

William Smith, Joseph's Brother Comments on Early Life and Family (written 1883)

Compiled By Glen W. Chapman – Jan 2006

Preface

"My excuse for writing this preface is a wish to correct errors instilled into the minds of the people--by many falsehoods and misrepresentations that book writers have set afloat concerning the character of Joseph Smith, and the origin of the Book of Mormon, regardless of the facts. There is not one writer, man or woman, of all the books and expositions of Mormonism that I have read professing to give the history of Joseph Smith, or the origin of Mormonism, but what has penned infamous and glaring falsehoods as by personal knowledge I know. For this reason I ask the reader to divest himself of prejudice and to read with prayerful and honest heart, and investigate the evidences and facts set forth in this work. If he will do this he may be assured that he will become satisfied respecting the calumnies and false charges brought against the divine mission of Joseph Smith. In nine cases out of ten, persons who have given the Mormon question an impartial investigation, it has caused them to be friends instead of enemies to the cause. If the story of the angel's visit to Joseph Smith, was so enormously strange as to excite the priesthood of the age to all this calumny upon the character of the prophet, why should we believe in the angel stories that are told us in the Bible. Bible believers should know that the whole Scripture Revelation is founded upon visions and dreams, and angel visits to man. And why should not God send angels to deliver messages to his servants in these latter days, as well as in olden times. Readers, read and ponder these questions and answer them for yourselves, God helping you to choose the right and to give a righteous judgment, as honest men and women should do. The strange inconsistency of persons professing to believe the Bible and still denying what they profess to believe, is plainly seen; for angels, saith the Scriptures, are ministering spirits to those that are heirs of salvation. Heb. 1:14.

Inasmuch as all men are to be judged out of the books which are written, according to their deeds, I deem it of importance to the Saints of the last days, and to mankind in general, to keep a true record of their proceedings and transactions in this life; therefore I propose to record a concise history of my early life and proceedings; especially since the time I was baptized into the church of God, and numbered with the Saints of the last days.

I was born in Royalton, Vermont, on the 13th day of March, 1811. At the age of five, my father moved his family into the town of Palmyra, Ontario county, New York. We moved into Manchester, in the same county in 1821, where we were engaged in agricultural pursuits, as we had been since my birth. While there we cleared a large farm, built a house, planted an orchard, and had commenced living in more comfortable circumstances.

During this period, I enjoyed in common with other boys of my age and circumstances, but limited opportunities for acquiring an education; and being like most youths, more fond of play than study, I made but little use of the opportunities I did have. In 1822 and 1823, the people in our neighborhood were very much stirred up with regard to religious matters by the preaching of a Mr. Lane, an Elder of the Methodist Church, and celebrated throughout the country as a "great revival preacher."

My mother, who was a very pious woman and much interested in the welfare of her children, both here and hereafter, made use of every means which her parental love could suggest, to get us engaged in seeking for our souls' salvation, or (as the term then was) "in getting religion." She prevailed on us to attend the meetings, and almost the whole family became interested in the matter, and seekers after truth. I attended the meetings with the rest, but being quite young and inconsiderate, did not take so much interest in the matter as the older ones did. This extraordinary excitement prevailed not only in our neighborhood but throughout the whole country. Great numbers were converted. It extended from the Methodists to the Baptists, from them to the Presbyterians; and so on until finally, almost all the sects became engaged in it; and it became quite a fashion to "get religion." My mother continued her importunities and exertions to interest us in the importance of seeking for the salvation of our immortal souls, until almost all of the family became either converted or seriously inclined.

After the excitement had subsided, in a measure, each sect began to beat up volunteers; each one saying, "We are right," "Come and join us," "Walk with us and we will do you good," etc. The consequence was that my mother, my brothers Hyrum and Samuel, older than I, joined the Presbyterian Church. Joseph, then about seventeen years of age, had become seriously inclined, though not "brought out," as the phrase was, began to reflect and inquire, which of all these sects was right. Each one said that it was right; which he knew could not be the case; and the question then was which one of the whole taught the true gospel of Jesus Christ, and made known the plan of salvation. If he went to one he was told they were right, and all others were wrong. If to another, the same was heard from them. Each professed to be the true church. This did not satisfy him, as he was aware that there could be but one way of entering into the Kingdom of Heaven, and that there was but one "straight and narrow path," etc. All this however was beneficial to him, as it urged him forward, and strengthened him in the determination to know for himself of the certainty and reality of pure and holy religion. He continued in secret to call upon the Lord for a full manifestation of his will, the assurance that he was accepted of him, and that he might have an understanding of the path of obedience.

