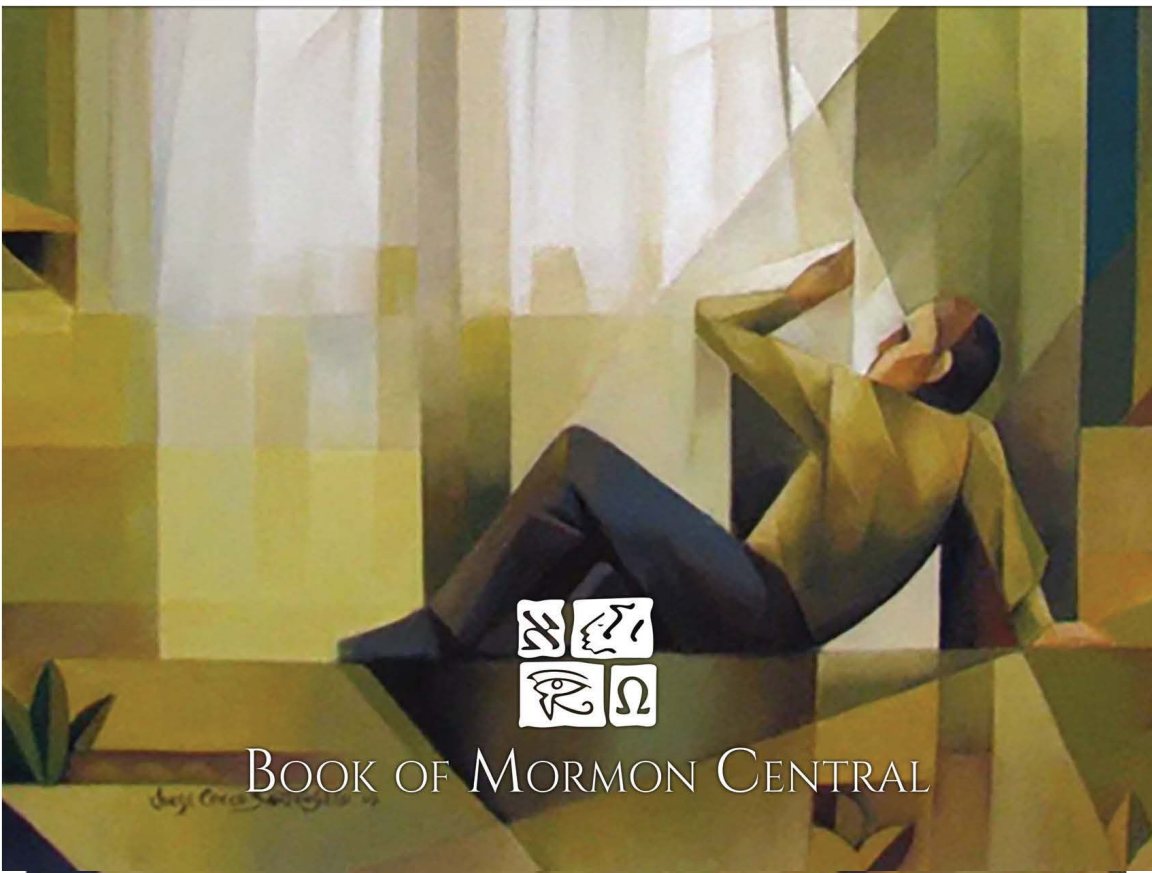




INSIGHTS INTO  
JOSEPH SMITH'S  
FIRST VISION



BOOK OF MORMON CENTRAL

Jay Cross, 2010

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## FOREWORD

Joseph Smith's First Vision of God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ occupies a foundationally important position in the lives and faith of members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Successive generations of latter-day prophets and apostles have testified of the consummate significance of the revelation of the Father and the Son to the boy Joseph in a grove of trees "on the morning of a beautiful, clear day, early in the spring of eighteen hundred and twenty" (Joseph Smith—History 1:14). So momentous is this event in the historical and theological consciousness of Latter-day Saints that President Russell M. Nelson designated the year 2020 as a bicentennial year of celebration.<sup>1</sup> "In the springtime of the year 2020, it will be exactly 200 years since Joseph Smith experienced the theophany that we know as the First Vision," President Nelson said in his closing remarks at the October 2019 general conference of the Church. "God the Father and His Beloved Son, Jesus Christ, appeared to Joseph, a 14-year-old youth. That event marked the onset of the Restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ in its fulness, precisely as foretold in the Holy Bible."<sup>2</sup> Sixth months later, during the April 2020 general conference, President Nelson unveiled a new bicentennial proclamation to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the First Vision. This proclamation—only the sixth issued by the Church in its nearly two-hundred-year history—read in part,

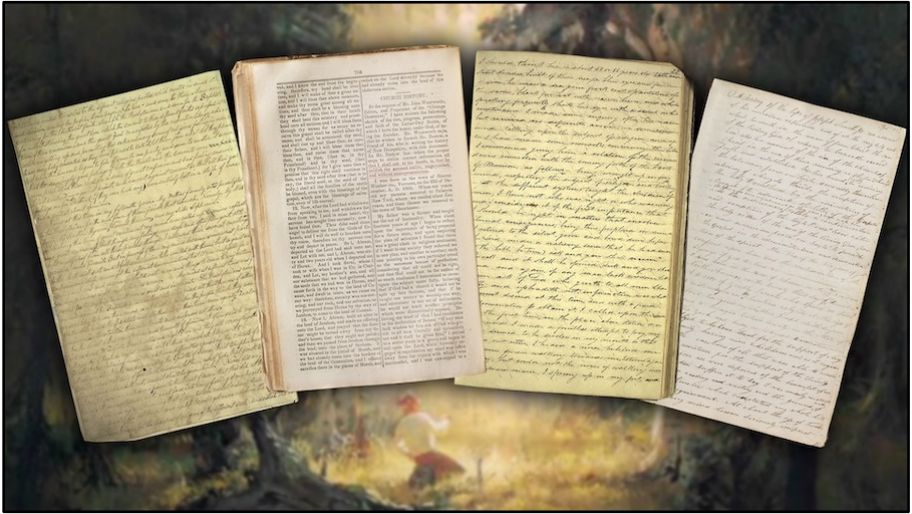
Two hundred years ago, on a beautiful spring morning in 1820, young Joseph Smith, seeking to know which church to join, went into the woods to pray near his home in upstate New York, USA. He had questions regarding the salvation of his soul and trusted that God would direct him. In humility, we declare that in answer to his prayer, God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, appeared to Joseph and inaugurated the "restitution of all things" (Acts 3:21) as foretold in the Bible. In this vision, he learned that following the death of the original Apostles, Christ's New Testament Church was lost from the earth. Joseph would be instrumental in its return.<sup>3</sup>

To participate in this bicentennial celebration, to heighten appreciation for the First Vision, and to help better inform Latter-day Saints of the founding event of their history, in early 2020 Book of Mormon Central (BMC) began publishing a series of short online articles offering insights into the First Vision. These "Joseph Smith—History Insights" appeared on BMC's Pearl of Great Price Central (POGP

Central) subdomain website accompanied by a bibliography of scholarly resources on the First Vision. Drawing from primary sources as well as both cutting-edge and pioneering secondary academic literature on the topic, the Insights highlighted the extant first- and secondhand accounts of the Prophet's First Vision, explored its historical and literary context, and probed its theological importance. By general conference weekend of 4–5 April 2020, twenty such Insights on the opening verses of Joseph Smith—History had appeared online.

*Insights into Joseph Smith's First Vision* has been undertaken principally to gather and present these twenty Insights (plus some previously unpublished content) in a convenient and visually engaging manner. Besides some slight editing and revisions, the Insights as they appear here are the same as they appear on the Pearl of Great Price Central website. Some reformatting has been done to accommodate the needs of a PDF format and to improve aesthetic quality. (For instance, the sections titled "Further Reading" at the end of each Insight on the POGP Central website have been gathered together and come after all twenty Insights in this version. Visuals and artwork have also been rearranged.)

It is the sincere hope and desire of the staff and volunteers at Book of Mormon Central that readers will find *Insights into Joseph Smith's First Vision* helpful in their quest to pursue learning "by study and also by faith" (Doctrine and Covenants 88:118). It is also their hope that this work will increase faith and conviction in the prophetic calling of Joseph Smith, the Restoration of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and the reality of God the Father and His Beloved Son in the hearts and minds of Latter-day Saints and other sincere seekers of truth.



## JOSEPH SMITH'S FIRSTHAND ACCOUNTS OF THE FIRST VISION

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**M**embers of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are inspired by Joseph Smith's account of his First Vision of God the Father and Jesus Christ as recorded in Joseph Smith—History in the Pearl of Great Price. Canonized as scripture on Sunday, October 10, 1880,<sup>1</sup> this account of the First Vision has been enshrined for Latter-day Saints as the canonical narrative of the early life and prophetic calling of Joseph Smith.<sup>2</sup>

But while Latter-day Saints are mainly familiar with the canonical account of the First Vision that was first drafted by Joseph Smith in 1838–39, over the years historians have identified three other firsthand accounts of the First Vision left by the Prophet. As with the four canonical gospels in the New Testament that narrate the life and teachings of Jesus, the four primary accounts of the First Vision can be read individually to appreciate the nuance and subtle differences that they communicate in each retelling or they can be read together in harmony to appreciate them as an organic whole. Whether read individually or in harmony, each



account communicates profound truths about God and Joseph Smith's prophetic call.<sup>3</sup>

The primary accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision have been conveniently collected and digitized by the Joseph Smith Papers Project.<sup>4</sup> They are:

[The 1832 Account: JS History, ca. Summer 1832, pp. 1–3.](#)

This is the earliest account of the First Vision and is recorded in Joseph Smith's own hand. It is a deeply personal and poignant narrative that is couched in Joseph's quest to find forgiveness for his sins as a young man. It features an extended direct quotation of what the Lord instructed Joseph in the vision.

[The 1835 Account: JS, Journal, 9–11 Nov. 1835, pp. 23–24.](#)

This recitation of the First Vision stems from Joseph Smith's encounter with the eccentric Robert Matthews in November 1835. Joseph and Matthews discussed religious matters during their meeting as both claimed prophetic authority. Part of the conversation included Joseph's description of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon and the First Vision. This account includes the detail not present in other accounts that Joseph saw "many angels" in his vision of the Father and the Son.

[The 1838 Account: JS History, 1838–1856, vol. A–1, pp. 2–3](#)

Undoubtedly the most famous account of the First Vision, this recitation opened what later evolved into the six-volume *History of the Church* and was canonized in the Pearl of Great Price. Written at a time when the persecution of the Saints in Missouri was fresh on the Prophet's mind, the tone of this retelling is more defensive and apologetic and emphasizes the theme of opposition against Joseph personally as well as his efforts to restore the Church of Jesus Christ.

[The 1842 Account: The Wentworth Letter \("Church History," Times and Seasons 3, no. 9 \[March 1, 1842\]: 706–707.\)](#)

Published in 1842 in the Church's newspaper *Times and Seasons*, this account was prepared at the request of Chicago newspaperman John Wentworth. It was contextualized as part of a larger "sketch of the rise, progress, persecution, and faith of the Latter-Day Saints." Peppered with Latin phrases, carefully crafted for wide public consumption, and drawing language from previously published records, this account of the First Vision shows the Prophet's evolving literary style and reliance on clerks who helped him (re)formulate his narrative in later years.

The 1835, 1838, and 1842 accounts of the First Vision were copied or otherwise repurposed on a few occasions in Joseph Smith's lifetime, attesting to their importance. As one historian has remarked, "Joseph Smith's [F]irst [V]ision may be the best documented theophany in history. . . . Joseph Smith worked hard to document his experience in the grove, and scholars have worked hard to raise awareness of his several accounts."<sup>5</sup>

Rather than feel threatened or bothered by the existence of multiple accounts of the First Vision, Latter-day Saints can rightly rejoice that they have access to additional records that complement the canonical account in the Pearl of Great Price. As is true with all books of scripture, "The [F]irst [V]ision accounts were created in specific historical settings that shape what they say and how they say it. Each of the accounts of Joseph Smith's [F]irst [V]ision has its own history. Each was created in circumstances that determined how it was remembered and communicated and thus how it was transmitted to us. Each account has gaps and omissions. Each adds detail and richness."<sup>6</sup>

## THE 1832 FIRST VISION ACCOUNT

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The earliest firsthand account of Joseph Smith’s First Vision was written in the summer of 1832.<sup>1</sup> Part of a larger, ambitious historical narrative “of the life of Joseph Smith Jr.” that includes “an account of his marvilous experience” and “an account of the rise of the church of Christ in the eve of time,”<sup>2</sup> this account of the First Vision is the only extant rendition that is preserved in the Prophet’s own hand.

The origin of the 1832 history that preserves this early account of the First Vision can be placed in the context of a shifting emphasis in recordkeeping among early Latter-day Saints. Spurred on by revelation commanding that a record and history be kept of the rise of the newly-formed Church of Christ (Doctrine and Covenants 21:1; 85:1–2), “the circa summer 1832 history came about as part of a new phase in [Joseph Smith]’s record-keeping practices. During the first four years of Mormon record keeping (1828–1831), [Joseph] focused primarily on preserving his revelatory texts. . . . This focus changed in 1832, when [Joseph] began documenting his personal life in detail for the first time, both in his history and in the journal he began on 27 November 1832.”<sup>3</sup>

“In the early 1830s,” note the editors of the Joseph Smith Papers Project, “when this history was written, it appears that [Joseph] had not broadcast the details of his first vision of Deity” with the possible exception of a hinting reference to the First Vision in an 1830 revelation.<sup>4</sup>

Initially, [Joseph] may have considered this vision to be a personal experience tied to his own religious explorations. He was not accustomed to recording personal events, and he did not initially record the vision as he later did the sacred texts at the center of his attention. Only when [Joseph] expanded his focus to include historical records did he write down a detailed account of the theophany he experienced as a youth. The result was a simple, unpolished account of his first “marvilous experience,” written largely in his own handwriting. The account was not published or

widely circulated at the time, though in later years he told the story more frequently.<sup>5</sup>

It isn't clear exactly when in 1832 this history was recorded, but a very likely time frame for its composition is sometime between July and November of that year.<sup>6</sup> Frederick G. Williams assisted Joseph as a scribe to record the opening pages of this history. The way Joseph told this account of his vision was likely influenced, in part, by experiences he had while staying in Greenville, Indiana.<sup>7</sup> That spring he traveled with Sidney Rigdon, Jesse Gause, Peter Whitmer Jr., and Newel K. Whitney to Missouri. On the way back to Ohio in May, Whitney broke his leg in a stagecoach accident, forcing Joseph to stay with him in Greenville to help him recover. During this time Joseph had plentiful opportunities to ponder on his standing before the

A page from Joseph Smith's 1832 history written in his own hand.

