

“Truly Manifested”

Does D&C 20:5 Refer to the First Vision?

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5 After it was truly manifested unto this first elder that he had received a remission of his sins, he was entangled again in the vanities of the world;

6 But after repenting, and humbling himself sincerely, through faith, God ministered unto him by an holy angel, whose countenance was as lightning, and whose garments were pure and white above all other whiteness;

7 And gave unto him commandments which inspired him;

8 And gave him power from on high, by the means which were before prepared, to translate the Book of Mormon.... (D&C 20:5-8, emphasis added)

Mormons are taught that in the spring of 1820 God the Father and Jesus Christ appeared to 14-year-old Joseph Smith as two separately embodied beings, and that in this “First Vision” Jesus informed Smith that all of the churches were wrong. Over three years later in September 1823, according to the LDS Church’s official account, an angel named Moroni appeared to Joseph to tell him about the Book of Mormon. However, all of the published accounts from the 1820s and 1830s that describe the beginning of Joseph Smith’s visionary experiences begin that story with the appearance of an angel, not with an appearance of God or Christ. The official account, written in 1838 or 1839, was first published in 1842. The earliest clear reference to Smith as a teenager seeing a divine being, rather than an angel, comes from an unpublished account that Smith wrote in his own hand in 1832. That 1832 account never circulated among the Mormons in Smith’s day and surfaced publicly for the first time in 1965. In that account, Smith mentioned seeing only Jesus, “the Lord,” in a vision that took place sometime prior to the visitation of the angel. Other alleged earlier references to the First Vision either refer to Smith’s later alleged encounter with an angel concerning the Book of Mormon or are hopelessly unreliable rumors that provide no valid evidence of the First Vision story.¹

Another alleged reference to the First Vision prior to 1832 appears in what is now Doctrine & Covenants 20. The exact date of this text is uncertain, perhaps because some parts were composed earlier than other parts. The section preface to D&C 20 in the official, current LDS edition dates the section to April 1830, essentially at the same time as the founding of the LDS Church (on April 6, 1830). The Book of Commandments, which contained an earlier edition of the section, dates it to June 1830. It was on June 9, 1830, that Smith read a version of this section together with section 22—the combination of those two sections then called the “Articles and Covenants of the Church of Christ”—at the first conference of the LDS Church. The document was first published in the Painesville *Telegraph*, April 19, 1831, and later in the

¹See the overview of these other alleged early First Vision accounts [here](#).

LDS periodical *Evening and Morning Star* in June 1832. Although parts of the section may date to the first half of 1830, June 1830 is the earliest we can realistically push back the origin of the text as a whole.²

According to some LDS scholars, D&C 20:5 is the earliest LDS reference to the First Vision.³ It refers to an experience that Joseph Smith claimed he had some time prior to the visitation by an angel concerning the Book of Mormon. In that earlier experience, Joseph Smith says, “it was truly manifested” to him that God forgave his sins. This experience of learning that God had forgiven him of his sins might seem to fit the unpublished 1832 account in which Christ assured Joseph that his sins were forgiven. According to D&C 20:5-8, after this was “manifested” to him, Joseph fell back into sin, repented, and was then visited by the angel who empowered him to translate the Book of Mormon. This sequence—an experience of obtaining forgiveness, followed by a lapse back into sin, followed by repentance and the visitation of the angel—is said to fit the later First Vision narrative accounts. LDS scholar Richard Lloyd Anderson explains:

So the sequence is clearly a revelation of forgiveness, further transgression, and then ‘after repenting... God ministered unto him by an holy angel’ (D&C 20:6)... Thus the First Vision was briefly noted from the beginning of the Church, but in terse language that those informed would understand.⁴

“Manifested”: Does This Mean a Vision?

We may agree that in D&C 20:5-6 Smith claimed that he had some sort of religious experience at some time prior to the visit of an angel to tell him about the Book of Mormon.⁵ But

²See Robert J. Woodford, “The Historical Development of the Doctrine and Covenants” (Ph.D. diss., Brigham Young University, 1974), 286-301; *Early Mormon Documents*, comp. and ed. Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996), 1:9-10.

