

# The First Vision: One Event, Many Stories



Canonized 1838 Account: Two Personages in a Pillar of Light.



Multiple Historical Accounts: A Complex Tapestry of Written Records.

The story of the First Vision is the founding event of the Mormon church, presented as a singular, well-documented historical fact. However, the historical record reveals at least four primary accounts written by Joseph Smith, with significant contradictions. **Why do these different versions exist, and what can they tell us?**

# The Pivotal Substance of Our Faith



“Our whole strength rests on the validity of that vision. **It either occurred or it did not occur.** If it did not, then **this work is a fraud.** If it did, then it is the most important and wonderful work under the heavens... The truth of that unique, singular, and remarkable event is the **pivotal substance of our faith.**”

This black-and-white framing from a church president establishes the profound importance of understanding the historical facts of the event.

# The First Clue: A 12-Year Silence



Joseph Smith claimed the vision occurred in 1820. The first known account was not written until 1832.

**For 12 years, there is no mention of this event from anyone:**

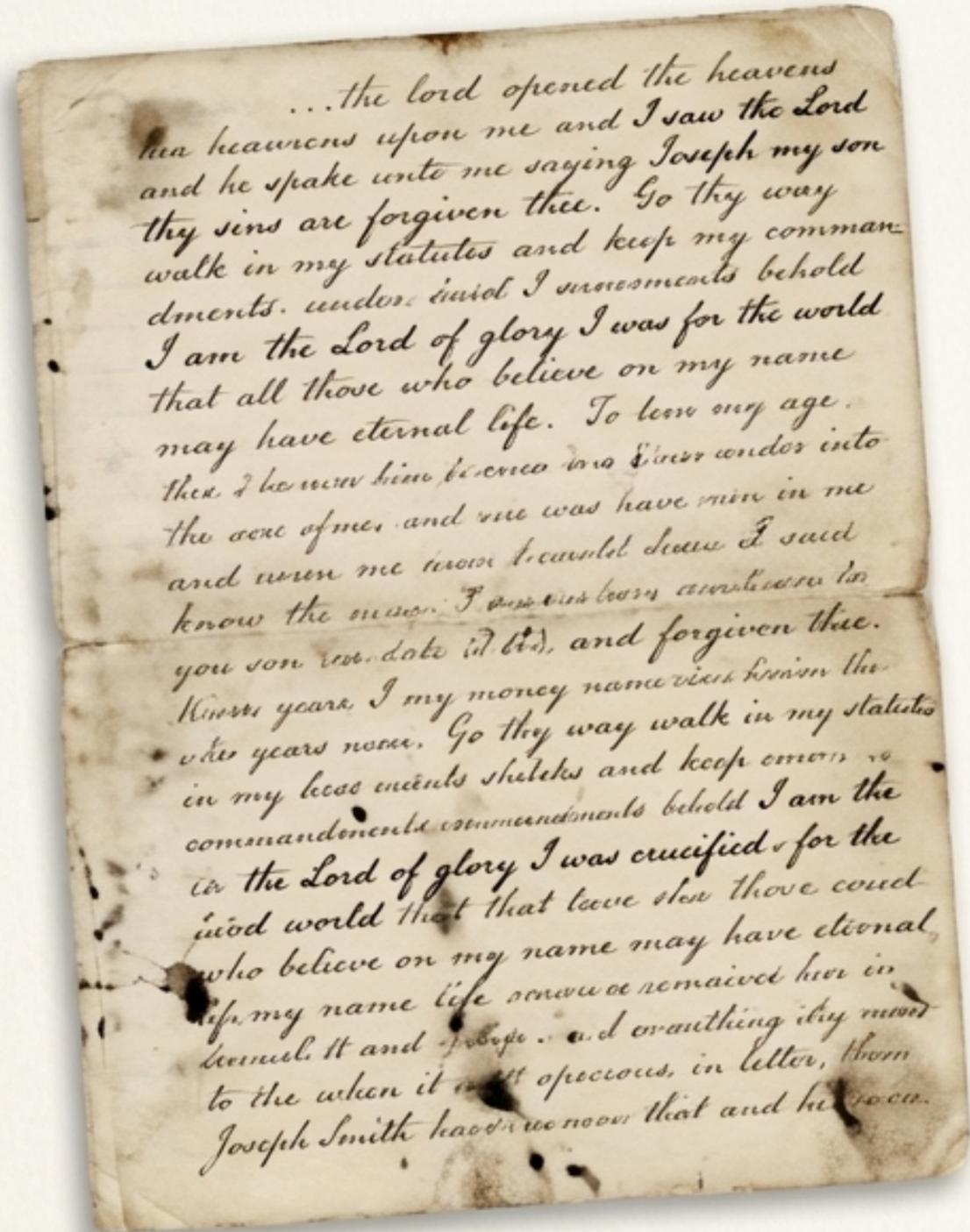
- No family members' journals.
- No early church leaders' writings.
- No local newspapers.
- No accounts from critics or supporters.

