*, p. 42.

**The Testimony of Martin Harris.** As Joseph's second of three scribes, Martin not only says that Joseph *found* the plates by use of his peep-stone (see above), but that he also used it to *produce* the Book of Mormon. "On Sunday, Sept.4, 1870, Martin Harris addressed a congregation of Saints in Salt Lake City. He related an incident which occurred during the time that he wrote that portion of the translation of the Book of Mormon which he was favored to write direct from the mouth of the Prophet Joseph Smith, and said that *the Prophet possessed a seer stone, by which he was enabled to translate as well as from the Urim and Thummim, and for convenience he then used the seer stone*" (emphasis added).<sup>32</sup>

While here he makes a distinction between the Urim and Thummim and Joseph's peep-stone, he says they were functionally equivalent, and therefore Joseph just used the seer stone for convenience. From this kind of statement we can see how people came to use the two terms interchangeably. And so Joseph's use of his peep-stone in a hat over time came to be viewed as his actually using the "Urim and Thummim."

**The Testimony of Oliver Cowdery.** Oliver was Joseph's third and final scribe. He was also chosen as one of the three to sign *The Testimony of Three Witnesses*. Regarding his participation in producing the Book of Mormon he confesses, "I have sometimes had seasons of skepticism, in which I did seriously wonder whether the prophet and I were men in our sober senses when we would be translating from plates *through the 'Urim and Thummim' and the plates not be in sight at all*. But I believed both in the Seer and in the '*Seer Stone*,' and what the First Elder announced as revelation from God, I accepted as such; and committed to paper with a glad mind and happy heart and swift pen" (emphasis added).<sup>33</sup>

Oliver's statement here confirms the testimonies of the others involved in the process. He, too, uses the terms "Urim and Thummim" and "Seer Stone" interchangeably and also confirms that the plates were not used at all. His testimony is especially significant because he was Joseph's scribe for the vast majority of Book of Mormon which we have today. The initial 116 pages, scribed by Emma Smith and Martin Harris, were confiscated by Martin's wife and never seen again.

Oliver Cowdery became the guardian of Joseph Smith's peep-stone after he stopped using it. We saw from Hosea Stout's *Diary* above (p. 28) that this stone wound up in Salt Lake City. David Whitmer tells us how this happened.

"With this stone all of the present Book of Mormon was translated. It is the only one of these relics which is not in the possession of the Whitmers. For years Oliver Cowdery surrounded it with care and solicitude, but at his death old Phineas Young, a brother of Brigham Young, and an old-time and once intimate friend of the Cowdery family, came out of Salt Lake City, and during his visit he contrived to get the stone from its hiding place, through a little deceptive sophistry, expended upon the grief-stricken widow. When he returned to Utah he carried it in triumph to the apostles of Brigham Young's 'lion house.'"<sup>34</sup>

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32. Andrew Jensen, *Historical Record*, p. 216, as cited in Tanner, *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?*, p.42.

33. Oliver Cowdery, *Defence in a Rehearsal of My Grounds for Separating Myself from the Latter Day Saints*, (Norton, Ohio: self-published, 1839), pp. 2-3. Reprinted in *Saint's Herald*, vol. 54, no. 12, pp. 229-230, March 20, 1907.

34. Interview with David Whitmer, *Des Moines Daily News*, Oct.16, 1886, as cited in Tanner, *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?*, p.41.

The stone reportedly remains in Utah to this day. It is said to be locked up in a safe in the office of the Mormon church President, where it has been observed as recently as 1971 by Joseph Anderson, then Assistant to the Council of the Twelve [Apostles].<sup>35</sup>

### **No One Really Ever Saw the Plates**

*The Testimony of Three Witnesses* which is printed in the front of every Book of Mormon says “We beheld and saw the plates, and the engravings thereon.” The second testimonial, *And Also the Testimony of Eight Witnesses*, likewise says “We did handle [the plates] with our hands: and we also saw the engravings thereon, all of which has the appearance of ancient work, and of curious workmanship.” Millions of Joseph Smith’s followers have placed great confidence in these statements over the years. They seem to verify that at least eleven people other than Joseph Smith had first hand experience with the Book of Mormon plates in some very tangible ways. If these statements are true, we do not have to trust that Joseph Smith came up with the Book of Mormon story all on his own. There is strong evidence, however, which contradicts these statements. This evidence suggests that no one actually saw—or handled—the plates, but were persuaded by Joseph Smith to sign these statements anyway. What makes this evidence even more damaging is that it is provided by one of the witnesses himself as well as by Joseph Smith’s own brother, both of whom had intimate firsthand knowledge of the whole affair.

***The Testimony of William Smith.*** Joseph Smith’s younger brother casts some very interesting new light on what it really meant to “see” and “feel” the Book of Mormon plates. In the course of an interview E.C. Briggs,

“asked Bro. Smith if he ever saw the plates his brother had had, from which the Book of Mormon was translated. He replied ‘I did not see them uncovered, but I handled them and hefted them while wrapped in a tow frock and judged them to have weighed about sixty pounds. I could tell they were plates of some kind and that they were fastened together by rings running through the back. Their size was as described in mother’s history.’ Bro. Briggs then asked ‘Did any others of the family see them?’ ‘Yes,’ said he, ‘Father and my brother Samuel saw them as I did while in the frock. So did Hyrum and others of the family’... ‘Didn’t you want to remove the cloth and see the bare plates?’ said Bro. B. ‘No,’ he replied; ‘for father had just asked if he might not be permitted to do so, and Joseph, putting his hand on them said; “No I am instructed not to show them to any one. If I do, I will transgress and lose them again.” Besides we did not care to have him break the commandment and suffer as he did before.’ ”<sup>36</sup>

***The Testimony of Martin Harris.*** The testimony of William Smith is closely paralleled by statements of Martin Harris. John H. Gilbert, Esq. was the printer who set the type for the very first edition of the Book of Mormon, referred to as the Palmyra edition. In one of his memorandum he reports on his personal inquiry with Martin. “Martin was in the office when I finished setting up the testimony of the three witnesses,—(Harris, Cowdery and Whitmer) I said to him, —‘Martin, did you see those plates with your naked eyes?’ Martin looked down for an

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35. Tanner, *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?*, p. 44.

