

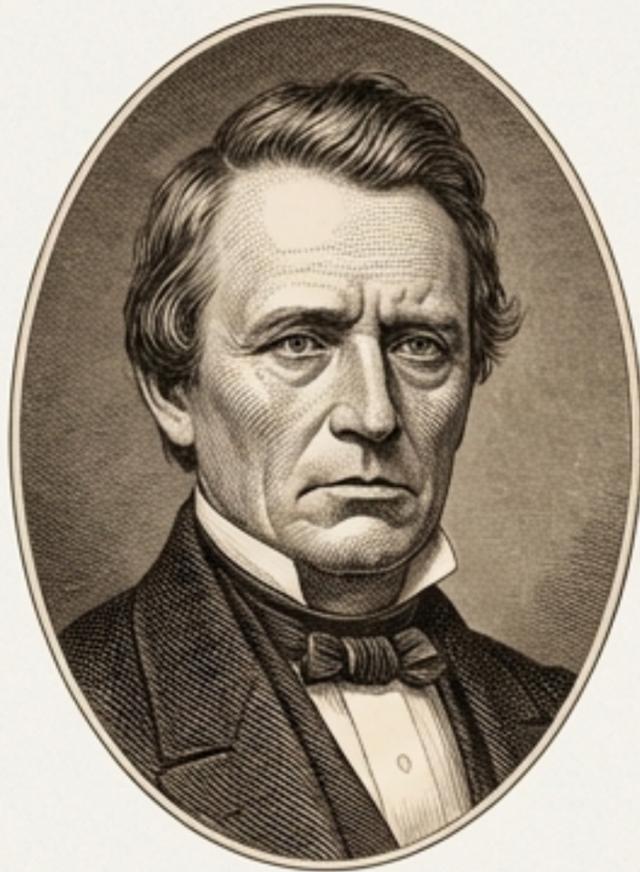
The Mantle of a Prophet

An Evidence-Based Investigation of the Transfiguration of Brigham Young



How are foundational religious miracles born?

A Leaderless People: The 1844 Succession Crisis



Sidney Rigdon



Brigham Young

Following Joseph Smith's murder in June 1844, the church was thrown into confusion. There was no clear, divinely appointed plan for succession.

The central question facing the Saints in Nauvoo was: Who now holds the authority to lead God's church?

Multiple leaders claimed the right to lead, including Sidney Rigdon, Joseph's longtime counselor, and Brigham Young, the President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.