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“The fact that **none of the available** contemporary writings about Joseph Smith in the 1830s...**mentions the story of the first vision** is convincing evidence that at best it received only limited circulation in those early days.”

– **James B. Allen**, former Assistant Church Historian

# Uncovering the Earliest Account (1832)



...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.

## Key Observations

- Written in Joseph Smith's own hand.
- States he was in his "16th year of my age" (15 years old), not 14.
- Describes seeing one personage: "the Lord," who identifies himself as Jesus Christ.
- This account was removed from its letterbook by Church Historian Joseph Fielding Smith and kept in his private safe for decades.

# Two Accounts, Two Foundational Contradictions

## 1832 Account (The First Draft)

### Reason for Prayer

Joseph states he **already knew** all churches were wrong. His primary concern was his **personal sins**. "I cried unto the Lord for mercy."

### Who Appeared?

**One personage**. "I saw the Lord." The being identifies as Jesus Christ.

## 1838 Account (The Official Story)

### Reason for Prayer

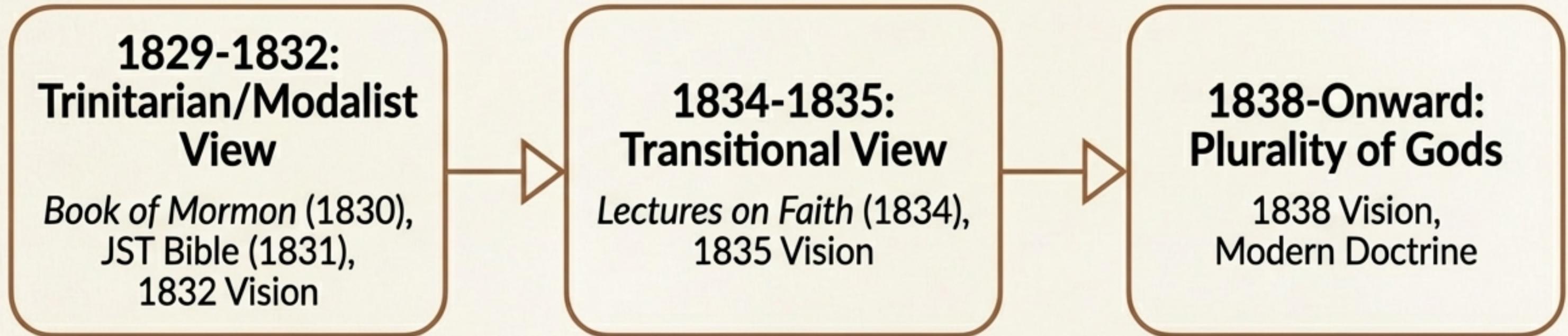
Joseph was confused by competing revivals and went to the grove to ask **which church was true**.

### Who Appeared?

**Two personages**. God the Father and Jesus Christ, as separate physical beings.

*Why would the core motivation and the identity of the divine beings change so dramatically over time?*

# The Contradictions Were Not Random. They Followed a Theological Evolution.



The changes in the First Vision story mirror a distinct evolution in Joseph Smith's teachings about the nature of God. The earliest account aligns perfectly with his early theology, while later versions reflect a new, radically different doctrine. The next slides will provide the evidence for this evolution.

# Exhibit A: The Godhead in the Original Book of Mormon (1830)

Verse	1830 Edition	1837 Revision
<b>1 Nephi 11:18</b>	...the virgin whom thou seest is the <b>mother of God</b> .	...the virgin whom thou seest is the mother of the <b>Son of God</b> .
<b>1 Nephi 11:21</b>	Behold the Lamb of God, yea, even the <b>Eternal Father</b> .	Behold the Lamb of God, yea, even the <b>Son of the</b> Eternal Father.
<b>1 Nephi 13:40</b>	...the Lamb of God is the <b>Eternal Father</b> ...	...the Lamb of God is the <b>Son of the</b> Eternal Father...

