



The Cowdery Conundrum: Oliver's Aborted Attempt to Describe Joseph Smith's First Vision in 1834 and 1835 (Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture)

Roger Nicholson

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

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

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