Lord and reflect on the trials that faced him. Several of the prominent themes in the 1832 account of the First Vision parallel themes that appear in Joseph's letters from his time in Greenville, which speak to the strong likelihood that at least the narrative and thematic seeds of the 1832 history were planted in Joseph's mind during this time.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps the most notable aspect of the 1832 account is that it does not explicitly speak of two personages visiting Joseph as later accounts do. Rather, it speaks of "the open[ing] the heavens upon [Joseph]" and Joseph then seeing "the Lord."<sup>9</sup> The reason for this apparent discrepancy with his

later accounts has been explored by Latter-day Saint writers who argue that, while admittedly not as clear as the later accounts, the language of this account does not necessarily preclude the possibility of two personages being described.<sup>10</sup>

Another remarkable detail in this account of the vision is Joseph’s description of “a pillar of ~~fire~~ light above the brightness of the sun at noon day” shining above him. Joseph appears to have struggled somewhat to communicate what he experienced in the vision, as he first wrote “fire” to describe what he saw but immediately crossed it out and replaced it with the word “light.”<sup>11</sup> This gives a glimpse into Joseph’s struggle to describe his revelations with what he called “the little narrow prison . . . of paper, pen, and ink; and a crooked, broken, scattered, and imperfect language.”<sup>12</sup>

After the Prophet’s death in 1844, the 1832 history traveled west with the Saints to Utah and was kept in the Church Historian’s Office. Being eclipsed in notoriety and importance by Joseph’s canonical 1838–39 account in the Pearl of Great Price, it went unpublished until 1965 when Paul Cheesman included a transcript of it in his master’s thesis.<sup>13</sup> Since then, the 1832 account has been published and discussed multiple times (including in official Church publications) and has regained a prominent place in the historical consciousness of Latter-day Saints.<sup>14</sup>

Although the 1832 account of the First Vision may be “the least polished” of the extant renditions, it is without question the most intimate. The later retellings “are more conscious of the vision’s significance for all mankind, but none surpasses this earliest known account at revealing what it meant personally to young Joseph Smith.”<sup>15</sup>

### *Circa Summer 1832 History*

(Following the standardized version [here](#); original available [here](#))

At about the age of twelve years, my mind become seriously impressed with regard to the all-important concerns for the welfare of my immortal soul, which led me to searching the scriptures—believing, as I was taught, that they contained the word of God and thus applying myself to them. My intimate acquaintance with those of different denominations led me to marvel exceedingly, for I discovered that they did not adorn their profession by a holy walk and godly conversation agreeable to what I found contained in that sacred depository. This was a grief to my soul.

Thus, from the age of twelve years to fifteen I pondered many things in my heart concerning the situation of the world of mankind, the contentions and divisions, the wickedness and abominations, and the darkness which pervaded

the minds of mankind. My mind became exceedingly distressed, for I became convicted of my sins, and by searching the scriptures I found that mankind did not come unto the Lord but that they had apostatized from the true and living faith, and there was no society or denomination that was built upon the gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the New Testament. I felt to mourn for my own sins and for the sins of the world, for I learned in the scriptures that God was the same yesterday, today, and forever, that he was no respecter of persons, for he was God.

For I looked upon the sun, the glorious luminary of the earth, and also the moon, rolling in their majesty through the heavens, and also the stars shining in their courses, and the earth also upon which I stood, and the beasts of the field, and the fowls of heaven, and the fish of the waters, and also man walking forth upon the face of the earth in majesty and in the strength of beauty, whose power and intelligence in governing the things which are so exceedingly great and marvelous, even in the likeness of him who created them. And when I considered upon these things, my heart exclaimed, "Well hath the wise man said, 'It is a fool that saith in his heart, there is no God.'" My heart exclaimed, "All, all these bear testimony and bespeak an omnipotent and omnipresent power, a being who maketh laws and decreeth and bindeth all things in their bounds, who filleth eternity, who was and is and will be from all eternity to eternity." And I considered all these things and that that being seeketh such to worship him as worship him in spirit and in truth.

Therefore, I cried unto the Lord for mercy, for there was none else to whom I could go and obtain mercy. And the Lord heard my cry in the wilderness, and while in the attitude of calling upon the Lord, in the sixteenth year of my age, a pillar of light above the brightness of the sun at noonday came down from above and rested upon me. I was filled with the spirit of God, and 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. Behold, the world lieth in sin at this time, and none doeth good, no, not one. They have turned aside from the gospel and keep not my commandments. They draw near to me with their lips while their hearts are far from me. And mine anger is kindling against the inhabitants of the earth, to

visit them according to their ungodliness and to bring to pass that which hath been spoken by the mouth of the prophets and apostles. Behold and lo, I come quickly, as it is written of me, in the cloud, clothed in the glory of my Father.”

My soul was filled with love, and for many days I could rejoice with great joy. The Lord was with me, but I could find none that would believe the heavenly vision. Nevertheless, I pondered these things in my heart.

## THE 1835 FIRST VISION ACCOUNT

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In early November 1835, Joseph Smith was visited by a man named Robert Matthews (also known as Joshua “the Jewish minister”), a Christian preacher who converted to Judaism and began claiming that he was the reincarnated apostle Matthias.<sup>1</sup> During their meeting the two began “talking upon the subject of religion” and the Prophet gave Matthews “a relation of the circumstances connected with the coming forth of the book of Mormon.”<sup>2</sup> As part of this narrative, Joseph retold his First Vision experience.

As he described it, “respecting the subject of religion” Joseph was as a young man deeply “perplexed in mind.” He could not tell “who was right or who was wrong” among “the different systems taught [by] the children of men” but recognized the “first importance that [he] should be right, in matters that involved eternal consequences.” And so with faith in biblical teachings found in passages such as Matthew 7:7 and James 1:5 Joseph relayed how he “retired to the silent grove and bowd down before the Lord” to resolve his perplexity. “[I]nformation was what [he] most desired at this time,” Joseph recounted, “and with a fixed determination to obtain it, [he] called upon the Lord for the first time.” After encountering a terrifying supernatural entity which attempted to stop him from praying, Joseph described how “a pillar of fire appeared above [his] head” that “rested down upon” him and “filled [him] with joy unspeakable.” In that “pillar of flame” appeared a “personage” who was then followed by another that “appeared like unto the first.” This second personage informed Joseph that his sins had been forgiven and testified of Jesus Christ. Many angels too were present in “this first communication” that occurred when Joseph was “about 14. years old.”<sup>3</sup>

Among the other reasons for its importance, this account of the First Vision offers a glimpse into how Joseph began understanding the step-by-step unfolding of his prophetic call. As historian Steven C. Harper has recognized, “In this account Joseph cast the vision as the first in a series of events that led to the translation of the Book of Mormon.”<sup>4</sup> Although it would take a few more years for Joseph to more fully contextualize and narrate the importance of what he called his “first



communication” with Deity, it is clear from the 1835 account that he was already formulating a coherent narrative structure for how he retold his vision to inquirers.

Unlike his highly personal 1832 history, this retelling of the First Vision by the Prophet was to a total stranger who literally walked into Joseph’s house unannounced and asked about his experience.<sup>5</sup> It is therefore understandable that “Joseph’s conversation on this occasion tended to deal with objective details, rather than intimate feelings. This account is plain, bold, and to the point.”<sup>6</sup> What’s more, Joseph drew on biblical language and imagery to describe his vision that would have appealed to a Jewish convert such as Matthews. Terms such as “pillar of fire” used in this account evoke the Exodus narrative in the Bible that describes the Lord appearing to Israel in just such (e.g. Exodus 13:21). “[T]he withholding of any mention of a divine name in connection with the Supreme One,” together with the mention of ‘many angels in this vision,’ would have [likewise] comported with Jewish sensitivities.”<sup>7</sup> At the same time, however, “the clear assertion of the presence of two divine beings and the unambiguous testimony that Jesus Christ is the Son of God were bold declarations” for Joseph to have made in front of his Jewish guest.<sup>8</sup>

The added detail of “many angels” being present in the vision is perhaps the most notable unique detail in this retelling. It isn’t clear precisely what the Prophet meant by this, and indeed including it in the narrative appears to have been something of an afterthought (the line is inserted interlineally in the journal). Notwithstanding, “A precedent for a visitation of Deity and angels can be seen in the account in 3 Nephi in which Jesus Christ descended to the earth to instruct His people and was followed by ‘angels descending . . . in the midst of fire’ to act as ministers (3 Ne. 17:24).” The identity of these angels “can only be guessed” since they go unnamed



*Robert Matthews (aka Joshua "the Jewish minister"), who visited Joseph Smith in his home in Kirtland, Ohio in early November 1835.*

by Joseph. “It is not known if these celestial visitants acted as a heavenly retinue (see Rev. 5:11; 1 Ne. 1:8; Alma 36:22), served in some type of ministerial capacity, or represented the many angels who would visit Joseph during the future process of restoration.”<sup>9</sup> What is known is that one week after his meeting with Matthews, Joseph told another inquirer (a non-Latter-day Saint named Erastus Holmes) about his “first visitation of Angels” when he was “about 14, years old.”<sup>10</sup>

The significance of this account of the First Vision was not lost on Joseph’s clerks, who had it recopied with only slight revisions into his 1834–1836 history.<sup>11</sup> One of the clerks involved in the project “explained that the intention [of the history] was to provide a ‘faithful narration of every important item in [Joseph Smith’s] every-day-occurrences.’”<sup>12</sup> The recopying of this account of the First Vision from Joseph’s private journal into another documentary repository among the early Latter-day Saints further signifies its importance. “Even so, [this account] remained generally unknown to Latter-day Saints until” its publication in the 1960s.<sup>13</sup>

*Journal, 9–11 November 1835*

(Following the standardized version [here](#); original available [here](#))

Being wrought up in my mind respecting the subject of religion, and looking at the different systems taught the children of men, I knew not who was right or who was wrong. And considering it of the first importance that I should be right in matters that involve eternal consequences, being thus perplexed in mind I retired to the silent grove and bowed down before the Lord, under a realizing sense that he had said (if the Bible be true), “Ask, and you shall receive; knock, and it shall be opened; seek, and you shall find;” and again, “If any man lack wisdom, let him ask of God, who giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not.”

Information was what I most desired at this time, and with a fixed determination to obtain it, I called upon the Lord for the first time in the place above stated. Or in other words, I made a fruitless attempt to pray; my tongue seemed to be swollen in my mouth, so that I could not utter. I heard a noise behind me, like some person walking towards me. I strove again to pray but could not. The noise of walking seemed to draw nearer. I sprung up on my feet and looked around but saw no person or thing that was calculated to produce the noise of walking.

I kneeled again. My mouth was opened and my tongue liberated, and I called on the Lord in mighty prayer. A pillar of fire appeared above my head. It presently rested down upon me and filled me with joy unspeakable. A personage appeared in the midst of this pillar of flame, which was spread all around and yet nothing consumed. Another personage soon appeared, like unto the first. He said unto me, "Thy sins are forgiven thee." He testified unto me that Jesus Christ is the son of God. And I saw many angels in this vision. I was about fourteen years old when I received this first communication.

## THE 1838 FIRST VISION ACCOUNT

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**T**he 1838 account of the First Vision is the most detailed and fleshed out of the four accounts written or dictated by Joseph Smith. It is also the one most familiar to Latter-day Saints today, owing to the fact that it is the account canonized as Joseph Smith—History found in the Pearl of Great Price. The account was part of a new history Joseph Smith began with Sidney Rigdon and George W. Robinson on April 27, 1838 in Far West, Missouri. Joseph dictated his history to Robinson until September, when James Mulholland took over as the primary scribe. Shortly thereafter, the Missouri War broke out, Joseph was imprisoned, and the history writing stalled. It wasn't until June 10, 1839 that Joseph and Mulholland began again.<sup>1</sup>

The portion of the narrative relating the First Vision was originally dictated in April or May 1838. The original manuscript prepared by Robinson, however, is lost. Mulholland made a copy in the summer of 1839, and revisions to the narrative may have occurred at this time. This was a period of severe persecution for Joseph Smith and the Saints. Only weeks before he began writing this history, the hostilities of former friends turned apostates in Kirtland, Ohio forced Joseph to move to Far West. Then, as mentioned, the history was derailed by the Missouri War and Joseph's imprisonment in Liberty Jail.<sup>2</sup> These hostilities were undoubtedly at the forefront of his mind as he dictated this history. Thus, he began:

Owing to the many reports which have been put in circulation by evil disposed and designing persons in relation to the rise and progress of the Church of Latter day Saints . . . I have been induced to write this history so as to disabuse the publick mind, and put all enquirers after truth into possession of the facts as they have transpired in relation to both myself and the Church as far as I have such facts in possession.<sup>3</sup>

As James B. Allen and John W. Welch observed, “In this context, it is no wonder that persecution, contention, competition, religious excitement, bad feelings, strife, contempt, bitterness, hatred, and rejection were recalled so vividly and stated so graphically in this 1838–39 account.”<sup>4</sup> Steven C. Harper has also

noted, “An outward observer would not likely interpret these events as intensely as [Joseph] Smith subjectively did.”<sup>5</sup>

This account also came in the wake of multiple previous attempts at writing a history of the Church’s origins, each of which had been derailed for one reason or another.<sup>6</sup> This allowed Joseph to experiment with different styles and methods of writing before settling on the bold, autobiographical style embodied in this account. It’s clear that over the years Joseph had deeply contemplated how he wanted to tell his story. Now, with an urgent need “to set the record straight once and for all,” Joseph was finally ready to tell his story with resolute purpose, and according to Allen and Welch, “it is likely that Joseph would more carefully consider this account than he had the earlier versions.”<sup>7</sup>

The result is an account of his experience that is more fully developed out than the earlier rehearsals. Here, Joseph puts greater emphasis on the “unusual religious excitement” around him than was mentioned in previous accounts.<sup>8</sup> He also makes the impact that reading and pondering James 1:5 had on him more explicit in this narration than any other. With the recent persecutions of Ohio and Missouri fresh on his mind, this report is also the only one that mentions his confiding in—and being rejected by—a trusted Methodist minister, and it more poignantly elaborates on his feelings of being persecuted as a young boy. Perhaps most importantly, however, it is this account that most clearly establishes that it was both God the Father and his “beloved son,” Jesus Christ, who appeared to him.