In 1837, Joseph Smith revised scripture claimed to be translated by the power of God to align with his new theology, just before writing the 1838 First Vision account.

## Exhibit B: Strengthening the Trinitarian View (1831)

King James Bible (Luke 10:22)

...and no man knoweth who the Son is, but the Father; and who the Father is, but the Son...

Joseph Smith Translation  
(Luke 10:22), revised in 1831

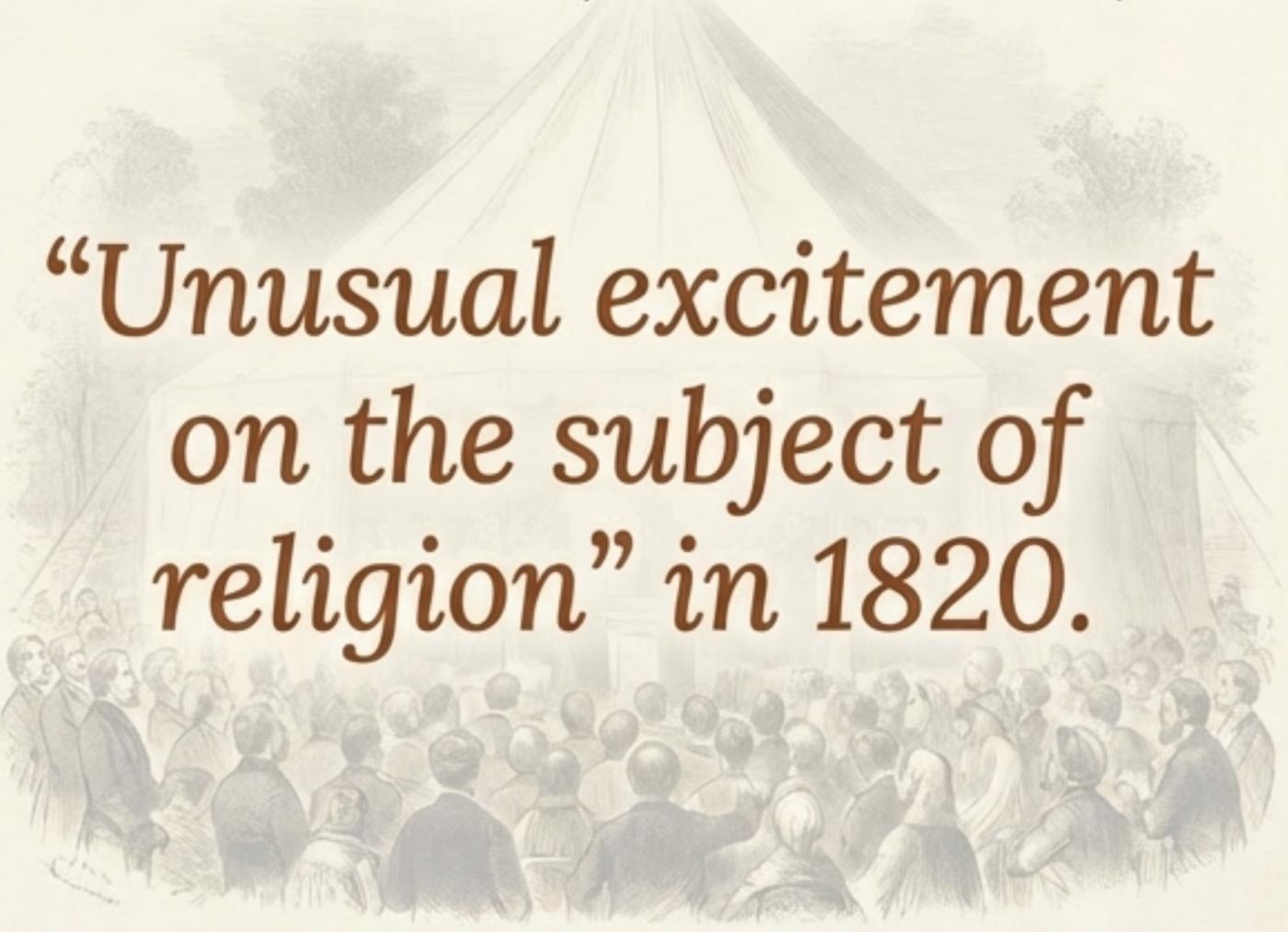
...and no man knoweth **that the Son is the Father, and the Father is the Son**, but him to whom the Son will reveal it.