³E.g., Grant Underwood, “Doctrine and Covenants: Sections 20-22,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1:410. LDS scholars known for their work on the First Vision, when discussing the earliest references to it, typically make no mention of D&C 20:5. See, for example, Paul R. Cheesman, “An Analysis of the Accounts Relating Joseph Smith’s Early Visions” (M.R.E. thesis, Brigham Young University, 1965), 3-7; Milton V. Backman Jr., *Joseph Smith’s First Vision: Confirming Evidences and Contemporary Accounts*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), 121-22. Richard Lyman Bushman did not mention it in *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 56-59, but in a later expansion of the same material referred to D&C 20:5 as “a glancing reference to the vision”: *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 39.

⁴Richard Lloyd Anderson, “The Organization Revelations (D&C 20, 21, and 22),” in *Studies in Scripture, Volume One: The Doctrine and Covenants*, ed. Robert L. Millet and Kent P. Jackson (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1989), 110, 111.

⁵Smith does not say here how long before the first angelic visitation this alleged religious experience occurred. The wording (“was entangled again... But after repenting”) is consistent with a passing of almost any length of time, whether weeks, months, or years.

was this religious experience a “vision”? That is, was it a visionary experience of a visitation by some supernatural being? The words he uses, “it was truly manifested unto this first elder,” are all the description he gives. Anderson observes that the word “manifested” in D&C is “generally synonymous” with “revealed.”⁶ More precisely, Joseph Smith used the verb *manifest* in D&C to mean that something had been made known, whether by God or by human beings.⁷ Consider the following examples of *manifest* in D&C⁸:

- The Lord had “manifested” to Oliver Cowdery that what he had written as a scribe was true (18:2).
- The Holy Spirit, or Comforter, is the one who “manifests” the truth to people (18:18; 21:9; 91:4; 124:97).
- People “manifest” by their good works that they are faithful Christians (20:37, 69) or by their evil works that they are wicked (35:7; 63:15; 71:7; 104:74; 123:13; 136:19).
- The Lord made “manifest” to Joseph Knight that he needed to pray (23:6).
- The elders were to reject a “spirit manifested” that they could not understand (50:31).
- The power of godliness is “manifest” to people only in the ordinances and priesthood (84:20-21).
- God made “manifest” to Smith the revelations he was to speak (85:6; 90:14).
- The Father’s works were “manifest” through Christ on earth (93:5).
- The truth was “plainly manifest” to human beings even though they rejected it (93:31).
- Those who had discovered an error in the president’s decision could “manifest” it (102:20).
- The voice of the Spirit would “manifest” to Joseph Smith who was chosen (105:36).
- What places should be appointed as stakes would be “manifested” to Joseph (115:18).
- A time was coming when it would be “manifest” whether there was one God or many (121:28).
- Where the angels live in God’s presence, “all things for their glory are manifest” (130:7), and in the future all things pertaining to kingdoms inferior to God’s will be “manifest” to those on the earth (130:9).

In just two texts, both dated to 1836, Joseph Smith said that the Lord would “manifest” himself in the temple (D&C 109:5; 110:7-8). These seem to be the only places in D&C where the term refers to visionary appearances or other experiential encounters with a divine being. They establish that the word *could* have this meaning. But does it have this meaning in D&C 20:5? Two passages closer to the context of that verse suggest that it probably does not. The first of these passages is in D&C 21, in a revelation dated April 6, 1830, just three months prior to the Articles and Covenants document from which D&C 20 derived. In this passage, Joseph Smith quotes the Lord God as saying the following concerning himself (Joseph):

⁶Anderson, “Organization Revelations,” 110.

⁷The noun *manifestation* in D&C usually functions more narrowly than the verb and typically refers to supernatural works of the Spirit (5:16; 8:1; 46:16; 70:13-15; 76:118; cf. 21:8, discussed below).