As the canonized account, the 1838 narration of the First Vision has had the greatest influence on how Latter-day Saints understand, learn, teach, and visualize the experience Joseph had in the grove early in the spring of 1820. This account, more than any other, has shaped and defined the legacy of Joseph Smith’s First Vision.

*JS History, 1838–39*

(See [Joseph Smith–History 1:1–20](#); original [here](#).)

## THE 1842 FIRST VISION ACCOUNT

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In 1842, as Nauvoo, Illinois was growing rapidly and Joseph Smith was gaining more notoriety on a national level, a Chicago newspaperman named John Wentworth solicited “a summary of the doctrines and history of the Latter-day Saints” from Joseph on behalf of his friend George Barstow, who was writing a history of the state of New Hampshire.<sup>1</sup> Joseph obliged, and provided Wentworth with a short “sketch of the rise, progress, persecution, and faith of the Latter-Day Saints.”<sup>2</sup> Joseph took the request from Wentworth seriously, since “opportunities for favorable treatment of the church in non-Mormon publications were rare, and some previous attempts had not been entirely successful.”<sup>3</sup> In this history, which was ultimately not published by Barstow but was published by the Prophet in the *Times and Seasons* under the title “Church History,” and which is known widely today as the Wentworth Letter, “[Joseph] recounted his first vision of Deity and the production of the Book of Mormon. He also included a thirteen-point summary of Latter-day Saint beliefs, known today as the Articles of Faith.”<sup>4</sup>

The account of the First Vision provided by the Prophet in this history is somewhat brief, but hits upon the major points that are also present in his previous narratives. He begins this part of the history with, “When about fourteen years of age I began to reflect upon the importance of being prepared for a future state, and upon enquiring the plan of salvation I found that there was a great clash in religious sentiment.” “[C]onsidering that all could not be right,” Joseph reasoned, “and that God could not be the author of so much confusion I determined to investigate the subject more fully.” This Joseph did by turning to the Bible, where he encountered passages such as James 1:5. “I retired to a secret place in a grove and began to call upon the Lord,” he continued, and “while fervently engaged in supplication my mind was taken away from the objects with which I was surrounded, and I was enwrapped in a heavenly vision and saw two glorious personages who exactly resembled each other in features, and likeness, surrounded with a brilliant light which eclipsed the sun at noon-day.” The personages told Joseph “that all religious denominations were believing in incorrect doctrines, and that none of them was

acknowledged of God as his church and kingdom.” Joseph was “expressly commanded to ‘go not after them,’” and instead received “a promise that the fulness of the gospel should at some future time be made known unto [him].”<sup>5</sup>

This account of the First Vision is marked by a “concise, straightforward, unadorned, informative, and matter-of-fact” tone. This makes perfect sense since “this account was meant for publication by the non-Mormon press” and thus has “the characteristics one would expect to find in a public relations statement.”<sup>6</sup> Unlike Joseph’s 1838–39 account which was written during a time of severe persecution for Joseph and the Saints, the 1842 account was written during a time of relative peace and calm. It was also solicited in good faith by an influential and sincerely inquisitive non-Latter-day Saint journalist. Joseph’s voice in the 1842 account is therefore not as defensive or polemical as in his previous account. For example, the 1842 account lacks any mention of the local opposition to Joseph’s vision (a theme that is prominent in the 1838–39 account), and instead of quoting the Lord as harshly saying the Christian creeds were an “abomination” (Joseph Smith—History 1:19), instead he is paraphrased as simply saying that “all religious denominations were believing in incorrect doctrines.”

The 1842 account of the First Vision also bears the marks of Joseph Smith’s evolving literary style and his reliance on clerks and ghostwriters (such as William W. Phelps, John Taylor, and others) to assist him in telling his history.<sup>7</sup> Unlike Joseph’s 1832 account of the First Vision, the language of this account is highly polished and sophisticated and peppered with Latin phrases such as *summum bonum* (“the highest good”), all of which rhetorically serves to give readers an impression of the Prophet’s learnedness. Joseph likewise drew from the language of previously published works such as Orson Pratt’s influential 1840 missionary tract *A[n] Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions*.<sup>8</sup> The cumulative effect of all of this is a tone running throughout this account that is erudite while also “confident and self-assured.”<sup>9</sup>

The influence of this account of the First Vision can be seen in its republication on multiple occasions throughout the succeeding decade after its initial appearance in 1842. Both Latter-day Saints and non-Latter-day Saints republished both extracts and verbatim copies of “Church History” in newspapers, books, and tracts throughout the 1840s and early 50s.<sup>10</sup> In 1843, at the direction of Joseph Smith, William Phelps prepared a slightly revised and updated version of “Church History” for the publisher Clyde, Williams & Co., which was preparing a

volume surveying contemporary religious movements in the United States. A year later Phelps' revised version of Joseph's 1842 history appeared as an article titled "Latter Day Saints" in the book *He Pasa Ekklesia* edited by Israel Daniel Rupp.<sup>11</sup>

Although the 1842 "Church History" editorial would later be eclipsed by Joseph's 1838–39 history, it still contributes important and unique details to fully understanding what Joseph saw and experienced in the grove. For example, it is in this account that Joseph described the two personages he saw as "exactly resembl[ing] each other in features, and likeness,"<sup>12</sup> thus affirming the inseparability and corporeal nature of both the Father and the Son (cf. Doctrine and Covenants 130:22–23). For these and other reasons, Latter-day Saints are greatly benefited by Joseph's 1842 account of his First Vision.

***"Church History," 1 March 1842 (Wentworth Letter)***

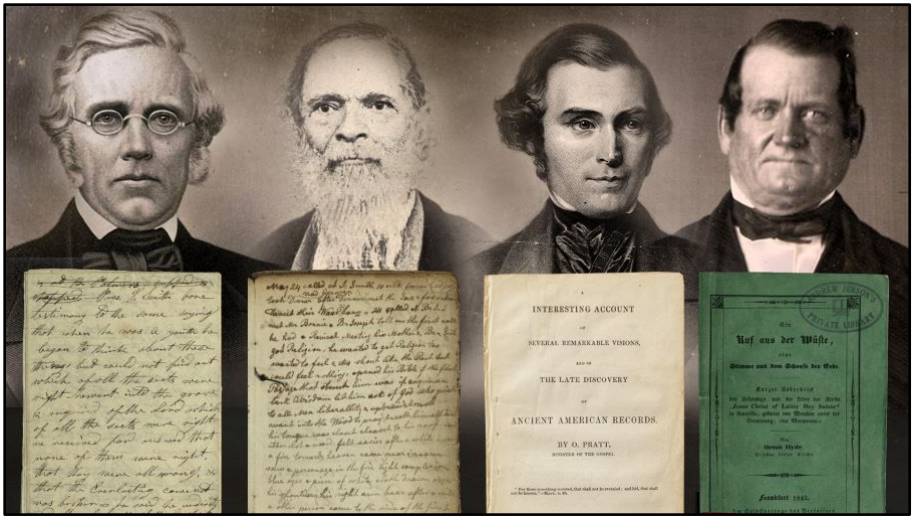
**(Following the standardized version [here](#); original available [here](#))**

When about fourteen years of age, I began to reflect upon the importance of being prepared for a future state, and upon enquiring about the plan of salvation, I found that there was a great clash in religious sentiment; if I went to one society, they referred me to one plan, and another to another, each one pointing to his own particular creed as the summum bonum of perfection. Considering that all could not be right, and that God could not be the author of so much confusion, I determined to investigate the subject more fully, believing that if God had a church it would not be split up into factions, and that if he taught one society to worship one way, and administer in one set of ordinances, he would not teach another principles which were diametrically opposed. Believing the word of God, I had confidence in the declaration of James; "If any man lack wisdom, let him ask of God, who giveth to all men liberally and upbraideth not, and it shall be given him."

I retired to a secret place in a grove and began to call upon the Lord. While fervently engaged in supplication, my mind was taken away from the objects with which I was surrounded, and I was enwrapped in a heavenly vision and saw two glorious personages who exactly resembled each other in features and likeness, surrounded with a brilliant light which eclipsed the sun at noonday. They told me that all religious denominations were believing in incorrect doctrines and that none of them was acknowledged of God as his church and kingdom. And I was



expressly commanded to “go not after them,” at the same time receiving a promise that the fulness of the gospel should at some future time be made known unto me.



## SECONDHAND ACCOUNTS OF THE FIRST VISION

**D**uring his lifetime, Joseph Smith provided four firsthand accounts of his First Vision.<sup>1</sup> These primary accounts serve as the foundation for understanding the Prophet’s early history and prophetic call. During his lifetime, however, Joseph also on occasion recounted his First Vision to trusted friends and the public at large. Those who heard him retell the First Vision story then recorded these rehearsals in both published works and private journals. These secondary accounts act as important historical data in two important ways: first, they capture some details about the vision that Joseph himself did not preserve in his firsthand accounts, and second, they serve as evidence that even though he was reticent to speak too much about it, Joseph was nevertheless telling others about the First Vision during his lifetime.<sup>2</sup> A look at the known contemporary secondhand accounts of the First Vision is helpful to fully capture and appreciate what Joseph saw, heard, and felt on that important occasion.

### [Orson Pratt, \*A\[n\] Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions\*](#)

In 1840, while on a mission in the British Isles, apostle Orson Pratt published *A[n] Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions, and of the Late Discovery of Ancient American Records* as a missionary tract. “Pratt began his thirty-one-page pamphlet by describing [Joseph Smith]’s first vision of Deity and the later visit

[Joseph] received from ‘the angel of the Lord.’” In addition, “He summarized the contents of the Book of Mormon, reprinted the statements of two groups of witnesses who saw the gold plates, and concluded with a fifteen-point ‘sketch of the faith and doctrine of this Church.’”<sup>3</sup>

In this tract, Pratt hit upon most of the major points narrated by Joseph himself in his earlier accounts of the First Vision, including his confusion over which Christian denomination of his day was the true faith, his reliance on James 1:5 to find guidance, retiring to a grove of trees to pray, seeing “two glorious personages, who exactly resembled each other in their features or likeness,” being forgiven of his sins, and being told to join none of the existing churches.<sup>4</sup> Pratt’s 1840 telling of the First Vision emphasizes the factor of reason, which told Joseph’s mind that there was only “one doctrine” and one “Church of Christ” to be known with “certainty” through “positive and definite evidence.” Pratt was also the first to mention that the bright light that descended on Joseph was so intense that the boy “expected . . . the leaves and boughs of the trees [to be] consumed.”<sup>5</sup>

Pratt’s pamphlet proved to be highly influential. “The first American edition was printed in New York in 1841, and reprints appeared in Europe, Australia, and the United States.” Although not a firsthand source from Joseph Smith himself “because [he] did not write it, assign it, or supervise its creation,” some of the language and content of *A[n] Interesting Account* was nevertheless appropriated by the Prophet in his 1842 “Church History” editorial that included a narrative of the First Vision.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, it’s obvious that Pratt knew about the First Vision before leaving for the British Isles from either Joseph directly or from his papers, and it is possible that Pratt had been instructed by Joseph on some of the details to publish about the First Vision once in Europe, thus accounting for these consistencies.

### Orson Hyde, *Ein Ruf aus der Wüste*

Two years after Pratt published *A[n] Interesting Account* another apostle, Orson Hyde, published a missionary tract in Germany titled *Ein Ruf aus der Wüste, eine Stimme aus dem Schoose der Erde* (*A Cry out of the Wilderness, A Voice from the Bowels of the Earth*). Using Pratt’s *A[n] Interesting Account* as his “principle source,”<sup>7</sup> Hyde touched on the same points as Pratt in his retelling of the First Vision. One detail included by Hyde but not by Pratt, however, was that as Joseph prayed in the grove “the adversary” filled his “mind with doubts and . . . all manner of inappropriate images [that] prevent[ed] him from obtaining the object

of his endeavors.”<sup>8</sup> Although Hyde’s overseas pamphlet did not become as popular or influential as Pratt’s, it is significant as “the first account [of the First Vision] published in a language other than English.”<sup>9</sup>

### *Levi Richards, Journal, 11 June 1843*

In a meeting at the temple in Nauvoo, Illinois on the evening of June 11, 1843, Levi Richards, one of the Prophet’s clerks and a Church historian, heard Joseph give an account of his First Vision.<sup>10</sup> This retelling came right after Elder George Adams spoke on the Book of Mormon and passages from Isaiah 24, 28, and 29 concerning the apostasy from Christ’s everlasting covenant. After summarizing Adams’ remarks, Richards then recorded,

Pres. J. Smith bore testimony to the same— saying that when he was a youth he began to think about these ~~these~~ things but could not find out which of all the sects were right— he went into the grove & enquired of the Lord which of all the sects were right— re received for answer that none of them were right, that they were all wrong, & that the Everlasting cove[n]t was broken.<sup>11</sup>

That the Prophet would focus this rehearsal of the First Vision on Christ’s affirmation of the reality of the Great Apostasy (a detail present in each of Joseph’s extant firsthand accounts) is understandable given the context of the message Adams had just delivered. As with the 1832 firsthand account which focuses heavily on Joseph’s personal quest for forgiveness of his sins,<sup>12</sup> this secondary account recorded by Richards indicates that on occasion Joseph preferred emphasizing certain aspects of his vision to given audiences and to illustrate specific theological points.