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Eleven years *after* supposedly seeing God and Jesus as separate beings, Joseph Smith revised the Bible via revelation to make their unity *stronger*. This is direct evidence that the 1838 version of the vision had not yet been conceived.

# The Problem with 1820: A Revival Out of Time

## The Claim (1838 Account)



*“Unusual excitement on the subject of religion” in 1820.*

## The Historical Record

-  No newspaper, religious press, or church records show any revival in the Palmyra area in 1819-1821.
-  Major, well-documented revivals occurred in **1816-17** and **1824-25**.
-  Smith family tax records show they moved to Manchester in 1822. Joseph's statement of a revival in the “second year after our removal” points to **1824**.
-  Lucy Mack Smith joined the Presbyterian church after her son Alvin's death in late 1823, an event tied to the 1824 revival.

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The historical setting for the First Vision story aligns with 1824, not 1820, creating a significant timeline problem for the church's narrative which places the Moroni visit in 1823.

# A “Singular” Event? Visionary Accounts in the Burned-Over District

Joseph Smith’s experience was not unusual for his time and place. Historian Richard Bushman located 32 pamphlets of visionary experiences published between 1783-1815 alone. Many share remarkable similarities with Joseph’s.

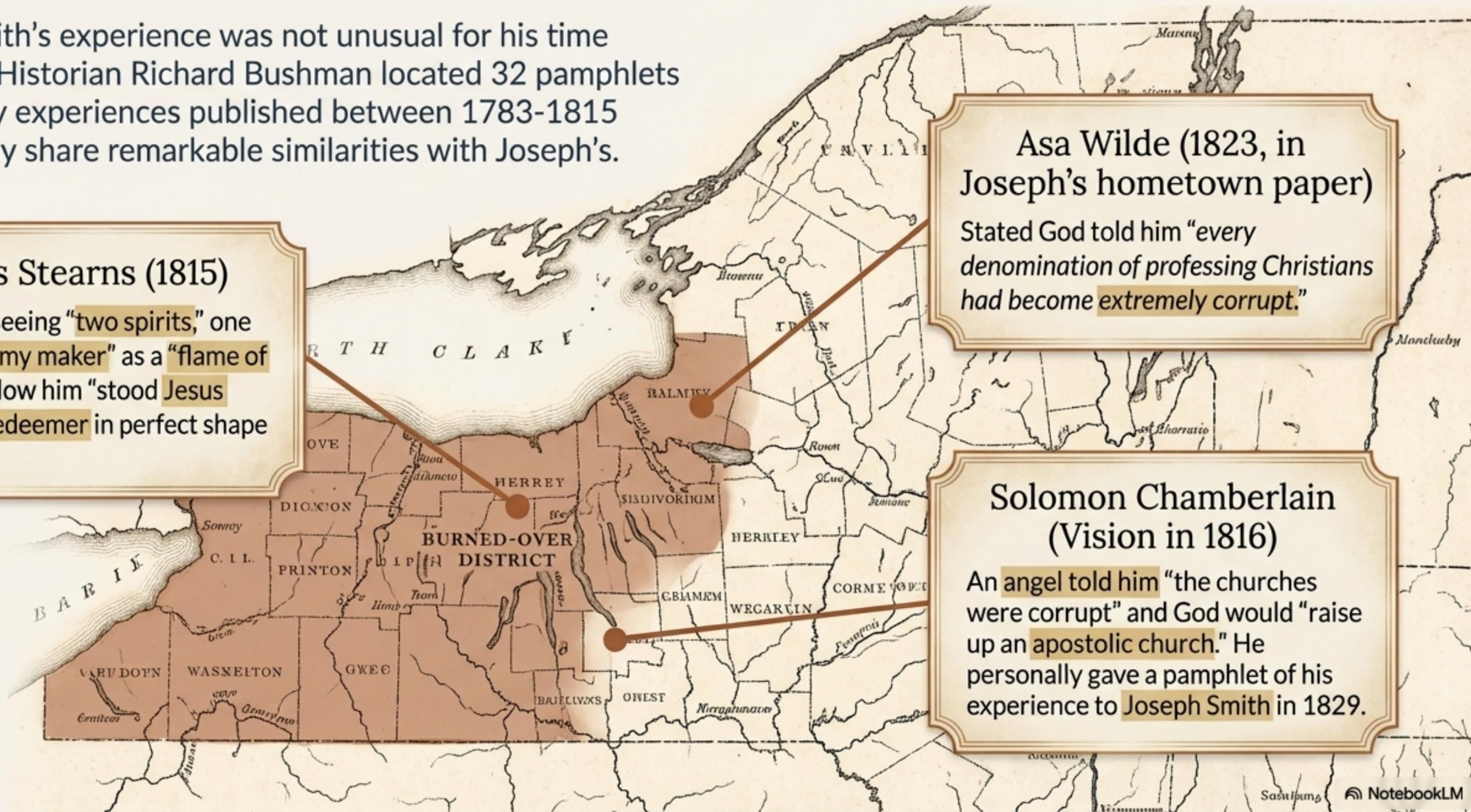
## Norris Stearns (1815)