At length he determined to call upon the Lord until he should get a manifestation from him. He accordingly went out into the woods and falling upon his knees called for a long time upon the Lord for wisdom and knowledge. While engaged in prayer a light appeared in the heavens, and descended until it rested upon the trees where he was. It appeared like fire. But to his great astonishment, did not burn the trees. An angel then appeared to him and conversed with him upon many things. He told him that none of the sects were right; but that if he was faithful in keeping the commandments he should receive, the true way should be made known to him; that his sins were forgiven, etc. A more elaborate and accurate description of the vision, however, will be found in his own history.

The next day I was at work in the field together with Joseph and my eldest brother Alvin. Joseph looked pale and unwell, so that Alvin told him if he was sick he need not work; he then went and sat down by the fence, when the angel again appeared to him, and told him to call his father's house together and communicate to them the visions he had received, which he had not yet told to any one; and promised him that if he would do so, they would believe it. He accordingly asked us to come to the house, as he had something to tell us. After we were all gathered, he arose and told us how the angel appeared to him; what he had told them as written above; and that the angel had also given him a short account of the inhabitants who formerly resided upon this continent, a

full history of whom he said was engraved on some plates which were hidden, and which the angel promised to show him. He continued talking to us sometime. The whole family were melted to tears, and believed all he said. Knowing that he was very young, that he had not enjoyed the advantages of a common education; and knowing too, his whole character and disposition, they were convinced that he was totally incapable of arising before his aged parents, his brothers and sisters, and so solemnly giving utterance to anything but the truth. All of us, therefore, believed him, and anxiously awaited the result of his visit to the hill Cumorah, in search of the plates containing the record of which the angel told him. He went, and upon his return told us that in consequence of his not obeying strictly the commandments which the angel had given him, he could not obtain the record until four years from that time.

During this four years, I spent my time working on the farm, and in the different amusements of the young men of my age in the vicinity. I was quite wild and inconsiderate, paying no attention to religion of any kind, for which I received frequent lectures from my mother and my brother Joseph. He occupied himself part of the time working on the farm, and part of the time in Pennsylvania where he courted a young lady by the name of Emma Hale, whom he afterwards married. At the end of the appointed time he went and obtained the plates which were pointed out to him by the angel. The story being noised abroad, he was pursued while on his way home with the plates, by two persons who desired to obtain the possession of the plates to convert them into money. However, he escaped to the house and brought the plates with him, wrapped up in a tow frock. He could not permit us to see them, because he said the angel told him not to do so, and he was determined to obey strictly this time; for he had disobeyed before and was compelled to wait four years before he could come into possession of the plates.

In consequence of his vision, and his having golden plates and refusing to show them, a great persecution arose against the whole family, and he was compelled to remove into Pennsylvania with the plates, where he translated them by means of the Urim and Thummim, (which he obtained with the plates), and the power of God. 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. He was engaged in this business as he had opportunity for about two years and a half. In the winter of 1829 and thirty, the Book of Mormon, which is the translation of the part of the plates he obtained, was published. He then showed the plates to my father and my brothers Hyrum and Samuel, who were witnesses to the truth of the book which was translated from them. I was permitted to lift them as they laid in a pillow-case; but not to see them, as it was contrary to the commands he had received. They weighed about sixty pounds according to the best of my judgment.

We were all very much scoffed at and persecuted during all this time, while Joseph was receiving his visions and translating the plates. A particular account of his visions and life during this period will be found in his biography, and therefore I omit it here. From the time that Joseph received his first vision until the completion of the translation of the Book of Mormon, I was engaged as a farmer boy in working on the farm of my father.

This farm had been articted for, to be paid in yearly installments of \$100 each. We had cleared up sixty acres of it and got it under a good fence and cultivation; besides building a good frame house, out-buildings, etc. But owing to the persecution of the religious

world in consequence of Joseph's visions, his obtaining the plates and translating them, our neighbors conceived an antipathy against us, calling us all manner of names, such as "money-diggers," "angel-believers," "gold Bible company," "visionary men," etc. Besides, whenever we had meetings at our house they would surround the house, throw stones, sticks and dirt against it, and insult us in all manner of ways. I got into a great many quarrels and contentions with the young men of the neighborhood on the same account, but invariably came off victorious.