### *David Nye White, Interview with Joseph Smith, 21 August 1843*

A few months after this June 1843 meeting, a journalist named David Nye White, senior editor of the *Pittsburgh Weekly Gazette*, interviewed Joseph for his paper while traveling through Nauvoo and the nearby area.<sup>13</sup> “During the conversation that ensued, the Prophet related the circumstances of his 1820 vision.”<sup>14</sup> In this interview, Joseph reiterated the familiar points present in his earlier accounts, with the added detail that the specific place in the grove where he prayed was in a clearing that had a “stump where [he] had stuck [his] axe when [he] had quit work” the previous day (presumably).

*Alexander Neibaur, Journal, 24 May 1844*

The final contemporary secondary account of the First Vision comes from Alexander Neibaur, a trusted Jewish German friend of the Prophet's who had joined the Church in England in 1837 and had immigrated to Nauvoo four years later.<sup>15</sup> "In May 1844 Neibaur was present at a small gathering to which Joseph gave an account of his vision just a month before he was murdered."<sup>16</sup> Included in this gathering was a certain person identified as a "Mr Bonnie" by Neibaur, meaning probably Edward Bonney,<sup>17</sup> who was not a member of the Church (and indeed was not even very religious per se) but was a member of the Council of Fifty.<sup>18</sup>



*Some of the known secondhand accounts of the First Vision came from members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles (such as Orson Pratt and Orson Hyde, depicted here in the center).*

In this mixed audience of close confidants and as preserved in Neibaur's "sincere, unpolished style that one would expect from a humble devotee not used to writing in English,"<sup>19</sup> Joseph retold how "he wanted to get Religion too wanted to feel & shout like the Rest but could feel nothing." Importantly, Neibaur preserved Joseph's only description of the personage who otherwise "def[ie]d] all description" (Joseph Smith—History 1:17) as "light complexion blue eyes a piece of white cloth drawn over his shoulders his right arm bear after a w[h]ile a other person came to the side of the first." Considering the audience and this intimate context, "there is a strong possibility that . . . though recorded by Neibaur, [this retelling of the First

Vision] may have been given primarily for the benefit of the Prophet's non-religious friend and Council of the Fifty member, Edward Bonney."<sup>20</sup> Neibaur's account echoes details that span the full range of the primary First Vision accounts from 1832 down to the versions published in the final years of Joseph's life.

It should be remembered that these are the *known* contemporary secondhand accounts of the First Vision. It is almost certain that Joseph told more individuals about his vision but that these retellings were not recorded or have not survived.<sup>21</sup> Reminiscences from individuals who knew Joseph corroborate this. For instance, Joseph Curtis remembered Joseph providing an account of his First Vision in 1835 while visiting the Saints in Michigan.<sup>22</sup> Edward Stevenson recalled late in his life that in 1834 he along with "many large congregations" heard the Prophet "testify] with great power concerning the visit of the Father and the Son, and the conversation he had with them."<sup>23</sup> And Mary Isabella Horne recounted how she first met Joseph as a young woman while living in Toronto, Canada in the fall of 1837 and remembered hearing him "relate his first vision, when the Father and the Son appeared to him; [and] also his receiving the gold plates from the Angel Moroni."<sup>24</sup>

Although these reminiscences must be accepted cautiously because of their secondhand nature and in some cases because of their great distance from the time of the events, they are consistent with Joseph's own firsthand accounts and are reinforced by the known fact that the Prophet was indeed telling others (including non-Latter-day Saints such as Robert Matthews and Erastus Holmes) about his vision during the mid-1830s.<sup>25</sup>

When brought together, these firsthand and secondary accounts constitute "the entire known historical record that relates directly to the contemporary descriptions of Joseph Smith's first vision" and potentially make that vision "the best documented theophany in history."<sup>26</sup>

## RELIGIOUS EXCITEMENT NEAR PALMYRA, NEW YORK, 1816–1820

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Joseph Smith remembered the time leading up to his First Vision as a period of intense personal struggle trying to decide which church, if any, was true. “At about the age of twelve years my mind become seriously imprest with the all important concerns for the well fare of my immortal Soul,” Joseph recalled in his 1832 history.<sup>1</sup> As his mind was “wrought up” on “the subject of religion,” Joseph considered “the different systems [of religion] taught [to] the children of men,” and “knew not who was right or who was wrong.”<sup>2</sup>

Later in his 1838–39 history, Joseph remembered that this personal religious quest for the truth was happening in the midst of “an unusual excitement on the subject of religion.”<sup>3</sup> Beginning “in the place where [he and his family] lived” with the Methodists, this religious excitement “soon became general among all the sects” and spread throughout “that region of country” until “the whole district of country seemed affected by it, and great multitudes united themselves to the different religious parties” (Joseph Smith—History 1:5).<sup>4</sup>

Historical records and primary sources confirm that there was considerable religious activity throughout much of western New York in the early 1800s.<sup>5</sup> During this time, multi-day Methodist revival meetings were regularly held throughout the region, featuring dozens—and sometimes even hundreds—of preachers and attracting crowds in the thousands from miles around.<sup>6</sup>

In Palmyra specifically, “The great revival of 1816 and 1817, which nearly doubled the number of Palmyra Presbyterians, was [still] in progress when the Smiths arrived.”<sup>7</sup> The next year, in June 1818, a Methodist camp meeting was held on the outskirts of town, drawing in a crowd of around 2000—twice the population of Palmyra itself—and featuring a high-ranking leader in the American Methodist church.<sup>8</sup> Another Methodist camp meeting with at least 1000 people in attendance was held in Palmyra in June 1820.<sup>9</sup> In July 1819, the neighboring town of Phelps (also called Vienna) was the host of a major regional conference of the

Methodist church, bringing in around 100 preachers from all across western New York, northern Pennsylvania, and southern Canada. These preachers held camp-meetings throughout the region as they traveled to and from the conference.<sup>10</sup>

Each of these events initiated by the Methodists in Palmyra and the surrounding area between the years 1818–1820 would indeed have generated “an unusual excitement” and provide a glimpse of the “great excitement” which promoted “serious reflection and great uneasiness” in young Joseph while at other times making him “greatly excited” (Joseph Smith—History 1:8–9).<sup>11</sup> Sarepta Marsh Baker, who attended some these revival meetings around Palmyra as a teenager in either 1819 or 1820, similarly remembered these events as a “religious cyclone which swept over the region round about.”<sup>12</sup>



*A circa 1829 depiction of a revivalist camp meeting during the Second Great Awakening.*

Much of western New York was experiencing similar religious excitement. “Between 1816 and 1821,” writes historian Milton V. Backman, “revivals were reported in more towns and a greater number of settlers joined churches than in any previous period of New York history.”<sup>13</sup> Several towns within a 20-mile radius of the Smith farm experienced heightened religious excitement in 1819–1820, and Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians all experienced significant membership



gains throughout western New York at this time.<sup>14</sup> Accounts of revivalism and major membership gains in other parts of western New York were reported directly in Palmyra and would have spread by word of mouth as people traveled as far as 50 miles or more to attend revival meetings and regional conferences.<sup>15</sup>

This evidence of religious excitement both directly in Palmyra and within the much larger “whole district of country” is consistent with Joseph Smith’s account.<sup>16</sup> As historian Richard Lloyd Anderson explained, “Joseph’s 1838 history creates two geographical levels explaining local as against regional religious conflict, his tighter home area as against expansion throughout a broader ‘district,’ possibly intended as the technical Methodist term.”<sup>17</sup> Joseph identified “unusual excitement” in his immediate environs in and around Palmyra while “the great multitudes [who] united themselves to the different religious parties” were said to have been throughout “the whole district of country” (Joseph Smith—History 1:5). As Anderson concluded:

Joseph quickly identified the crescendo of growth as the “whole district of country,” which may be a general term for his larger area or his technical term for the whole Methodist Genesee District. . . . This multicounty Methodist “District” increased by 1,187 in the conference year ending July 1819. . . . [Thus] Joseph’s accounts [of his First Vision] coalesce not only with each other but also with family, local, and revival records, showing that his First Vision setting is historically authentic.<sup>18</sup>

## HOW OLD WAS JOSEPH SMITH AT THE TIME OF THE FIRST VISION?

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When Latter-day Saints tell the story of the First Vision today, they frequently emphasize Joseph Smith’s age when he entered the grove of trees near his family home to seek God in prayer. For instance, an article on the official website of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints states the following: “When Joseph Smith was 14 years old, he wanted to know which church he should join, so he asked God in sincere prayer. In response to this prayer, God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, appeared to Joseph and told him the true Church of Jesus Christ was not on the earth and They had chosen Joseph to restore it.”<sup>1</sup> In another article published in the February 2020 issue of the *Ensign*, President Henry B. Eyring of the First Presidency recognized, “When 14-year-old Joseph Smith walked out of a grove of trees in Palmyra, New York, USA, he knew for himself that God communicates with His children in mortality.”<sup>2</sup>

Describing Joseph as fourteen years old when he experienced his First Vision comes from his 1838–39 history as canonized in the Pearl of Great Price. In that account Joseph described himself as “an obscure boy, only between fourteen and fifteen years of age” when he experienced his vision “early in the spring of eight hundred and twenty” (Joseph Smith—History 1:22–23, 14). A look at Joseph’s three other extant contemporary firsthand accounts of his First Vision reveals an overall consistency in this detail.

In his 1835 and 1842 accounts of the First Vision, Joseph identified himself as being, respectively, “about 14. years old” and “about fourteen years of age” when he experienced his vision.<sup>3</sup> In another retelling, Joseph informed Erastus Holmes that he was “about 14 years old” when he received “the first visitation of Angels.”<sup>4</sup> There is one exception, however. In Joseph’s earliest surviving account of his vision scribe Frederick G. Williams inserted interlineally that he was “in the 16th year of [his] age” when he called upon the Lord for forgiveness of his sins.<sup>5</sup>

The first point to keep in mind is that Joseph was consistent throughout his other accounts in placing his age at between fourteen and fifteen years old when he received his vision in the early spring of 1820. So too were the contemporary secondhand accounts of the First Vision recorded or published in Joseph's lifetime, which all place him at that same age.<sup>6</sup> What's more, "in the 16th year of my age" does not necessarily mean Joseph was claiming he was sixteen years old when he had his vision, but could actually indicate that Joseph was no older than fifteen years old at the time of the vision. As historian D. Michael Quinn has observed, "like many people today, Joseph Jr. was confused by the distinction between stating his age . . . and its equivalent year-of-life."<sup>7</sup> The "16th year of [Joseph's] age" would actually have started on his fifteenth birthday in December 1820,<sup>8</sup> so while the dating of the vision in the 1832 account is still anomalous, it is not dramatically divergent from Joseph's stated age of "about 14 years old" and "between fourteen and fifteen years of age" at the time of the vision in early 1820 in his later narratives.<sup>9</sup>

Looking at the 1832 history in fuller narrative context likewise helps make sense of this discrepancy.

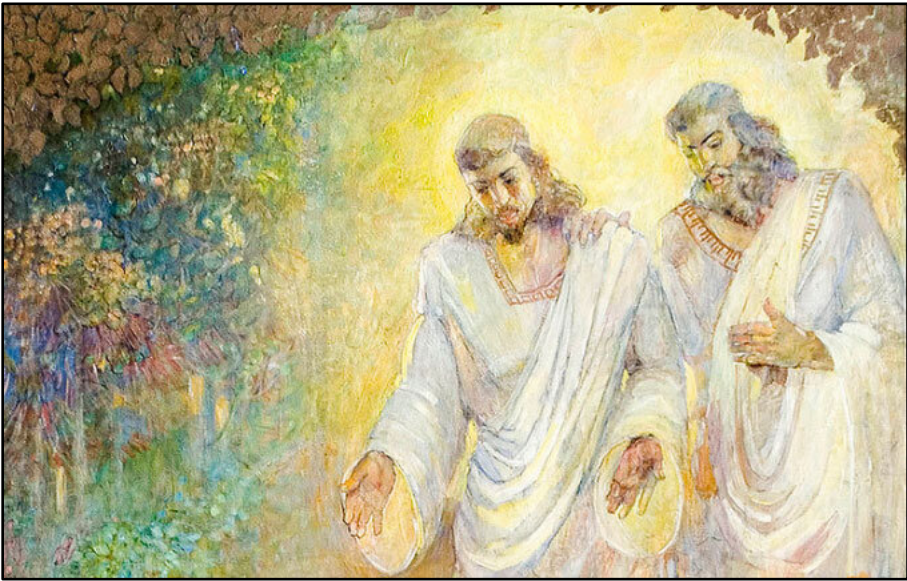
Joseph Smith wrote that "at about the age of twelve years" his mind became concerned "with regard to the all important concerns" of his immortal soul. He then became aggrieved that the various denominations did not "adorn their profession by a holy walk" as required by the Bible, and he pondered in his heart many things concerning the darkness of the world for three years, "from the age of twelve years to fifteen," culminating with the vision in that year, as he says, when he was "in the 16th year of my age" (that is, fifteen years old). Here we learn that Joseph's personal spiritual concerns began earlier (at the age of twelve) than we might otherwise have supposed and that his discontent over the contentions, divisions, wickedness, and abominations around him grew over a period of two to three years. It is understandable that, in preparing his 1832 draft, he might have thought of those intense struggles as having lasted a year longer than they actually had. After more careful reflection, he would consistently report that the answer came in his fifteenth year.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, as Matthew Brown has pointed out, by his own admission Joseph only had a rudimentary grasp of "the ground <rules> of Arithmetic."<sup>11</sup> When this point is brought into consideration, "it becomes apparent that the chronology changes that take place in Joseph Smith's historical narrations originate not from an

evolutionary scheme of storytelling but rather from a pronounced lack of mathematical skills” and perhaps simple lapses of memory in his first attempt to record his history.<sup>12</sup> In other words, there is no reason to conclude that Joseph was fabricating the story of his First Vision simply because he innocently misremembered his age by less than a year in one of his accounts. And all of this, of course, assumes that Williams’ insertion of the phrase “in the 16th year of my age” in the 1832 history was at Joseph’s behest and was not an independent scribal interpolation.