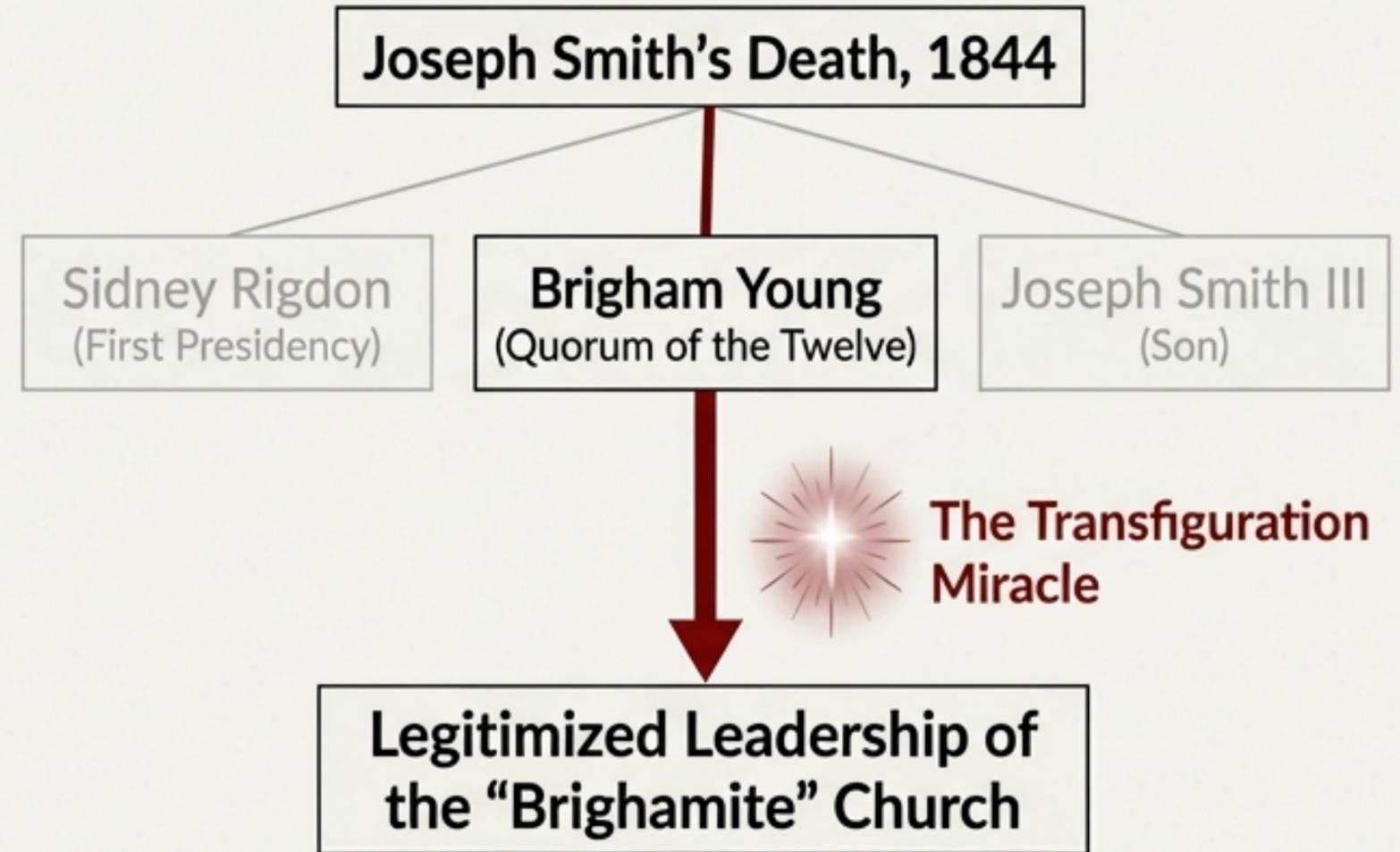
The Miracle at Nauvoo

As Brigham Young rose to speak, a miracle occurred. Eyewitnesses reported his appearance transformed. His face, his gestures, even his stature became that of the martyred prophet, Joseph Smith. Hundreds in the audience believed it was Joseph himself, returned to speak. It was reported that even Brigham's voice took on the unique sound of Joseph's, down to a lisp from a chipped tooth.

“It is Joseph himself personified.” – LDS Answers

The Divine Stamp of Approval

The Transfiguration story is more than a miracle; it is the cornerstone of Brigham Young's authority and the legitimacy of the church he would lead to Utah. It serves as the divine sign that God had chosen Brigham, not Sidney Rigdon or Joseph's own son, to be the rightful successor. It justifies following him over all other claimants.



“If the Lord miraculously transfigured Brigham Young's appearance, Brigham Young was divinely sanctioned as Joseph Smith's successor. If the Transfiguration never took place, the very foundations of our LDS faith in history are weakened.” – LDS Answers

An event this miraculous, **witnessed by hundreds,**
must be in the historical record.

**What does the
contemporary
evidence say? ?**

The Seven-Year Silence

The most consequential event in modern religious history supposedly occurred, yet not a single person or publication mentioned it until at least seven years later. Despite numerous journals, letters, and newspapers from August 8, 1844, there are zero contemporary accounts of a transfiguration.



SEVEN YEARS OF SILENCE



**AUG 8, 1844:
The Meeting**

**c. 1851:
First Allusions
Emerge**

Wilford Woodruff
“Wrote seven pages in his journal about the day’s events. No mention of a miracle.”