⁸This is a complete list of all occurrences, except for the references to the Lord becoming “manifest” in the temple (109:5; 110:7-8) and the occurrences in D&C 20-21, discussed below.

For thus saith the Lord God: Him have I inspired to move the cause of Zion in mighty power for good, and his diligence I know, and his prayers I have heard. Yea, his weeping for Zion I have seen, and I will cause that he shall mourn for her no longer; for his days of rejoicing are come **unto the remission of his sins**, and the **manifestations** of my blessings upon his works. For, behold, I will bless all those who labor in my vineyard with a mighty blessing, and they shall believe on his words, which are given him through me by the Comforter, which **manifesteth** that Jesus was crucified by sinful men for the sins of the world, yea, **for the remission of sins** unto the contrite heart. (D&C 21:7-8)

In this passage, Joseph speaks of the “remission of his sins” as something the Lord was bringing to him at that time in 1830, and he speaks in parallel of the Lord’s “manifestations” of blessings on Joseph’s works at that same time. There is no visionary experience involved here; Joseph says that he will now know that he has received from the Lord remission of his sins and blessings on his works, and those who believe Joseph Smith’s teachings will also know that Jesus died for the remission of *their* sins. Clearly, Joseph does not mean that everyone who believes his teachings will have a vision. Rather, he is saying that “the Comforter” (the Holy Spirit) will make it clear to them in their hearts that these things are true. Twice, then, in this short passage in D&C 21—dating from the same period as the D&C 20 passage—Joseph links “the remission of sins” with “manifesting,” just as he does in D&C 20:5, and in these two occurrences in D&C 21 the context makes it clear that he is not referring to a visionary experience.

If we turn to D&C 20, the very same text as the alleged reference to the First Vision, we find a similar statement using the same language:

All those who humble themselves before God, and desire to be baptized, and come forth with broken hearts and contrite spirits, and witness before the church that they have truly repented of all their sins, and are willing to take upon them the name of Jesus Christ, having a determination to serve him to the end, and **truly manifest** by their works that they have **received** of the Spirit of Christ **unto the remission of their sins**, shall be received by baptism into his church. (D&C 20:37)

Note the verbal parallels here to verse 5, “it was **truly manifested unto** this first elder that he had **received a remission of his sins**.” Everyone who is qualified to receive baptism into the new Church will “truly manifest” that they have “received...remission of their sins,” just as it was “truly manifested” to Joseph Smith that he had “received a remission of his sins.” To put it another way, Joseph Smith is saying that others must “truly manifest” that they have received remission of their sins, just as it was “truly manifested” to him that he had received remission of his sins. Again, there is no indication, and no reason to suppose, that Joseph Smith expected all of his Church members to experience visions as confirmation that their sins were forgiven. What makes “truly manifest” that God had forgiven their sins was “their works,” not visions. Their good works “manifest” this blessing to them in or through the agency of “the Spirit of Christ,” just as in D&C 21:37 “the Comforter” was the ultimate source of this revelation. If the “manifesting” of their “remission of sins” did not involve visions, there is no reason to think, based on this passage, that Smith’s experience did.

One possible objection to this conclusion is that verse 5 uses the passive form “manifested unto” (D&C 20:5), whereas verse 37 uses the active form “manifest” (20:37). One might infer from the wording “manifested *unto*” that verse 5 means that something external to Joseph Smith revealed to him that he had been forgiven. However, to read a visionary experience into the passive form here goes beyond what the wording can clearly convey. Given the verbal parallels to verse 37, a simpler and more likely explanation is that in 20:5 Joseph is referring to a work of the Spirit as confirming his forgiveness (a kind of spiritual “testimony”). The thought that the Spirit manifested to someone that he was forgiven is complementary to the thought that someone’s Spirit-prompted works manifest that he was forgiven. Even if we understand Smith’s wording to imply some sort of external revelation, the text is completely vague as to what form that revelation might have taken.