Owing to many improvements we had made and the hard times, we had missed making the last payment on our land, and father had gone to Pennsylvania to borrow money to pay up, and to liquidate some other claims against us. But while he was gone, the agent with whom we had agreed for the land being removed from office, and a new one coming in who was unacquainted with our circum-stances, our neighbors contrived to undermine us by furnishing a man with money, and sending him to the new agent; who, seeing the last payment not settled and the bond thereby forfeited, sold it immediately to this man right from under us. He came with a "writ of ejectment" and turned us all out of doors. Our other creditors then came upon us also, and stripped us of every cent and left us houseless and homeless, and almost friendless, to wander into the wide world and again seek a livelihood. Father was gone, our farm was gone, our home was gone. The weather was cold, and the hearts as well as the doors of the people seemed to be closed against us, and our situation was truly deplorable. But we thanked the Lord in all our affliction that we were counted worthy to suffer in his cause, and realize that our light affliction here would work for us "a much more exceeding and eternal weight of glory" in the eternal world. Having been ejected from our home thus unceremoniously, we went to my brother Hyrum's house; a small log-house on a farm of eighty acres which he had purchased, adjoining our old farm. It was in this house that the first conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints was held, on the 6th day of April, 1830, at which I was present. The Church then consisted of but six members. My father and brothers were baptized at this time and commenced preaching in the vicinity.

I fully believed all the circumstances as I have related them, with regard to the visions and revelations which my brother Joseph said he had received and seen; but being young and naturally high-spirited, I did not realize the importance of such things as I should have done, and did not see the necessity of yielding obedience to the requirements of the gospel. For in fact, I knew nothing about it, although I had believed everything with regard to the work previously, until after the organization of the Church, when I was exhorted continually by my parents and brethren; especially by Joseph. I became awakened to the necessity of embracing the plan of salvation, and of the necessity of publishing a knowledge of Jesus Christ and his gospel among all nations, kindreds, tongues and people; that the nations afar off might hear of his glory and learn of his fame, and that the sayings of the prophet relative to the gathering of Israel and the glory of Zion in the last days might be fulfilled. I determined to enlist in the glorious cause, and endeavor to bear some humble part in rolling on the great work of the Lord. I felt willing to forsake the world, the flesh, and the devil, and go down into the waters of baptism and take upon me the name of Jesus Christ, according to the requirements of the gospel. I was accordingly baptized by Elder David Whitmer, on the 9th day of June, 1830, at the same time with nine others; viz, Don Carlos Smith, John Jolly, John Poorman, Porter Rockwell, Jerusha Smith, Caroline Rockwell, Electa Rockwell, Julia Ann Jolly, and Harriet Jolly. The Spirit of the Lord was poured out upon us and our hearts made to rejoice in the truth. The next evening we had a prayer meeting, during which we were confirmed under the hands of Oliver Cowdery,

(one of the three witnesses to the Book of Mormon), according to the order of the ancient church and the teachings of the apostles of our Lord and Savior. Some of the brethren received marvelous manifestations during the evening. Bro. Newell Knight saw the heavens opened and he heard things which he was unable to utter: his strength was taken from him twice, and he was obliged to be lifted up and placed upon bed. I did not, myself, receive any such manifestations, but felt the Spirit of God like a burning fire shut up in my bones.

From this time I could behold the situation of the world; and the Spirit taught me that the harvest was great and the laborers few. I began to think it was my duty to preach the gospel and warn the nations of the earth of the great things about to take place.

I was baptized in Seneca Lake during the time of a conference held there, being the second one held by the Church. Afterwards I returned to Manchester, about thirty miles distant. During the journey many solemn thoughts, and serious contemplations passed through my mind, concerning the work of the last days, and the great responsibility under which I had just been laid, to live soberly, righteously, and godly before the world, in order that the Lord might be glorified and honored through me.

After this conference O. Cowdery, P. P. Pratt, and Ziba Peterson with some others, took a mission to the Western States, where they baptized a great number, and established a branch of the Church in Kirtland, Ohio. Among those who were baptized was Sidney Rigdon, who came soon after and made brother Joseph a visit, being the first time they had ever met. They returned together to Ohio in the fall. I was subsequently ordained a Teacher under the hands of my brother Joseph, and John Whitmer; according to the following certificate, which is a correct transcript from the original given me by them”:

"This is to certify that William Smith has been received in the Church of Christ, according to the articles and covenants of this Church, and ordained a Teacher, under the hands of Joseph Smith, Jr. This therefore, authorizes him to act as Teacher in this Church according to the articles and covenants.

JOHN WHITMER, Leaders

Joseph Smith.

Given at Hyrum's, Oct. 5th, 1830.