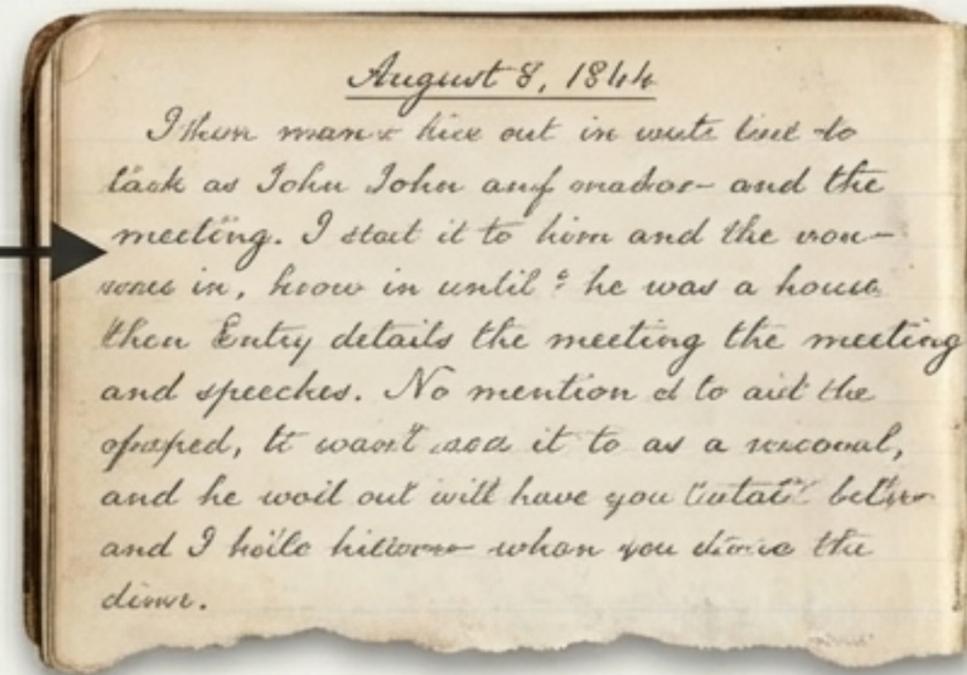
Parley P. Pratt
“Wrote about the day in his autobiography. No mention.”

Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, Willard Richards
“All present, their writings contain no mention of any miraculous event.”

Rewriting the Record

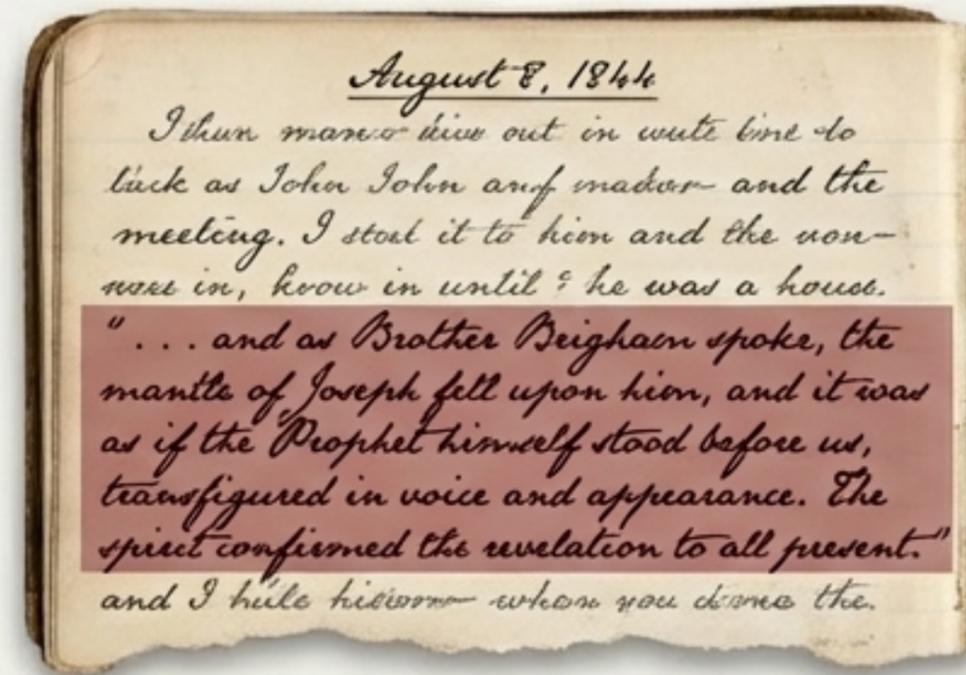
Some later accounts used to “prove” the miracle were actively altered. The diary of George Lobb was long cited by scholars as a **contemporary account**. However, analysis revealed it **was a copy** Lobb made of his own diary years later, with the Transfiguration story added in.