The anomalous dating in the 1832 history notwithstanding, the cumulative historical evidence strongly favors the “traditional” date of early 1820 for the First Vision when Joseph was fourteen years old.

Source	Age of Joseph Smith at the Time of First Vision
<a href="#">JS History, ca. Summer 1832, pp. 1–3.</a>	“<in the 16th year of my age>”
<a href="#">JS, Journal, 9–11 Nov. 1835, pp. 23–24</a>	“about 14. years old”
<a href="#">JS, Journal, 14 Nov. 1835, p. 37</a>	“about 14, years old”
<a href="#">JS History, 1838–1856, vol. A–1, pp. 2–3</a>	“in my fifteenth year,” “between fourteen and fifteen years of age,” “a little over fourteen years of age”
<a href="#">The Wentworth Letter (“Church History”)</a>	“about fourteen years of age”
<a href="#">Orson Pratt, <i>A[n] Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions</i></a>	“somewhere about fourteen or fifteen years old”
<a href="#">Orson Hyde, <i>Ein Ruf aus der Wüste</i></a>	“his fifteenth year”
<a href="#">David Nye White, <i>Interview with Joseph Smith</i>, 21. August 1843</a>	“about fourteen years old, a mere boy”



## DID BOTH THE FATHER AND THE SON APPEAR TO JOSEPH SMITH IN THE FIRST VISION?

**I**n the canonical 1838–39 account of the First Vision, Joseph Smith identified “two Personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above [him] in the air” (Joseph Smith–History 1:17). With one exception, the other firsthand accounts of the First Vision left by the Prophet also speak of two personages appearing in the vision. The exception is the 1832 history, “a rough, unpolished effort [by the Prophet] to record the spiritual impact of the vision on him” and “probably the first time Joseph Smith had even tried to commit his experience to writing.”<sup>1</sup> In that account Joseph, in his own hand, described what he saw and heard as follows:

I cried unto the Lord for mercy for there was none else to whom I could go and to obtain mercy and the Lord heard my cry in the wilderness and while in <the> attitude of calling upon the Lord <in the 16th year of my age> a pillar of fire light above the brightness of the sun at noon day come down from above and rested upon me and I was filled with the spirit of god and 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.<sup>2</sup>

In this earliest extant firsthand account of his vision, Joseph did not explicitly specify that two personages appeared to him, but rather that, first, “the Lord opened the heavens” upon him, and second, “[he] saw the Lord.” This has led some to wonder how, if at all, this might be reconciled with Joseph’s other accounts which do more overtly specify that two personages, the Father and the Son, appeared to him. James Allen and John Welch provide one persuasive reading of the historical sources that finds agreement among other scholars:

Because the 1832 account does not say that two beings were present in the vision, some people have wondered, Did Joseph Smith see two personages or one? Did he alter his story as time went on? With a little explanation, these questions can be answered. First, it is clear that the consensus of the First Vision accounts is that two personages appeared. While the brief 1843 Richards report leaves out many details, including any specific mention of God’s appearance, all of the other eight accounts speak clearly of two divine beings. Second, the remaining account, the 1832 narrative, actually suggests that the vision progressed in two stages: first, Joseph ‘was filled with the spirit of god and the Lord opened the heavens upon me,’ and second he “saw the Lord and he spake unto me.” The second stage clearly refers to Jesus Christ, who identifies himself as the one who was crucified. Though not explicitly stated, the initial mention of the Spirit of God and the Lord may have reference to the presence of God the Father and his opening of this vision, since it is clear in all the other accounts that the vision was opened by God who then introduced his Son. To be sure, the main point of emphasis, especially in the official 1838 account, was that “I had actually seen a light and in the midst of that light I saw two personages, and they did in reality speak unto me, or one of them did.” Finally, remembering that the 1832 manuscript was an unpolished effort to record the spiritual impact of the vision on him, and that the main content of the heavenly message was delivered by the Son, it is understandable that the Prophet simply emphasized the Lord in the 1832 account. Thus, nothing precludes the possibility that two beings were present.<sup>3</sup>

This two-stage reading is strengthened by the fact that in his 1835 account of the First Vision, and also in two contemporary secondhand accounts (those captured by David White and Alexander Neibaur as seen in the chart below), Joseph described one personage appearing to him in the midst of the brilliant pillar of light or flame and then the second one appearing immediately after.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, it would make functional sense that one being (the Father) was first the focus of Joseph's attention as the Father "opened the heavens upon" him, at which point Joseph then "saw the Lord [the Son]."

Keeping in mind that the various divine titles for the members of the Godhead were not necessarily uniform or standardized among Latter-day Saints in the Prophet's lifetime,<sup>5</sup> nothing precludes the possibility that the 1832 account refers to both God the Father and Jesus Christ as "the Lord."<sup>6</sup> As historian Richard L. Anderson elaborates,

Possibly the term Lord referred to the Father in the first instance, while afterward referring to the Son, who declared his atonement for the sins of all. This is the most personalized of all the vision accounts, and Joseph Smith is preoccupied with Christ's assurance, evidently only hinting at the presence of the Father. Yet in the Prophet's 1838 public history, the Father introduced the Son and told Joseph to "Hear Him!" (JS—H 1:17). Joseph's 1832 account verifies that the answer came from Christ himself; this account concentrates on the Savior's words as the response to Joseph's prayer. From the beginning, the resurrected Savior directed the reestablishment of his own church.<sup>7</sup>

Additionally, contextual clues from the 1832 history reinforce this argument. The opening lines of this text situate the First Vision as just the first in a series of momentous events leading to "the rise of the church of Christ in the eve of time."<sup>8</sup> The first event in this sequence is described as Joseph "receiving the testimony from on high," meaning the First Vision. Second is "the ministering of Angels," meaning the appearance of Moroni. Third is "the reception of the holy Priesthood by the ministring of—Aangels to adminster the letter of the Law <Gospel—>," meaning probably the restoration of the priesthood by John the Baptist. Fourth, and finally, is "a confirmation and reception of the high Priesthood after the holy order of the son of the living God," referring to either the restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood by Peter, James, and John or the June

1831 conference that witnessed the first confirmations of elders to the high priesthood.<sup>9</sup>

As Matthew Brown and Gregory Smith have both observed, the description of Joseph “receiving the testamony from on high” could very likely be referring to God the Father testifying that Jesus Christ is His Son.<sup>10</sup> Given the narrative sequence of the history (which begins with an account of the First Vision [pp. 2–3] and then describes the appearance of Moroni and the translation of the Book of Mormon [pp. 3–6]), this could only work as a reference to God the Father testifying of His Son during Joseph’s First Vision. As Brown writes, although the presence of God the Father is not explicitly “described as making an appearance alongside His Son in the” 1832 First Vision account, “the words the Father spoke to Joseph Smith [‘This is my Beloved Son—Hear Him!’] during that experience are alluded to” with the prefatory note that in the vision Joseph “receiv[ed] the testamony from on high.”<sup>11</sup> This is consistent with the other First Vision accounts that have the Father testifying of the Son and would, in turn, necessitate two personages being implicitly present in the 1832 account even if only one is explicitly described. In other words, the 1832 account could easily be read as describing Joseph’s experience with two divine beings, one whom he at least heard, and the other whom he saw and also heard.

Some have argued that Joseph’s 1832 history describes only one divine personage because his views on the nature of God allegedly evolved over time, and earlier in his life he held to more traditional Trinitarian views.<sup>12</sup> This argument seems unlikely for a few reasons, not the least being that a vision received by Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon in February 1832 (Doctrine and Covenants 76) contains explicit mention of them seeing Jesus Christ on the right hand of God the Father, who bore witness of His Son (vv. 20–23).<sup>13</sup> The earliest extant manuscript of this vision was composed or copied probably between February and March 1832, several months before the 1832 history, which was begun later that summer.<sup>14</sup> If Joseph was already claiming to have seen both the Father and the Son in early 1832, then the reason for the less explicit mention of the Father in the 1832 account of the First Vision cannot plausibly have been due to an alleged evolution from a Trinitarian to a non-Trinitarian theology on Joseph Smith’s part.<sup>15</sup>

As historian James B. Allen rightly concludes, after looking at the available historical evidence, “All accounts of the First Vision but one specify that two heavenly personages appeared to young Joseph, and three [secondhand accounts]



state that these personages exactly resembled each other. There is no doubt that the Prophet intended to convey the message that they were the Father and the Son.”<sup>16</sup>

Source	What Joseph Saw in the Vision
<a href="#">JS History, ca. Summer 1832, pp. 1–3</a>	“the <Lord> opened the heavens upon me and I saw the Lord”
<a href="#">JS, Journal, 9–11 Nov. 1835, pp. 23–24</a>	“a personage appeared in the midst, of this pillar of flame which was spread all around, and yet nothing consumed, another personage soon appeared like unto the first . . . . <and I saw many angels in this vision>”
<a href="#">JS History, 1838–1856, vol. A–1, pp. 2–3</a>	“I saw two personages (whose brightness and glory defy all description) standing above me in the air.”
<a href="#">Orson Pratt, <i>A[n] Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions</i></a>	“he was enwrapped in a heavenly vision, and saw two glorious personages, who exactly resembled each other in their features or likeness.”
<a href="#">Orson Hyde, <i>Ein Ruf aus der Wüste</i></a>	“Two glorious heavenly personages stood before him, resembling each other exactly in features and stature.”
<a href="#">The Wentworth Letter (“Church History”)</a>	“I . . . saw two glorious personages who exactly resembled each other in features, and likeness, surrounded with a brilliant light”
<a href="#">David Nye White, <i>Interview with Joseph Smith</i>, 21. August 1843</a>	“I saw a light, and then a glorious personage in the light, and then another personage, and the first personage said to the second, ‘Behold my beloved Son, hear him.’”

[Alexander Neibaur, Journal, 24 May 1844](#)

“saw a fire towards heaven came near & nearer saw a personage in the fire light complexion blue eyes a piece of white cloth drawn over his shoulders his right arm bear after a w[h]ile a other person came to the side of the first”



## THE FIRST VISION AS A DIVINE COUNCIL VISION

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**I**n the various accounts of the First Vision left behind by Joseph Smith, the appearance of Jesus Christ alongside God the Father takes center stage.<sup>1</sup> Yet a passing reference in the 1835 account hints at the possibility that he saw more than the Father and the Son. Just as he was finishing this narration of the his “first communication,” Joseph passingly mentioned how he saw “many angels in this vision.”<sup>2</sup>

This tantalizing hint suggests that Joseph Smith’s First Vision may have been comparable to the theophanies of ancient Israelite prophets, where they would see God in the midst of his divine council. In ancient Israel, God was believed to rule in heaven, surrounded by a multitude of divine beings, variously called *gods*, *sons of God*, *holy ones*, *angels*, and other similar titles.<sup>3</sup> It was considered the mark of a true prophet that he had *seen* and *heard* the proceedings of God’s divine council.<sup>4</sup> As such, the calling of new prophet typically followed a narrative pattern culminating in his standing in the midst of the council.

The typical prophetic call narrative began with a historical introduction, often describing a time of trouble in the land which leads the prophet to pray in behalf of the people of Israel. As a result of the prayer, the heavens are opened and the prophet sees God in the midst of the heavenly host, is initiated into the divine council, and is permitted to witness their deliberations and decrees. The vision then culminates with the prophet being commissioned to deliver the message he received from council to the people of Israel.

Latter-day Saint scholars have pointed out that Lehi, in the Book of Mormon, fits this pattern remarkably well.<sup>5</sup> The setting is “in the commencement of the first year of the reign of Zedekiah, king of Judah,” a time when Jerusalem had recently been invaded by the Babylonians and when there were “many prophets, prophesying unto the people that they must repent, or the great city Jerusalem must be destroyed.” Lehi “went forth prayed unto the Lord, yea, even with all his heart, in behalf of his people.” Lehi’s prayer is answered with a series of visions, beginning with a vision of “a pillar of fire” and culminating with another vision of “God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels in the attitude of singing and praising their God.” Members of the divine council descend to earth, and “One,” whose “luster was above that of the sun at noon-day,” handed Lehi a book, containing the decrees of the council (1 Nephi 1:4–14).

Although Joseph Smith did not use the ancient Israelite literary pattern to narrate his First Vision,<sup>6</sup> careful study of his accounts suggests that he had a parallel experience. Like Lehi and many of the prophets of old, Joseph lived in a time of “unusual excitement” in the center of the Second Great Awakening (Joseph Smith–History 1:5).<sup>7</sup> Caught in the midst of a “war of words and tumult of opinions” (Joseph Smith–History 1:10), Joseph went out into a grove of woods to pray. He saw a “pillar of light” or “pillar of fire”—as he describes it in some accounts—which was “above the brightness of the sun” (Joseph Smith–History 1:16).<sup>8</sup> Joseph then saw “two personages,” identified as God the Father and his Son Jesus Christ (Joseph Smith–History 1:17) and, according to his 1835 account, “many angels.”

Thus, Joseph Smith appears to have stood in the midst of the heavenly host, making his First Vision akin to the prophetic calls of ancient prophets. In February 1832, Joseph would have another vision—this one in tandem with Sidney Rigdon—where he clearly described seeing God and Christ in the midst of the heavenly council:

And we beheld the glory of the Son, on the right hand of the Father, and received of his fulness; And saw the holy angels, and them who are sanctified before his throne, worshiping God, and the Lamb, who worship him forever and ever. (Doctrine and Covenants 76:21–22)

With divine council visions like that of D&C 76, and most likely the First Vision as well, Joseph Smith placed himself firmly within the ancient Hebrew prophetic tradition.