Described seeing “two spirits,” one being “God my maker” as a “flame of fire” and below him “stood Jesus Christ my redeemer in perfect shape like a man.”

Asa Wilde (1823, in Joseph’s hometown paper) Stated God told him “every denomination of professing Christians had become extremely corrupt.”

## Solomon Chamberlain (Vision in 1816)

An angel told him “the churches were corrupt” and God would “raise up an apostolic church.” He personally gave a pamphlet of his experience to Joseph Smith in 1829.



# The Motive: Why Write the First Version in 1832?

## Leadership Challenge

In the summer of 1832, Joseph Smith visited Missouri and found his leadership directly challenged by Bishop Edward Partridge, who ran the church's Missouri branch.

1832

Joseph Smith writes his first, private account of the vision.

## Consolidating Authority

In response to this discord, Joseph began writing a history that established a unique, foundational divine experience, separating his authority from that of any other leader. The First Vision and Priesthood Restoration stories originate from this period of challenge.

# The Motive: Why Create a New, Grand Story in 1838?

Nov 1837

The Kirtland Safety Society bank collapses, wiping out the savings of many members and destroying Joseph's credibility.

Dec 1837

28 members are excommunicated, including Martin Harris.

Jan 1838

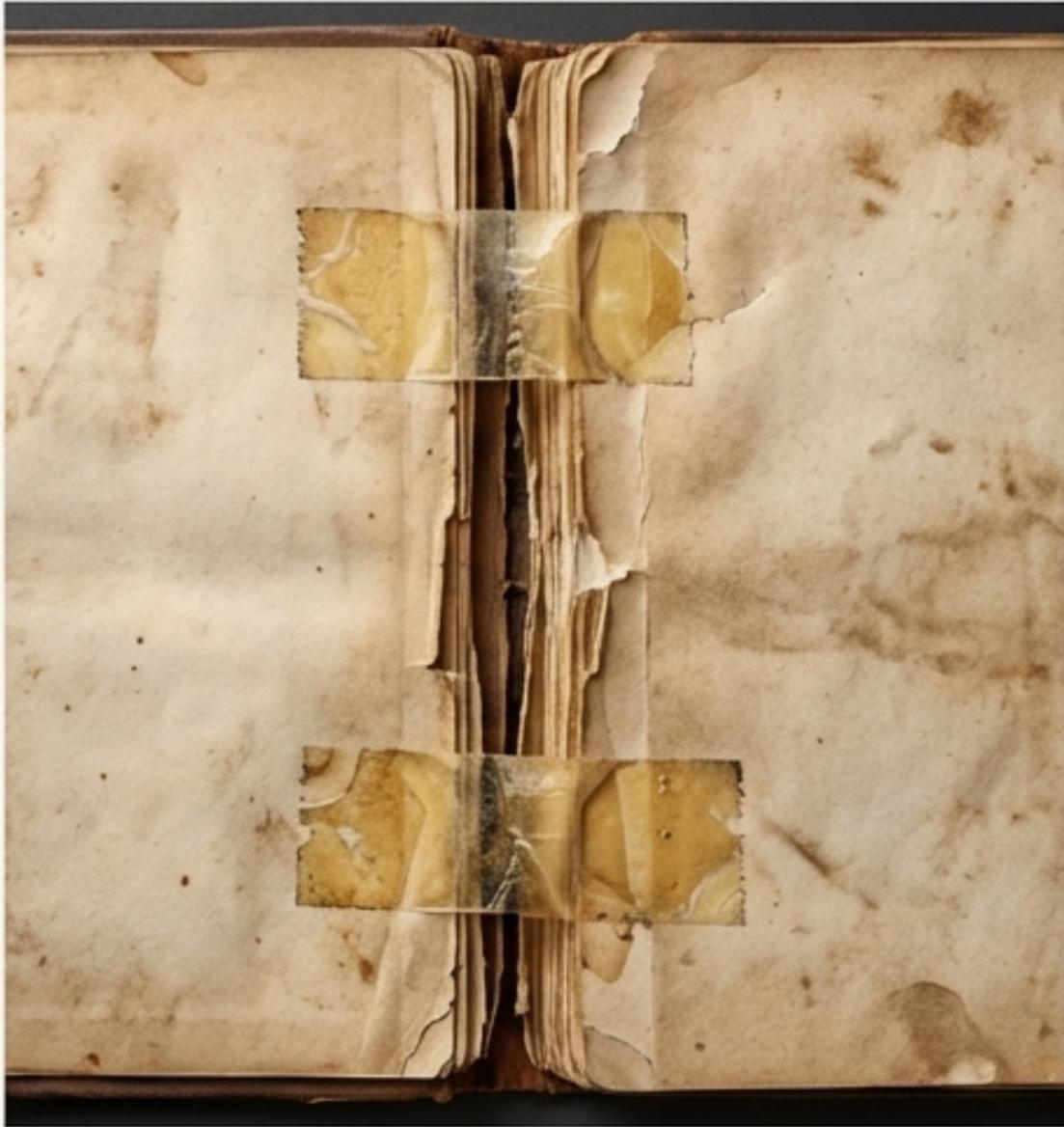
Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon flee Kirtland to escape creditors and dissenters.