Original Diary (c. 1844)



Original Diary (c. 1844)

Altered Copy (c. 1854)



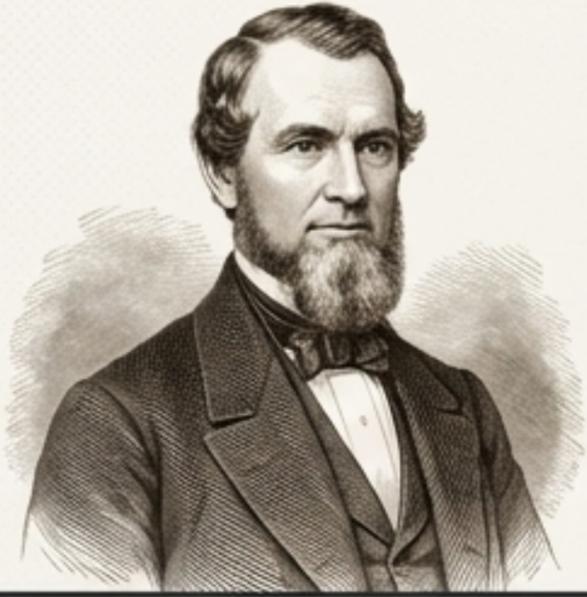
Altered Copy (c. 1854)

Entry details the meeting and speeches. No mention of a miracle.

Transfiguration story inserted here ten years after the fact.

The original diary has since been found. It contains **no references whatsoever** to the Transfiguration of Brigham Young.

The Witness Who Wasn't There



In the 1869 General Conference, **Apostle Orson Hyde** bore a powerful, first-person testimony of seeing and hearing the miracle.

“Am I mistaken, said I, or is it really the voice of Joseph Smith? ...it was not only the voice of Joseph but there were the features, the gestures, and even the stature of Joseph before us in the person of Brigham.”



The Reality Check

Historical records, including the journal of Wilford Woodruff, confirm Orson Hyde was still traveling back from a mission. He arrived in Nauvoo *five days after* the event took place.