## WHO WAS THE MINISTER JOSEPH SMITH SPOKE TO ABOUT HIS VISION?

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**I**n the canonized account of the First Vision, Joseph Smith remembered confiding in a Methodist minister and received a stinging rebuke.<sup>1</sup>

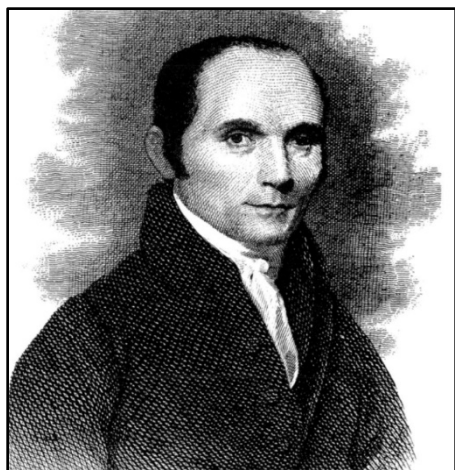
Some few days after I had this vision, I happened to be in company with one of the Methodist preachers, who was very active in the before mentioned religious excitement; and, conversing with him on the subject of religion, I took occasion to give him an account of the vision which I had had. I was greatly surprised at his behavior; he treated my communication not only lightly, but with great contempt, saying it was all of the devil, that there were no such things as visions or revelations in these days; that all such things had ceased with the apostles, and that there would never be any more of them. (Joseph Smith—History 1:21)

The impact of this rejection may have shaped how and when Joseph did (and did not) tell his story for years to come.<sup>2</sup> Yet this is the only time Joseph ever mentioned this encounter, and none of his firsthand accounts disclose the name of this preacher. It is therefore impossible to know for certain who this preacher was. There is, however, one Methodist preacher named by both Oliver Cowdery and William Smith as being influential in the religious excitement leading up to Joseph Smith’s vision, and even in potentially prompting Joseph Smith to pray and ask God in the first place—Rev. George Lane.<sup>3</sup>

George Lane was an itinerant Methodist minister in the northern Pennsylvania and western New York area in the early 1820s.<sup>4</sup> He was remembered for his powerful preaching. A contemporary who heard him preach at a camp meeting in 1819 said, “The exhortations of the presiding elder, George Lane, were overwhelming; Sinners quailed under them, and many cried aloud for mercy.”<sup>5</sup>

According to Oliver Cowdery, in Joseph Smith’s “15th year [1820] . . . One Mr. Lane, a presiding Elder of the Methodist church, visited Palmyra, and vicinity. Elder Lane was a tallented man possessing a good share of literary endowments, and apparent humility. . . . Mr. Lane’s manner of communication was peculiarly calculated to awaken the intellect of the hearer, and arouse the sinner to look about him for safety—much good instruction was always drawn from his discourses on the scriptures, and in common with others, our brother’s [i.e., Joseph Smith’s] mind became awakened.”<sup>6</sup>

William Smith remembered Rev. Lane specifically exhorting anyone who was uncertain about which church to join to follow the counsel of James 1:5, and this prompting Joseph to act on Lane’s words.<sup>7</sup>



*Rev. George Lane (1784-1859).*

There is some question as to the reliability of these recollections, however, since Rev. Lane was not placed over the Ontario Circuit (which included Palmyra) until 1824, and primarily worked in northern Pennsylvania between 1819 and 1823.<sup>8</sup> The issue is further complicated by ambiguities in both Oliver’s and William’s narratives. After introducing Rev. Lane in an 1820 setting, Oliver relocates his narrative to the year 1823, and proceeds to tell of the visit of Moroni rather than the First

Vision.<sup>9</sup> Thus, it is ambiguous as to whether Oliver meant to indicate whether Rev. Lane was influential in 1820 or 1823.<sup>10</sup> In William’s late reminiscences, he also frequently conflates details from Joseph Smith’s First Vision in 1820 with Moroni’s visit in 1823, and William’s accounts may actually be dependent on Oliver’s narrative.<sup>11</sup>

Joseph Smith, unfortunately, never mentioned Rev. Lane by name, and thus never clarified what, if any, influence the preacher had on him in his youth. In light of the accounts from Oliver Cowdery and William Smith, however, it is noteworthy that, according to historian Larry C. Porter, “Lane was in the geographical proximity of Joseph Smith on a number of occasions between the years 1819 and 1825.”<sup>12</sup> In

particular, Lane attended the Genesee Conference held in Phelps in July 1819—less than 15 miles from the Smith farm and likely part of the “unusual excitement” Joseph remembered leading up to the First Vision.<sup>13</sup> Thus, Joseph may, indeed, have heard Rev. Lane preach prior to his First Vision, as Oliver and William described.<sup>14</sup>

Could Rev. Lane also be the unnamed preacher mentioned by Joseph, in whom he confided after his vision? Porter notes, “In July 1820, Lane would have had to pass through the greater Palmyra-Manchester vicinity on his way to Niagara, Upper Canada” to the Genesee Conference, that year held at Lundy’s Lane.<sup>15</sup> As was customary, Lane stopped and preached at camp-meetings along the way to and from the conference.<sup>16</sup> This potentially could have afforded Joseph the opportunity to speak to Lane a few months after his vision, if Lane indeed was the minister Joseph remembered confiding in. Others, however, have argued that the minister Joseph was referring to was someone more regularly in the Palmyra area.<sup>17</sup>

Even though the “nature and degree, or indeed the actuality, of their acquaintanceship during this interval” remains uncertain, Porter concludes, “it is easy to see that Joseph Smith could have had contact with Lane at a number of points during this extended period.”<sup>18</sup>



## WHY WAS JOSEPH SMITH INITIALLY RELUCTANT TO TELL OTHERS ABOUT THE FIRST VISION?

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Based on the extant documentary record, and by his own admission, Joseph Smith was at first reluctant to tell others about his First Vision. In the canonical 1838–39 account, Joseph reported that when his mother asked what had happened to him in the grove, he refrained from informing her about the vision.

When the light had departed, I had no strength; but soon recovering in some degree, I went home. And as I leaned up to the fireplace, mother inquired what the matter was. I replied, “Never mind, all is well—I am well enough off.” I then said to my mother, “I have learned for myself that Presbyterianism is not true.” (Joseph Smith—History 1:20)

“Not only did [Joseph] initially refrain from describing his experience to his mother,” noted historian Ronald Walker, “he apparently told no one in his family at the time, though it is certain that he told them later. The one person he did tell, according to his record, was one of the local clergymen of the area, a man of the cloth whom he thought would understand and one whom he could trust.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, as told in the canonical account, Joseph confided in “one of the Methodist preachers” who was active in the Palmyra, New York area.<sup>2</sup> However, after telling this preacher about the vision, Joseph was “greatly surprised at his behavior; he treated [Joseph’s] communication not only lightly, but with great contempt, saying it was all of the devil, that there were no such things as visions or revelations in these days; that all such things had ceased with the apostles, and that there would never be any more of them” (Joseph Smith—History 1:21).

It appears that Joseph told a few others about his vision in the early 1820s, but quickly discovered that doing so “excited a great deal of prejudice against [him]

among professors of religion” (Joseph Smith—History 1:22). It’s likely that Joseph’s memory of this “great persecution” (Joseph Smith—History 1:22) that he experienced as a young man was amplified beyond its actual scope by the opposition he was exposed to during the Kirtland apostasy of 1837 and the Mormon War of 1838 at the time when he penned the account in the Pearl of Great Price.<sup>3</sup> At the very least, though, it’s clear that Joseph took this criticism very personally (as one might reasonably expect from an impressionable teenage boy), and the negative reactions of the Methodist preacher and other Palmyra residents was enough to apparently startle the Prophet into relative silence for the remainder of his adolescence. As recognized by historian James Allen, there “is little if any evidence . . . that by the early 1830’s Joseph Smith was telling the story [of the First Vision] in public. At least if he were telling it, no one seemed to consider it important enough to have recorded it *at the time*, and no one was criticizing him for it.”<sup>4</sup> Instead of the First Vision, as is common today, “the popular image of Mormon belief [in sources from the 1830s and 40s] centered around such things as the Book of Mormon, the missionary zeal, and the concept of Zion in Missouri.”<sup>5</sup>

Why is it, then, that Joseph was reticent to publicly talk about the First Vision until later in his life? As seen above, one obvious answer is that Joseph felt stung by the rejection and contempt he experienced as a teenager when he first began telling others about his vision. As Allen elaborates,

It is noted by some that in 1838 [Joseph Smith] declared that his basic reason for telling [the First Vision] even then, eighteen years after it happened, was in response to “reports which have been put in circulation by evil-disposed and designing persons” [ cf. Joseph Smith—History 1:1] who had distorted the facts. Furthermore, the young prophet said that he had been severely rebuffed the first time he told the story in 1820; and since it represented one of his most profound spiritual experiences, he could well have decided to circulate it only privately until he could feel certain that in relating it he would not receive again the general ridicule of friends.<sup>6</sup>

Another “possible explanation for the fact that the story of the vision was not generally known in the 1830’s is sometimes seen in Joseph Smith’s conviction that experiences such as these should be kept from the general public because of their extremely sacred nature.”<sup>7</sup> Consistent with the practices of the early followers of Jesus,<sup>8</sup> “[Joseph] kept sacred things sacred until it was otherwise required. As he did

throughout his life, he desired his followers to have a measure of the same things that he experienced. They, too, would need to exercise discretion in caring for what was revealed to them.” As seen in a general pattern of guarded behavior on Joseph’s part when it came to him relating details about his visions to others, “It is clear that his early instincts and early instructions from the Lord caused him to treat his experiences with great care. Later, when it became expedient, he was more forthcoming about what had happened to him. But even then, we have just glimpses and squints at the scope of his experiences.”<sup>9</sup>

Joseph’s early reluctance to speak publicly about his First Vision, however, should not be mistaken as evidence of fabrication.<sup>10</sup> As Allen himself points out, Joseph began privately recording and retelling the details of his First Vision “during the formative decade of church history.”<sup>11</sup> Besides the surviving contemporary historical sources,<sup>12</sup> later reminiscences left by others also remember Joseph telling public audiences about the First Vision by the mid-1830s.<sup>13</sup> The point, therefore, is not that Joseph was opportunistically concocting stories of visions to suit his purposes, but rather that “if Joseph Smith told the story to friends and neighbors in 1820, he stopped telling it widely by 1830” and only gradually divulged it to a more public audience beginning in the mid- to late-1830s.<sup>14</sup> By the end of his life Joseph—no longer the insecure teenager of Palmyra—felt confident enough to publish accounts of his First Vision for the entire world to scrutinize.<sup>15</sup>

## REMEMBERING JOSEPH SMITH'S FIRST VISION

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As historians strive to understand and interpret the past, they are dependent upon the *memories* of those who were there and who left a record of their experiences. This is especially true of the First Vision, in which we must rely on the memory of the only mortal participant: Joseph Smith. As such, it is important for those wishing to study the First Vision, or any other historical event, to understand both the limits and strengths of human memory. Historian Steven C. Harper has looked carefully at Joseph Smith's First Vision accounts in light of memory studies, trying patiently to "listen" to Joseph remember his experience in each account.<sup>1</sup> As Harper explains, "Seekers strive to understand the dynamics of memory in order to listen more carefully to Joseph communicate his memories."<sup>2</sup>

Memory is not the simple recall of information and events from one's life, but is an active process that involves reconstructing the events in one's mind again and again.<sup>3</sup> The complexities of memory are such that it's not a simple dichotomy between "accurate" and "inaccurate" memories. Nearly all memories have both reliable and unreliable elements in them. In his studies, Harper found that "Joseph's accounts of his vision acknowledge that his memory was both limited and accurate."<sup>4</sup> Studying Joseph's accounts about the First Vision with an understanding of both the nature and limitations of memory can help us not only better reconstruct the original vision itself, but also better recognize and understand what the vision meant to Joseph at various points of his life. "Joseph's accounts of his first vision represent the event as he experienced it, both at the time and over time."<sup>5</sup>

"Most memory evaporates," Harper explains, "but when we focus on something repeatedly, it is processed into a secondary memory."<sup>6</sup> Secondary memories are more stable over time, and are strengthened by making emotional connections to our experiences. Long-term memory is also improved when we are conscious that we are remembering.<sup>7</sup> This means that important events in our life

can be more easily remembered, but peripheral details often become fuzzy or can slip from our minds altogether.

“Joseph Smith’s accounts of his first vision,” remarks Harper, “abound with these attributes of memory.”<sup>8</sup> Joseph indicated both strong emotional connections and a “meta-awareness” indicative that he was deliberately and consciously remembering. His “feelings were deep,”<sup>9</sup> and his “mind became seriously impressed.”<sup>10</sup> This kind of language saturates his detailed accounts. “Joseph’s memories seem especially keen when they recall thoughts and the strong emotions he associated with them.”<sup>11</sup>

Yet peripheral details, like his age, the exact day of the event, the time of year when the “religious excitement” began, and so on are all remembered more vaguely. He was “about” 14 years old, it was “sometime” in the second year after they moved to Manchester, and it was “early in the spring” when he kneeled to pray.<sup>12</sup> “Joseph Smith’s accounts of his vision show memory that was simultaneously vivid and vague.”<sup>13</sup>



Joseph’s accounts also illustrate the features of both factual memory (recollections of objective details) and interpretive memory (the meaning or significance that he assigned to the experience.)<sup>14</sup> “Interpretive memories grow and change over time because they are shaped by events subsequent to the episode being remembered.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, each of Joseph’s accounts reflect different emphases and details in part because they reflect what his vision meant to him at different stages of his life.