April 1838

Oliver Cowdery is excommunicated.

Just 15 days after excommunicating Cowdery—the last of the Three Witnesses—Joseph Smith begins dictating a new official history. **This new history includes the grand 1838 First Vision, establishing his authority as absolute and God-given at a time when it was at its lowest point.**

# The Evidence of a Cover-Up



- **The Church's Claim:** The official essay states the 1832 account was “generally forgotten.”
- **The Reality:** In the 1930s, Church Historian and Apostle Joseph Fielding Smith discovered the account, recognized it was problematic, and physically removed the pages from the journal, hiding them in his private safe. The pages only “reappeared” in the 1960s after historians learned of their existence and the Tanners began writing about the missing account.
- Joseph Fielding Smith taped the pages back into the book and had the account published in a BYU student’s thesis to control the narrative of its release.

**This was not an act of forgetting, but a deliberate suppression of a key historical document.**

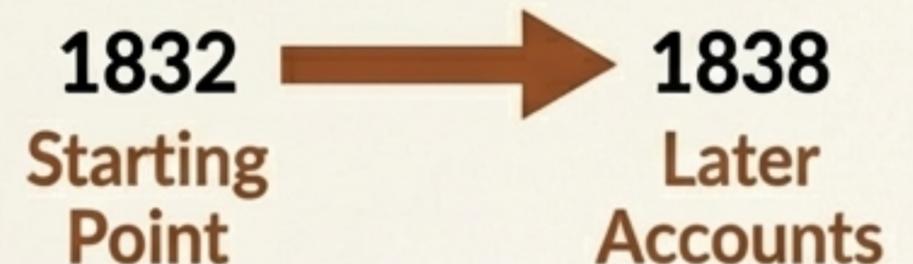
# An “Outlier” or a Starting Point?

## The Church’s Explanation

“ Three of the four accounts clearly state that two personages appeared...  
The **outlier** is Joseph Smith’s 1832 account...”

## A More Consistent View of the Evidence

- The 1832 account cannot be an ‘outlier’ when it is the *first* and is supported by *all* of Joseph Smith’s other contemporary teachings and scriptural productions (Original Book of Mormon, 1831 JST Bible revision, witness statements).
- It is not an outlier; it is the **starting point** of an evolving story. The later accounts are the ones that deviate from the original theology.
- Framing the first account as the ‘outlier’ is an attempt to reverse the timeline and mislead the reader.



# Did it Occur as Claimed? The Evidence in Totality.

## Official Narrative

-  A single, consistent event in 1820.
-  God and Jesus appeared to answer which church was true.
-  A unique, singular event in world history.



## Historical Record

-  A story first told 12 years later and changed dramatically over time.
-  An evolving narrative that mirrored Joseph's changing theology and was written in response to leadership crises.
-  An experience similar to many other contemporary visionary accounts.

Returning to **President Hinckley's words**, the historical evidence shows the First Vision did **not occur as Joseph Smith claimed**. It was not a singular event, but a story crafted and retrofitted **over time** to serve a purpose.