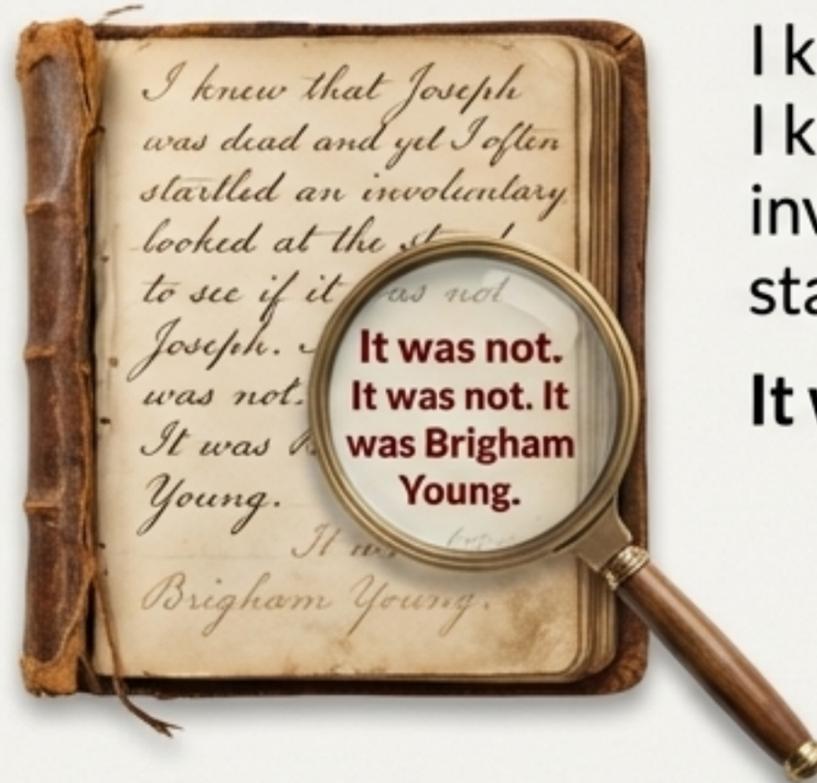
Follow the Footnotes: The First Account

The earliest known written allusion to the event comes from Emily Hoyt's diary, seven years later. The Church's *Saints* book frames this as a key witness to the miracle.

The Church's Framing (Saints)

"Emily Hoyt...testifying how much he looked and sounded like Joseph on the stand."

What Emily Hoyt Actually Wrote



I knew that Joseph was dead
I knew that Joseph yet I often startled an
involuntary look at the
stand to see if it was

It was not. It was B

It was not. It was Brigham Young.

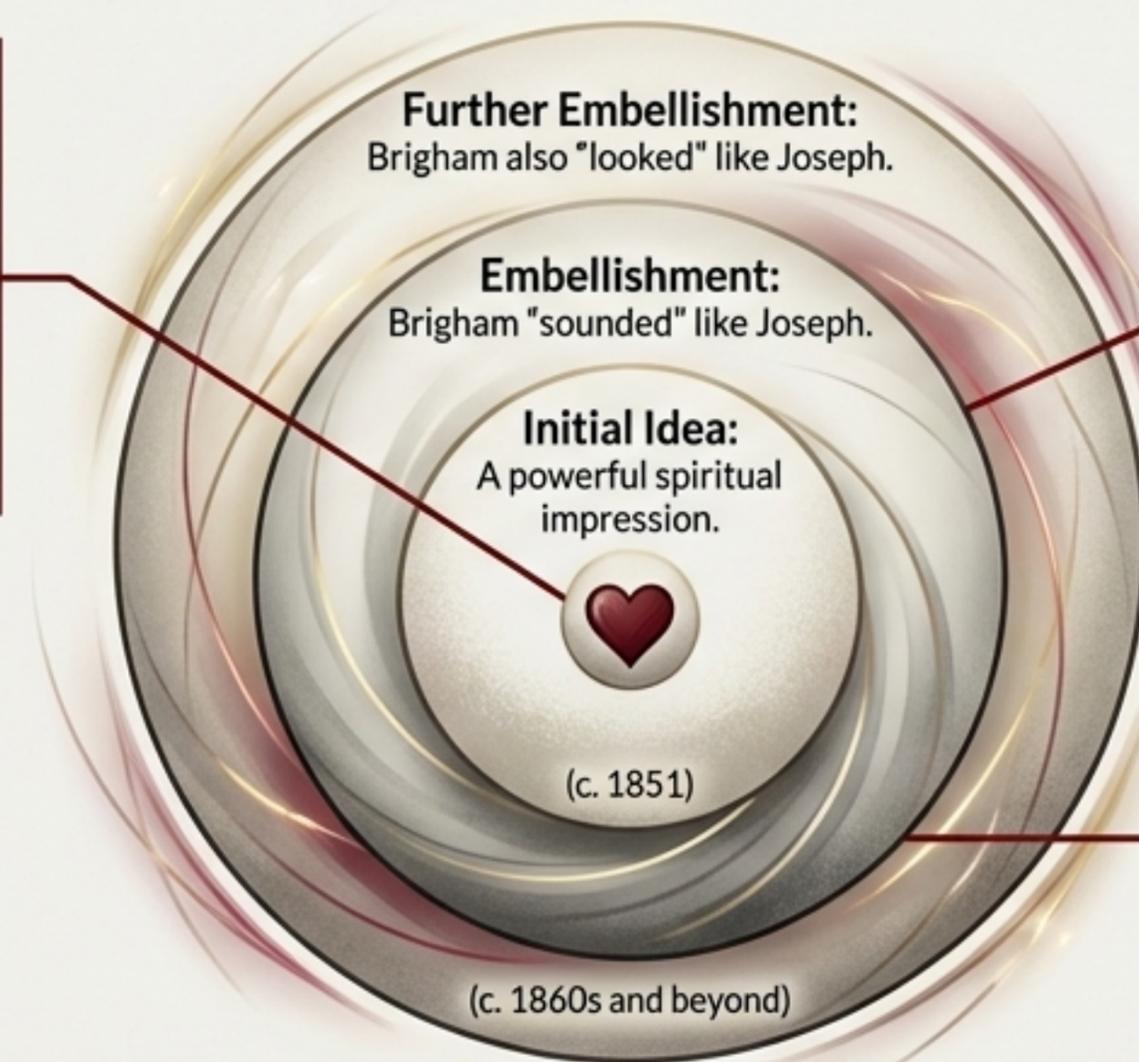
Hoyt's account describes a powerful *spiritual impression* and similarity in leadership style that *reminded* her of Joseph. She explicitly states it was *not* a physical transformation. The story grew from this emotional confirmation into a literal, physical miracle.