For example, the 1838 account has a strong emphasis on persecution, which is lacking in the other accounts.<sup>16</sup> This account was written and edited in the midst of the hostilities of the Kirtland apostasy, the Missouri War, and Joseph's imprisonment in Liberty Jail.<sup>17</sup> In the midst of all of this, persecution loomed large on Joseph's mind, and in his interpretive memory, "It *seem[ed]* as though the adversary was aware at a very early period of my life that I was destined to be a disturber and annoyer of his kingdom" (Joseph Smith—History 1:20, emphasis added).<sup>18</sup>

This does not mean Joseph was misremembering or making experiences up. Rather, it simply means that some recollections of his First Vision may not have been as marked and intense as Joseph later remembered them to have been. As Harper put it, "An outward observer would not likely interpret these events as intensely as [Joseph] Smith subjectively did."<sup>19</sup> To the contrary, the fact that Joseph's accounts bare all the hallmarks—including the limitations—of human memory strongly suggests that these are *authentic* memories. Meaning, this is not a story Joseph just made up or fabricated. He is remembering a real experience he had in the woods as a boy. As Harper concludes:

Joseph created human memories of his first vision . . . . The reveal vivid memories of elements of the experience that deeply impressed him— anxious uncertainty prior to the theophany, the epiphany that resulted from reading and reflecting on James 1:5, the feeling of love and redemption from the theophany, the reality of the vision itself. Interpretive and introspective memories are present as well. . . . The accounts are not, by Joseph's own admission, a flawless recreation of the event, nor are they "a complete fabrication of life events." Despite distortions and limits in recounting the experience, Joseph's accounts generally exhibit continuity. Moreover, they communicate to seekers Joseph's memories of how he experienced the vision at the time and how he remembered it over time.<sup>20</sup>

## HOW DID JOSEPH SMITH TELL THE STORY OF HIS FIRST VISION?

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Joseph Smith was influenced in many ways by his time and culture. He spent his teenage years growing up in western New York’s so-called Burned-over District, which saw not only intense religious revivals and spiritual fervor but also an outpouring of books, tracts, newspaper articles, and oral accounts of the religious experiences of many men and women. It therefore “should come as no surprise,” as BYU English professors Neal Lambert and Richard Cracroft wrote in their ground-breaking 1980 study, that Joseph should tell about his First Vision “consciously or unconsciously” using “a literary style and structure similar to familiar conversion accounts spoken and written by his contemporaries.”<sup>1</sup>

Insightfully, Lambert and Cracroft point out how Joseph’s “florid wording” in his 1832 account—with “soaring, solemn, and often tedious” expressions—attempted to match its rhetoric to the long-standing literary form of “spiritual autobiography.”<sup>2</sup> That autobiographic form, which was identified and outlined as early as 1670,<sup>3</sup> was a common pattern that many people still in Joseph’s day used to convey with an elevated prose the struggles and sublimity of their spiritual experiences.

Joseph employed yet another approach in his “1835 impromptu recital.” It communicated a “simple and more confident style,” using “spare prose.” This “prefigured the simple eloquence of the 1838 version.”<sup>4</sup> And because that 1838–39 rendition<sup>5</sup> was intended to introduce a full history of “the rise and progress of the Church,” that telling, understandably, shifted its emphasis away “from the personal to the institutional,”<sup>6</sup> being concerned more with Joseph’s wrestle with which church to join and not just being forgiven of his previous sins or follies.

In addition, historian Richard L. Bushman has analyzed other narratives of spiritual experiences contemporary to Joseph Smith.<sup>7</sup> Bushman compared Joseph’s

1838–39 account with the reports of visionary conversion experiences in 32 pamphlets published in the United States between 1783 and 1815, finding that “the stylistic similarities,” while interesting and plentiful, in the end “only highlight . . . the differences between Joseph and the host of now forgotten visionaries.” For instance, these “narratives of dreams and miraculous appearances did not imply the construction of any institutional form; they did not propose doctrine; they did not proclaim commandments. . . . They inspired awe at the presence of invisible powers made visible but were an occasion to marvel rather than to act.”<sup>8</sup>

Adding another high-level historical study to this discussion, in 2011 historian Christopher C. Jones convincingly argued that certain phrases in Joseph’s 1838–39 account find echoes especially in conversion narratives written by Methodist Christians.<sup>9</sup> As Jones writes,

Examining Joseph Smith’s first vision in the context of Methodist concerns over the nature of true religion brings its message into sharper focus. While condemning all religious denominations, it spoke to specific Methodist concerns in antebellum America. Yet closer attention to the Methodist context also suggests that Methodism fundamentally shaped Smith’s early religious wanderings in important ways. Heavenly visions at the time of conviction and conversion were, in fact, common among Methodists of the day. And nowhere else did the rhetoric of true religion’s form and power appear more regularly than in both private and public conversion narratives of Methodism’s adherents. As other historians have previously pointed out, Joseph Smith’s earliest recorded recollections of his first vision resemble early American evangelical conversion narratives in both context and content. By focusing more specifically on the Methodist variation of the standard conversion narrative, it becomes clear that Smith’s own narratives bear distinct Methodist markers of influence.<sup>10</sup>

This all makes sense. In wrestling with the question about which church to join, young Joseph “became somewhat partial to the Methodist sect, and [he] felt some desire to be united with them” (Joseph Smith—History 1:8). As Jones has explored elsewhere, Methodism played a significant (though certainly not the only) role in shaping early Latter-day Saint religious identity and practice.<sup>11</sup>

That Joseph would therefore narrate his First Vision in a style that would have been recognizable to him and would have appealed to many of his earliest followers



is understandable. Most notably in this regard, an important component in Methodist religious identity was obtaining a “form” and the “power of godliness,” referring to the outward spiritual power that brought vitality to true Christian religious practice. John Wesley himself expressed fears that his followers’ quest for popularity would rob them of “the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out,” leaving them as “having the form of religion without the power.”<sup>12</sup> Those who lacked the power of godliness were deemed illegitimate, neither having the true form of Christian worship nor possessing the Lord’s power. Similarly, in his 1838–39 account, Joseph wrote that the Lord informed him that the sects of his day “teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a *form of godliness*, but they deny the *power* thereof” (Joseph Smith—History 1:19, emphasis added).

The Lord’s words would have resonated with both Joseph himself and anyone who shared a Methodist background or who knew the New Testament. “Over the course of the eighteenth century and during the first decades of the nineteenth, Methodists in both Great Britain and America regularly proclaimed that Methodism uniquely possessed both the form of godliness and the power of true religion. [These words] found expression in Methodist sermons, hymns, ecclesiastical reports, and even in the personal writings of laity and clergy.”<sup>13</sup>

At the same time, this expression drew particular strength because of its prominence in the Bible: “This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, . . . having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof; from such turn away” (2 Timothy 3:1–2, 5). Thus, for Joseph to report that *all* Christian sects (not just the Methodists) lacked the power of godliness would have been not only radical but also “particularly offensive” to his contemporaries,<sup>14</sup> to say nothing of the fact that in his 1844 testimony, Joseph specifically said that he was told “No” when he asked the Lord if he “must join the Methodist Church.”<sup>15</sup>



*John Wesley (1703–1791), the founder of Methodism.*

Another common theme in Methodist and other Protestant Christian conversion narratives that is brought out in Joseph's First Vision account is the individual's search for forgiveness of his or her sins. This theme is prominent especially in Joseph's earlier retellings of the First Vision written in 1832 and 1835,<sup>16</sup> whereas in the later accounts, Joseph's quest to determine which church to join is the focal narrative element. Although some have seen this as contradictory, Jones explains how this would not necessarily be so, especially from the perspective of a Methodist conversion narrative.

While forgiveness for [Joseph Smith's] sins preoccupied the earlier account [of the First Vision], and the concern with which church was right consumes the later narrative, within the Methodist tradition, the two were not mutually exclusive questions. In fact, they were closely linked with one another. Perhaps Joseph Smith asked "which of all the sects was right" precisely because he felt that forgiveness of his personal sins was intimately tied to his joining a certain church.<sup>17</sup>

In certain important ways, however, Joseph's First Vision story diverged from what was typical of contemporary nineteenth-century Methodist conversion narratives. For example, Jones points out that, like Joseph Smith, Methodist converts sometimes described visionary experiences of seeing the Lord. Unlike Joseph Smith, however, they frequently described their visions with guarded or sometimes deliberately vague language.

Methodists of the day carefully qualified the nature of their visionary experiences with phrases like "by faith, I saw . . ." or by affirming that it was just a dream. . . . Joseph Smith, by contrast, affirmed unambiguously that "it was nevertheless a fact, that I had had a vision. . . . I had actually seen a light and in the midst of that light I saw two personages, and they did in reality speak to me. . . . I knew it, and I knew that God knew it, and I could not deny it." It was thus not necessarily a matter of what Joseph Smith experienced, but rather how he explained it [that offended many contemporary Christians]. The straightforward and sure language he used to describe his vision filtered its meaning, making it more threatening to the Methodist minister in whom he confided.<sup>18</sup>

From all of this it is apparent that Joseph Smith's First Vision accounts sometime align with and at other times react against what Jones calls "a community

of discourse” that had been circulation in the early nineteenth century. The Prophet’s repetition of the Lord’s use of phraseology from 2 Timothy 2:5 in particular “directly challenged Methodist claims to possess the form and power of godliness. Such a message resonated with those [Joseph] Smith attracted to the Mormon religion, many of whom criticized the Methodists as having rejected their heritage as a people who [once had more openly] embraced visions, dreams, and miraculous religion.”<sup>19</sup>

Just as the biblical authors consciously shaped their writings according to ancient literary conventions to best communicate their message,<sup>20</sup> so too did Joseph make “literary, structural, and stylistic” choices in testifying of his experience. More than reflecting any fundamental change in his “understanding of the event in the Sacred Grove,” these choices reveal a deliberate effort on the Prophet’s part to present his narrative in ways that would resonate with the needs and familiar speech patterns of his particular audience(s).<sup>21</sup>

While Joseph may have imitated some familiar literary or narrative conventions of the day, his depiction of the First Vision is anything but derivative or banal. Because he tailored his words authentically to meet the needs of his listeners and readers, his words speak powerfully. Careful readers of especially the 1838–39 account (now canonized in the Pearl of Great Price) have noticed the simple yet profound manner in which the Prophet communicated his experience. As Lambert and Cracroft have concluded:

[T]he 1838 account [of the First Vision] seem[s] remarkably plain and unadorned. [It] employ[s] for the most part, brief subject/verb structures, and simpler coordinating connectives, rather than the more complicated subordinating connectives of the earlier versions. The language itself is less high-blown and far more natural and restrained, using fewer and simpler adjectives and adverbs and concentrating more on nouns and verbs to carry the burden of meaning. Indeed the prose is so free from emotionally loaded words and phrases as to make us almost forget the cosmic significance of the events being recounted.<sup>22</sup>

This linguistic honesty deeply impressed Dr. Arthur Henry King, an English language stylistician trained at the Universities of Cambridge and Lund. One of his skills was detecting linguistically whether or not people were telling the truth. King’s

reaction as he read Joseph's 1838–39 account of the First Vision for the first time is therefore noteworthy:

When I was first brought to read Joseph Smith's story, I was deeply impressed. I wasn't inclined to be impressed. As a stylistician, I have spent my life being disinclined to be impressed. So when I read his story, I thought to myself, this is an extraordinary thing. This is an astonishingly matter-of-fact and cool account. This man is not trying to persuade me of anything. He doesn't feel the need to. He is stating what happened to him, and is stating it, not enthusiastically, but in quite a matter-of-fact way. He is not trying to make me cry or feel ecstatic. That struck me, and that began to build my testimony, for I could see that this man was telling the truth.<sup>23</sup>

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FIRST VISION

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The accounts of the First Vision left by Joseph Smith establish the basic details of this supremely important historical experience. These details include the who, what, where, why, and when of the events surrounding the First Vision.<sup>1</sup> But beyond the historical details surrounding the First Vision itself is the importance or significance of the First Vision for members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. As historian James Allen pointed out several decades ago in two pioneering pieces of historical scholarship, there is the *perceived* reality of the First Vision—what the vision means, what it signifies, or what we learn from it—as much as there is the *historical* reality of that event.<sup>2</sup> The historical reality of the First Vision is captured in Joseph Smith’s primary accounts and, barring any major future discoveries, remains fairly solidified in the historical consciousness of modern Latter-day Saints. The perceived reality of the significance of the First Vision, on the other hand, has evolved over time as Latter-day Saints beginning with Joseph Smith himself have attempted to make sense of what the vision means for their faith and religious practice.

As Allen and others have explored at length, the meaning or significance assigned to the First Vision emerged slowly during Joseph Smith’s lifetime.<sup>3</sup> The Prophet left some clues as to what he himself understood was the significance his vision in his firsthand accounts of that experience. In some of his accounts, especially from 1832 and 1835, but also in Orson Pratt’s secondhand presentation in 1840, Joseph conceptualized the importance of his vision in a deeply personal way.<sup>4</sup> The importance of a personal God who forgives sins and answers the humble prayers of his children appears most prominently in these retellings.