These passages in D&C 20 and 21 are the *only* passages in the LDS scriptures using any form of the word “manifest” in conjunction with the expression “remission of sins.” Joseph Smith’s own use of this language contemporaneous with D&C 20:5 shows that he was most likely *not* referring to a visionary experience. He was probably referring to an inner experience that he interpreted as a witness of the Spirit that God had forgiven his sins. The LDS scriptures contain numerous references to the “remission of sins” (28 times in the Book of Mormon, 19 times in D&C, and 2 times in Pearl of Great Price), and not once is it connected with a visionary experience.

Somewhat surprisingly, then, the evidence from Smith’s own usage of the language found in D&C 20:5 indicates that he was probably *not* referring to a vision.⁹

The Evolution of the First Vision Story

If we were to suppose, for the sake of argument, that D&C 20:5 refers to a visionary experience of some kind, it would not provide evidence for the First Vision *per se*—that is, for Joseph Smith’s alleged vision in which he saw the Father and the Son. D&C 20:5 mentions *neither* the Father *nor* the Son. If we suppose that a vision is implied, it could just as easily be a vision of an angel. D&C 20:5 also says nothing about Joseph learning at that stage of his life that all of the churches were wrong.

On the other hand, the one specific element that D&C 20:5 *does* mention—Joseph’s receiving an assurance of the remission of his sins—is totally lacking in the official First Vision story told in Pearl of Great Price (JS-H 1:14-20). In that account, nothing is said about Joseph seeking or receiving an assurance of forgiveness until the night the angel came to his room to tell him about the Book of Mormon. It is in *that* context, in the Pearl of Great Price account, that Joseph seeks forgiveness of his sins (JS-H 1:29).

We thus have the following situation: D&C 20:5 speaks of an experience Joseph Smith had sometime prior to the visit by the angel concerning the Book of Mormon. All that D&C 20:5 tells us about this experience was that in it Joseph received some sort of confirmation—“it was truly manifested”—that he had remission of his sins. JS-H also speaks of an experience Joseph

⁹Grant Palmer, who concedes that D&C 20:5 is “the earliest allusion, oral or written, to the first vision,” immediately qualifies this concession by noting that “nothing is said about a vision” in this text. Grant H. Palmer, *An Insider’s View of Mormon Origins* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 235-36.

had prior to the visit by the angel, but in this experience he sees God the Father and Jesus Christ, hears Jesus tell him that all of the churches were wrong, and hears nothing about the forgiveness or remission of his sins. To put it succinctly: what is said in D&C 20:5 is not said in JS-H, and what is said in JS-H is not said in D&C 20:5. The *only* overlap between the two accounts is that both purport to tell about something that Joseph Smith experienced sometime prior to the visit by the angel regarding the Book of Mormon.

Now, it is likely that in the Pearl of Great Price account, Joseph Smith's alleged visionary encounter with God the Father and Jesus Christ *takes the place of* that incident in D&C 20:5 when Joseph receives assurance of forgiveness. Two pieces of information support this conclusion.

The first is that Smith's earliest narrative of a vision involving deity reports that he had the vision in response to prayer for the forgiveness of his sins. In his handwritten account of 1832, Smith claimed that the Lord Jesus had appeared to him in a vision and pronounced his sins forgiven. It is reasonably clear that in this 1832 account, the appearance of the Lord has the same function (at least in part) as the experience reported in 1830 that "manifested" to Smith that he had remission of his sins.

Second, in the 1838/1839 account in Pearl of Great Price, Smith sets up the appearance of the angel (in 1823) with this explanation:

...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 one** (JS-H 1:29).