The Anatomy of a Myth

If the miracle didn't happen, how did so many people come to believe—and even “remember”—it? The answer lies in human psychology and social dynamics.

Motivated Reasoning

The intense need to justify following Brigham to Utah and believe they made the right choice.



Contagious Thought

As stories are told and retold, they spread through a community, becoming more detailed and widely accepted over time.

Collective Memory

Over years, a community's shared narrative can reshape individual memories. People can come to “remember” details that never occurred or being at events they never attended.

“A rational and likely explanation for this faulty group memory is that a contagious thought can spread through the populace to create a collective mind.” – Richard Van Wagoner, *Dialogue*

A Laboratory for Miracle Stories

The pattern of the Transfiguration story—a late-emerging narrative that grows more miraculous over time and lacks contemporary evidence—is not unique in Mormon history. It provides a lens through which to re-examine other foundational events.

	The Transfiguration	The First Vision	Priesthood Restoration
No Contemporary Accounts	✓	✓	✓
First Mention Years Later	7 years	12 years	5+ years
Story Evolves Over Time	✓	✓	✓
Serves a Legitimacy Crisis	✓	✓	✓

The First Vision: First written account appears 12 years after the event. The story evolves over multiple retellings, changing from “the Lord” to two distinct personages (God and Jesus) to match developing theology.

The Priesthood Restoration: The miraculous visit of Peter, James, and John is absent from the original 1829 revelations and early church history. It was retrofitted into later versions of the Doctrine and Covenants to bolster Joseph Smith’s authority.