36. *Zion's Ensign*, January 13, 1894, p. 6.

instant, raised his eyes up, and said, ‘No, I saw them with a spiritual eye.’ ”<sup>37</sup>

Sometime later Martin revealed the same concept but with greater detail to a public church meeting in Ohio. Present that day was Stephen Burnett who had been a missionary of the young church. In April 1838 Burnett wrote of this meeting to one of the church’s first apostles, Lyman Johnson.

“I have reflected long and deliberately upon the history of this church & weighed the evidence for & against it—loth to give it up—but when I came to hear Martin Harris state in public that he never saw the plates with his natural eyes only in vision or imagination, neither Oliver nor David & also that the eight witnesses never saw them & hesitated to sign that instrument for that reason, but were persuaded to do it, the last pedestal gave way. In my view our foundations were sapped & the entire superstructure fell a heap of ruins. I therefore three week [*sic*] since in the Stone Chapel gave a full history of the church since I became acquainted with it.....together with the reasons why I took the course which I was resolved to do, and renounce the Book of Mormon with the whole scene of lying and deception. I was followed by W. Parish, Luke Johnson & John Boynton all of who concurred with me. After we were done speaking M. Harris arose & said he was sorry for any man who rejected the Book of Mormon for he knew it was true, he said he had hefted the plates repeatedly in a box with only a tablecloth or a handkerchief over them, but he never saw them, only as he saw a city through a mountain. And said that he never should have told that the testimony of the eight was false, if it had not been picked out of him, but should have let it passed as it was.”<sup>38</sup>

The next time Martin was careful not to allow the details be “picked out of him.” During an interview with Joel Tiffany he was asked, “How did the Lord show you these things? He replied, ‘I am forbidden to say anything about how the Lord showed them to me, except that by the power of God I have seen them.’ ”<sup>39</sup>

## Summary and Conclusion

Joseph Smith’s *History of the Church*, written in 1838, has been enshrined by Mormons and RLDS alike as their official story. It represents the “first cause” of all Mormon history. At a minimum it was written 18 years after his supposed “First Vision” experience, and 9 years after completion of his Book of Mormon. Not only does this official story conflict with Joseph’s own earlier versions of the experiences, but with an abundance of historical evidence as well, much of which was generated by first-hand eye-witnesses and supporters of his work, including his own family members. Some of these conflicts are:

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37. Wilford C. Wood, *Joseph Smith Begins His Work*, vol. 1, 1958, Preface.

38. Letter from Stephen Burnett to Lyman E. Johnson dated April 15, 1838. This letter was copied May 24, 1838 onto pages 64–66 of a Letter Book which contains copies of Joseph Smith's letters and others from April 20, 1837 to Feb. 9, 1843 with a few for other years. This letter Book is among the *Joseph Smith Collection* in the LDS Church Archives, Salt Lake City, Box 2, Folder 2. A microfilm copy is in the RLDS Church Archives. The letter has been copied with its original spelling, but with some punctuation added to aid readability.

39. Tiffany, *Tiffany's Monthly*, vol. 5, no. 1 (May–June, 1859), p. 166.

- There are virtually no contemporaneous accounts of his dramatic “First Vision” experience; it was first recorded by Joseph Smith himself—a number of years after the fact. This raises a serious question about whether or not he ever had the experience.
- Joseph portrays himself as a young man preparing himself to be used by God in restoring first-century Christianity to the earth once again. History shows us that both he and his family were practicing occultists, adept in a variety of magical arts including “glass-looking” and “money-digging.” Court records prove that in 1826 Joseph Smith was convicted of glass-looking by using a “peep-stone” buried in a hat.
- Joseph claims an angel directed him to the Book of Mormon plates. Martin Harris, (Book of Mormon scribe and one of its three “witnesses”), and others claim that Joseph found these plates by use of his “peep-stone” instead.
- Joseph implies that he produced the Book of Mormon by reading the plates using the ancient “Urim and Thummim” which were found with them. Virtually every person who scribed the Book of Mormon for Joseph says he did not use the plates, but rather produced it by use of his peep-stone buried in a hat.
- Joseph obtained the signatures of 11 witnesses to the actual existence of the Book of Mormon plates. All 11 were supposed to have seen the plates and their peculiar engravings. Eight of these witnesses were to have handled the plates. Joseph’s own brother, William Smith, and Martin Harris consistently report that *no one ever saw the plates*, “only in vision or imagination.” Martin Harris says the witnesses were persuaded by Joseph Smith to sign the statements anyway, despite this fact. This testimony completely invalidates the two statements of these 11 witnesses which continue to be published in the front of every Book of Mormon.

Therefore, since there is an abundance of historical evidence to the contrary, we can only conclude that Joseph Smith’s *History of the Church* written in 1838 is fundamentally untrue. It appears then to be a myth or legend created by Joseph, well after the fact, in order to provide a “magnificent tradition” as a basis for his new church, in lieu of its actual occult underpinnings.