The use here of the term *manifestation* in connection with forgiveness of sins recalls the language of D&C 20:5. This parallel, and the evidence of the 1832 account, suggest that by 1832 Smith had decided to expand his earlier passing reference to an experience in which his remission of sins was "manifested" to him with the story of the appearance of the Lord. That 1832 account is the first time that Smith made mention of a separate visionary experience preceding by some years the visitation of the angel to announce the Book of Mormon. He then expanded this story again in 1838 with the claim that God the Father had appeared alongside Jesus Christ. In this new story, Joseph's first "manifestation" had nothing to do with obtaining assurance of forgiveness or remission of sins. Instead, Joseph receives assurance of forgiveness in the form of the later visitation of the angel who informs him about the Book of Mormon. Thus, what was once just a story of one primary visitation—that of an angel to tell Joseph about the Book of Mormon—Joseph expanded after he had started the Church to become a story of two very different visitations.¹⁰ In this historical context, Smith's reference in 20:5 to his first religious experience (not first vision) is a kind of "transitional fossil" between his original, simpler story of one angelic visitation and his later, more complex story of two visitations, one by God and Christ and a second by an angel.

¹⁰Of course, Smith claimed more than just two visitations, since, in his telling of the angel story, the angel appeared to him repeatedly before entrusting to him the gold plates of the Book of Mormon.

D&C 20:5 as a *Problem* for the First Vision Story

It is tempting for Mormon apologists to read back into the statement in D&C 20:5 an early cryptic reference to the First Vision. Since the text says nothing explicit about a vision and says nothing at all about a visitation by a divine being, D&C 20:5 really says nothing about what Mormons call the First Vision. Of course, if one is already convinced that the First Vision occurred, then it makes sense to suppose that D&C 20:5 refers (quite obliquely) to it. However, for those who are investigating the *evidence* for the First Vision, whether it actually occurred is the very question they seek to answer. A crucial evidential consideration in answering this question is to determine the earliest, reasonably clear reference to this alleged event. In light of the above study of D&C 20:5 in its context, that text simply does not qualify as such a reference.

Indeed, supposing for the sake of argument that the First Vision really happened, D&C 20:5 poses a severe difficulty. If the First Vision was an actual event in the life of Joseph Smith, D&C 20:5 is precisely where one would expect to see it mentioned. So why, in a document written for the faithful members of his new Church, would Joseph Smith refer so cryptically to that event? Keep in mind that in current LDS religious belief the First Vision is the foundational event of the Restoration and the most monumental event in the history of the world after the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Why, if current LDS belief is true, isn't the First Vision mentioned clearly in D&C 20, right where one would expect that it should be? Indeed, why isn't there any clear reference to the First Vision in any text that was disseminated to the LDS people prior to the official account that was composed in 1838 or 1839?

Richard Lloyd Anderson surely understates the problem when he asserts that D&C 20:5 is a reference to the First Vision "in terse language that those informed would understand."¹¹ On what basis can Anderson claim that "those informed would understand" Smith's words to refer to the First Vision, when there is no earlier reference to it in any other source? Perhaps the question might be posed this way: Just who was "informed" as to what really happened? As far as we can tell, there was no mention of a First Vision type of experience until the handwritten, unpublished account of late 1832, and no one other than Smith's scribe seems to have been "informed" about it even then. The "terse language" that Anderson says Smith used to refer covertly to the First Vision contrasts with what Anderson describes as "a brilliant verbal photograph" in the same passage (D&C 20:6-8) of the angel's visit to Smith.¹² Why, if the First Vision story was as important as LDS General Authorities have been claiming almost non-stop for the past century, did Joseph Smith repeatedly tell the angel story with such clarity while giving at best a "terse" nod to the all-important story of God and Christ appearing to him? In any case, Anderson's qualification that "those informed would understand" is an admission that anyone not already familiar with the First Vision story would never see it in D&C 20:5.

The simplest and historically most credible explanation is that the First Vision was a story that Joseph Smith gradually developed after he founded the LDS Church. This explanation makes sense of all the evidence. In particular, it explains why, prior to 1832, one cannot find a single credible reference to Joseph claiming to have seen any divine being in the years preceding the visitation by the angel Moroni.

¹¹Anderson, "Organization Revelations," 111.

¹²*Ibid.*, 110.