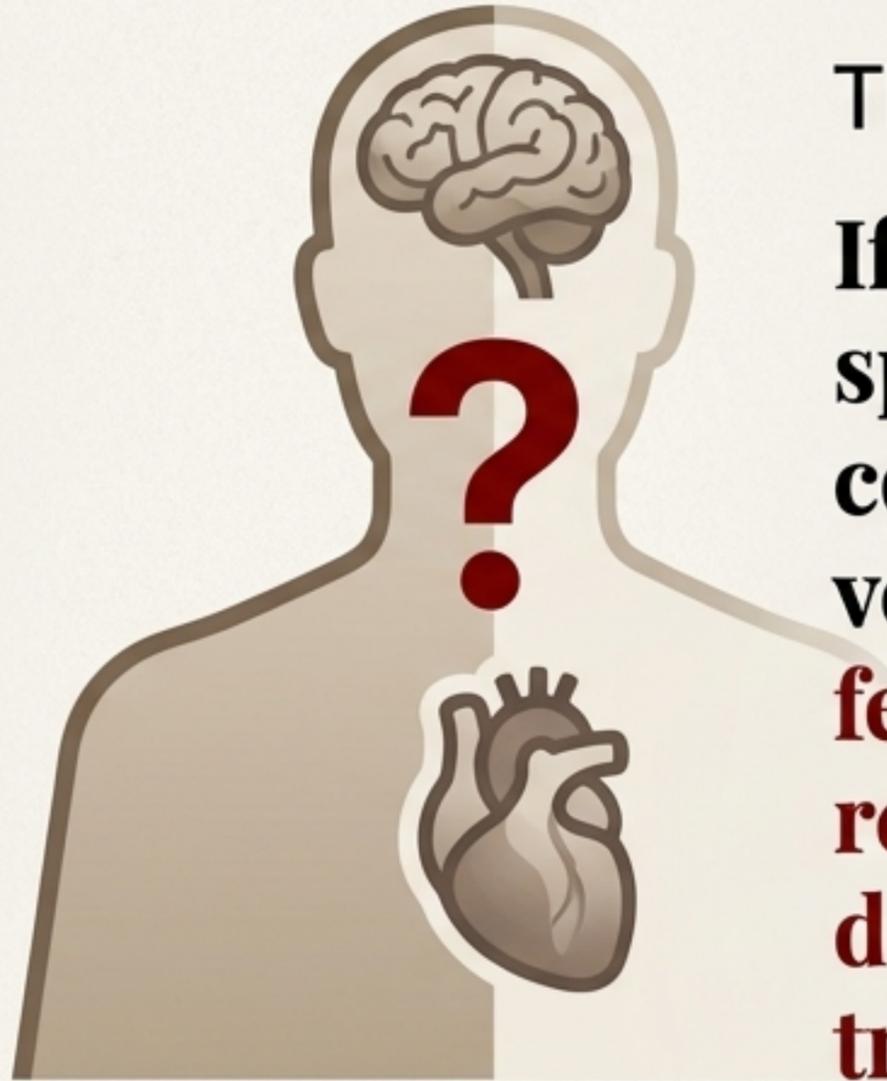
The Epistemological Challenge

The Premise

The story of Orson Hyde is deeply problematic.

An **Apostle** tells a faith-promoting story from the pulpit that we know is **false**.

The audience undoubtedly felt powerful spiritual emotions—what they would call “the Spirit.”



The Question

This raises a critical question:

If people can have profound spiritual witnesses confirming a story that is verifiably untrue, how can feelings be considered a reliable method for determining historical truth?

A Tale of Two Histories

The Traditional Story



A miraculous, public event where God divinely sanctioned Brigham Young as Joseph Smith's successor. It is a cornerstone of faith.

The Historical Evidence

Timeline:

- 1844: Event
- 7 Years Later: First Mention
- 15 Years Later: Transfiguration Story Grows

George Lobb Diary

A compelling but ordinary speech that won the political support of the Saints. The miracle story was an origin myth created years later to solve a legitimacy crisis, retroactively sanctifying a political victory.

The Transfiguration of Brigham Young is not a historical event, but a powerful example of how religious myths are born to meet the needs of a community.

Key Findings & Further Reading

Key Takeaways

- The story of Brigham Young's miraculous transfiguration has no contemporary historical evidence. The first accounts appear seven years after the event.
- Key leaders present on the day, like Wilford Woodruff, wrote extensively but never mentioned a miracle.
- Later accounts were manipulated (George Lobb's diary) or based on false memory (Apostle Orson Hyde's testimony).
- The earliest account (Emily Hoyt's) describes a spiritual impression, not a physical miracle, showing how the legend grew over time.
- This pattern provides a powerful model for understanding the evolution of other foundational stories in Mormonism and world religions.

For Deeper Study



[LDS Discussions Essay: "The Transfiguration of Brigham Young"](#)



[Dialogue Journal: Richard Van Wagoner, "The Making of a Mormon Myth"](#)



[Mormon Stories Podcast: Episode 1783, "Did Brigham Young Transform Into Joseph Smith?"](#)