In his later accounts from 1838 and 1842 that were intended for a more public audience—and which were written when the Prophet had time to more carefully conceptualize and record what points he wanted to emphasize in his history—the First Vision took on more universal significance as a sign that Joseph had been

called of God to usher in the last dispensation of the gospel after a long period of apostasy.<sup>5</sup> The dichotomy between an early personal stage, on the one hand, and an institutional stage in his later First Vision formulations and usages, on the other, however, is not entirely rigid. For example, instructions not to join any existing church and their errors are already found in the 1832 account, and the points about Joseph's prayers being answered and a special personal blessing having been given to him persist in Orson Hyde's 1842 secondhand account.<sup>6</sup>

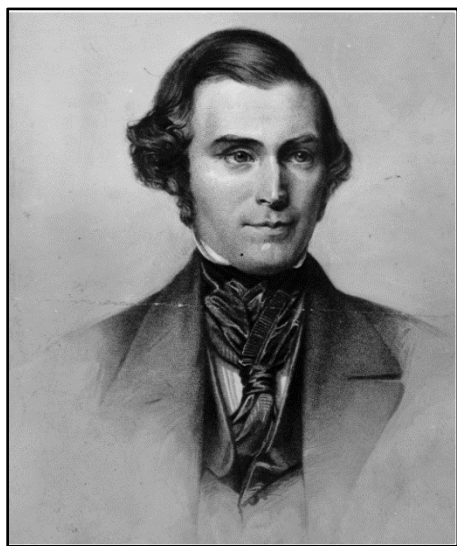
From surviving secondhand accounts, we now also know that Joseph at times told his vision in ways to highlight specific theological points beginning earlier than scholars had previously thought. For example, in the spring of 1835 in Michigan, Joseph spoke to believers about the First Vision to support the doctrine of continuing revelation. In Kirtland, Ohio in June 1835, he preached a Sabbath sermon on the requested topic of "This is My Beloved Son, Hear Him." In 1837 in Toronto, Canada he spoke about the Father and the Son. In 1840, Samuel Bennett and Orson Pratt discussed, in Philadelphia, the bodily manifestation of God in connection with the First Vision, and both of them that year published booklets in defense of the Church.<sup>7</sup> Finally, in a discourse delivered on June 11, 1843, the Prophet related his vision in a way that affirmed the reality of the Great Apostasy.<sup>8</sup>

It appears that while Joseph Smith used the First Vision often and for several purposes, including at times to discuss the nature of God,<sup>9</sup> Latter-day Saints did not systematize any single special theological meaning or significance out of the First Vision in the early years of the Church. For example, whereas today Church members look to the First Vision to fortify a full understanding of the nature of the Godhead, a systematic approach was not fully developed until later in the nineteenth century with such works as Elder B.H. Roberts's *The Mormon Doctrine of Deity* and into the twentieth century with the 1916 statement by the First Presidency on the Godhead.<sup>10</sup> Such full articulation was beyond the capability and priorities for the first generation of converts to the Church of Jesus Christ.<sup>11</sup> This, Allen reasonably argues, might be because many of the details of Joseph's vision were not widely known in the 1830s as well as because of the general wariness among Latter-day Saints to propound anything that seemed like a dogmatic creed.<sup>12</sup>

Another reason identified by Allen "may have been that the first generation of Mormon theologians placed so much emphasis on the idea that the restoration of the gospel began [in earnest] when the angel Moroni delivered the Book of

Mormon [plates to Joseph in 1827]. This event, after all, was depicted from the beginning as fulfilling the prophecy in Revelation 14:6.”<sup>13</sup> This can be seen in the example of Elder Orson Pratt in his 1840 pamphlet *A[n] Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions*. Pratt undertook one of the earliest attempts to draw theological or historical significance out of the First Vision. But instead of elaborating on how the First Vision clarified the nature of God, in this publication Pratt—as had Joseph himself in 1835—situated the vision of the Father and the Son as the first in a series of heavenly encounters leading to the recovery and translation of the Book of Mormon and the restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>14</sup> That was understandable, as Pratt was writing a missionary tract for investigators and new converts who would have tangible access to the text of the Book of Mormon but not to the accounts of First Vision. Furthermore, when earliest members of the Church spoke of “the Vision,” they often meant what is now known as Doctrine and Covenants 76, the grand vision of the degrees of glory experienced together by Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon.<sup>15</sup> There were many visions in Joseph Smith’s lifetime, so in the midst of those outpourings the focus of attention was still dynamic and broad.<sup>16</sup>

Although Pratt’s pamphlet was influential, it would still take several more years for Latter-day Saint writers to craft a full institutional narrative or understanding



Orson Pratt (1811–1881), Latter-day Saint apostle and writer.

about the First Vision that had applicability for the faith of Church members worldwide. In what historian Steven Harper calls the creation of a “collective memory,”<sup>17</sup> Latter-day Saints throughout the mid- to late-nineteenth century began delivering sermons, composing poems and hymns, writing tracts and books, and commissioning artwork that standardized how the First Vision was collectively imagined and communicated. Indeed, even the name *First Vision* (first used by Pratt in 1849) was itself coined as a way to position Joseph’s 1820 encounter with

the Father and the Son in a broader historical and theological context in relation to

his subsequent visions of Moroni and other heavenly personages.<sup>18</sup> Fostering this growing significance of the First Vision in the collective thinking of Church members was the canonization of the Pearl of Great Price in the year 1880, which brought with it scriptural status for the 1838–39 account of the First Vision recorded in what is known today as Joseph Smith—History (vv. 1–26).

By the year 1920—one hundred years after the boy Joseph entered the grove of trees near his home to seek out God in prayer—the First Vision had secured an enormously important position for Latter-day Saints. In April of that year the Church’s magazine *Improvement Era* published an issue celebrating the centennial anniversary of the First Vision.<sup>19</sup> Writing in that commemorative issue of the magazine, President Heber J. Grant heralded “the appearance of God the Father and his Son Jesus Christ to the boy prophet Joseph Smith” as a “marvelous occurrence fraught with wondrous results” and nothing less than “the greatest event that has taken place in all the world since the birth of our Lord and Redeemer, Jesus Christ.” He likewise deemed it “the most wonderful vision ever bestowed upon mortal man.”<sup>20</sup> Among other truths, the First Vision, President Grant continued, demonstrated the reality of the restoration of the gospel and the divine calling of Joseph Smith.<sup>21</sup> That same month during the Church’s general conference, President Anthon H. Lund of the First Presidency preached that the First Vision was “the dawn of this last dispensation, the dispensation of the fulness of times. It was indeed the beginning, the very initiating of this work; and the Lord chose an instrument, not learned and educated, but a man who was willing to do that which he should be commanded to do.”<sup>22</sup>

Today, leaders of the Church have further elaborated, emphasized, and clarified how the First Vision is significant for Latter-day Saints and, indeed, the entire world. In the October 2002 general conference of the Church, President Gordon B. Hinckley testified,

We declare without equivocation that God the Father and His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, appeared in person to the boy Joseph Smith. . . . 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. Reflect upon it, my brethren and sisters. For centuries the heavens remained sealed. Good men and women, not a few—really great and wonderful people—tried to correct, strengthen, and improve their systems of worship and their body



of doctrine. To them I pay honor and respect. How much better the world is because of their bold action. While I believe their work was inspired, it was not favored with the opening of the heavens, with the appearance of Deity. Then in 1820 came that glorious manifestation in answer to the prayer of a boy who had read in his family Bible the words of James: “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him” (James 1:5). Upon that unique and wonderful experience stands the validity of this Church.<sup>23</sup>

In 2005, Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf bore testimony that “Joseph Smith’s First Vision blesses our own personal lives, the lives of families, and eventually the whole human family—we come to believe in Jesus Christ through the testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith.”<sup>24</sup> More recently, the Church’s *Ensign* magazine has published talks by General Authorities once again articulating the valuable truths that we learn from the First Vision, including truths about the nature of God and Jesus Christ, how to receive personal revelation and answer to prayer, and the divine origins of the Church of Jesus Christ.<sup>25</sup>

All of this demonstrates that, like God’s children of past dispensations, Latter-day Saints of this final dispensation learn truth line upon line, precept upon precept (2 Nephi 28:30). It often takes time and careful study to fully recognize and convey the unfathomable significance of when God enters into history and acts for the benefit of humankind; a point recognized by Elder Roberts over a century ago.

I believe “Mormonism” affords opportunity for disciples of the second sort; nay, that its crying need is for such disciples. It calls for thoughtful disciples who will not be content with merely repeating some of its truths, but will develop the truths; and enlarge it by that development. Not half—not one-hundredth part—not a thousandth part of that which Joseph Smith revealed to the Church has yet been unfolded, either to the Church or to the world. The work of the expounder has scarcely begun. . . . The disciples of “Mormonism,” growing discontented with the necessarily primitive methods which have hitherto prevailed in sustaining the doctrine, will yet take profounder and broader views of the great doctrines committed to the Church; and, departing from mere repetition, will cast them in new formulas; co-operating in the works of the Spirit, until they help to give to the truths received a more forceful expression and carry it beyond the earlier and cruder stages of development.<sup>26</sup>

“Once the [First Vision] assumed its predominant place in Mormon writing and preaching” in the latter half of the nineteenth century, observed Allen, “it became much more than Joseph Smith’s personal experience. It became a shared community experience. Every Mormon and every prospective convert was urged to pray for his own testimony of its reality—in effect, to seek his own theophany by becoming one with Joseph in the grove.”<sup>27</sup> This invitation remains extended today as the significance of Joseph Smith’s First Vision is shared throughout the world.

## WHAT DID JOSEPH SMITH LEARN FROM THE FIRST VISION?

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Latter-day Saints have formulated a number of important theological or doctrinal points that can be learned from Joseph Smith's First Vision. Some of these points include: searching the scriptures can bring revelation, God answers sincere prayers and forgives sins, Satan is real but his power is limited, and God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ are separate beings with human forms.<sup>1</sup> While these doctrinal contributions of the First Vision are certainly worthy of careful consideration by modern Latter-day Saints, another interesting question to ponder is what Joseph Smith himself may have learned from his vision of the Father and the Son and how that may have influenced his teachings and ministry. Because the Prophet gave multiple accounts of the First Vision, we are capable of piecing together fairly well what he saw, heard, and experienced on that occasion. We are also capable of creating some sense of what Joseph learned based on what the accounts explicitly record and what we might infer from reading between the lines.

Based on both first- and secondhand reports,<sup>2</sup> the following tables provide a synopsis of what Joseph heard and saw in his vision.<sup>3</sup>

## Synoptic chart of what Joseph Smith saw in the First Vision

	JS 1832	JS 1835	JS 1838	Pratt 1840	JS 1842	Hyde 1842	Richards 1843	White 1843	Neibaur 1844
Appearance of (pillar) light/fire	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓
Brighter than the sun	✓		✓		✓				
Above Joseph's head		✓	✓						
Descended from above	✓		✓	✓					✓
Descended gradually			✓	✓					✓
Light/fire rested on the trees				✓					✓
Light/fire rested on Joseph	✓	✓	✓	✓					✓
Light/fire all around		✓		✓	✓				
One personage appeared first, then another	(implied)	✓						✓	✓
Two personages	(implied)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Exactly resembled each other		✓		✓	✓	✓			
Glory defied description			✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Appearance of many angels		✓							

## Synoptic chart of what Joseph Smith heard in the First Vision

	JS 1832	JS 1835	JS 1838	Pratt 1840	JS 1842	Hyde 1842	Richards 1843	White 1843	Neibaur 1844
Father introduced/testified of the Son	(implied)	✓	✓					✓	✓
Joseph called by name	✓		✓						
Joseph's prayers are answered, promised special blessing						✓			
Joseph's sins are forgiven	✓	✓		✓					
Joseph told to keep the commandments	✓								
Jesus describes himself	✓								
Joseph told to join no church			✓	✓		✓		✓	✓
All are wrong, none do right	✓		✓						✓
None do good	✓								✓
Everlasting covenant broken, all sin, gone astray	✓						✓		✓
Professors of religion corrupt			✓					✓	
Creeds are an abomination			✓						
Churches teach false doctrine				✓	✓	✓			
Draw near to God with lips only	✓		✓						
Form of godliness but deny the power thereof			✓						
None acknowledged as God's church, kingdom, people				✓	✓	✓			✓
Lord to come quickly	✓								
Fulness of the gospel promised				✓	✓	✓			

As seen above, based on the explicit details of the surviving accounts of the First Vision, it is obvious that Joseph learned much from his encounter with the Father and the Son. First, he learned of the reality of a personal God and a personal Savior who answer prayers and are concerned for the well-being and salvation of humankind. In his 1832 account, Joseph—who as a youth became “convicted of [his] sins”—said that he sensed as though “there was none else to whom [he] could go and obtain mercy.” He therefore “cried unto the Lord for mercy” and testified that “the Lord heard [his] cry in the wilderness.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, as Joseph made clear six years later, from his vision in the grove he “had found the testimony of James to be true—that a man who lacked wisdom might ask of God, and obtain, and not be upbraided” (Joseph Smith—History 1:26).<sup>5</sup>

Another truth Joseph learned from the First Vision was of the reality of the Great Apostasy, which New Testament apostles had prophesied must occur before the Second Coming of the Lord (e.g. 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12).<sup>6</sup> Three out of the four firsthand accounts left by the Prophet indicate that Jesus confirmed this to young Joseph. “The world lieth in sin at this time,” Joseph quoted the Lord as telling him in his 1832 account, “and none doeth good, no, not one. They have turned aside from the gospel and keep not my commandments. They draw near to me with their lips while their hearts are far from me.”<sup>7</sup> Since it was intended for a non-Latter-day Saint audience, the account prepared by the Prophet in 1842 softened the language but still communicated the same point: “[The heavenly personages] told me that all religious denominations were believing in incorrect doctrines, and that none of them was acknowledged of God as his church and kingdom.”<sup>8</sup> A year later, Joseph used what he learned in the First Vision about the apostasy in a sermon elaborating on Isaiah 24, 28–29.

at 6 AM. heard Eld. G[eorge] J. ~~Adam~~ Adams upon the book of Mormon proved from the 24,<sup>th</sup> 28<sup>th</sup> & 29<sup>th</sup> of Isaiah that the everlasting cove[n]t set which was set upon by Christ & the apostles had been broken . . . Pres. J. Smith bore testimony to the same— saying that when he was a youth he began to think about these ~~these~~ things but could not find out which of all the sects were right— he went into the grove & enquired of the Lord which of all the sects were right— re received for answer that none of them were right, that they were all wrong, & that the Everlasting cove[n]t was broken.<sup>9</sup>

While these points are explicit in the surviving historical accounts, others must be teased out more cautiously. For instance, it is unclear precisely how the First Vision impacted Joseph's understanding of the nature of the Godhead. To be sure, three out of the four firsthand accounts report two personages, the Father and the Son, being present in the vision. (The fourth seems to imply the presence of two personages, but is not explicit.<sup>10</sup>) Joseph also reported that one of the personages appeared first and then the second shortly after,<sup>11</sup> with the two of them "exactly resemble[ing] each other in features and likeness."<sup>12</sup>

Beholding something so extraordinary undoubtedly would have left a strong impression on the young boy, and it is probable that this encounter influenced Joseph's teachings that God the Father and Jesus Christ both had tangible bodies of flesh and bone (Doctrine and Covenants 130:22–23).<sup>13</sup> But because the Prophet himself was not explicit on this point, we must posit this cautiously. Based on surviving documentation, "it is difficult to know exactly what [Joseph] Smith concluded about the nature of the godhead from this experience."<sup>14</sup> A late, thirdhand account preserved by Charles Lowell Walker indicates that God the Father physically touched Joseph's eyes before he saw the Savior in the vision.<sup>15</sup> If this source is accurate, it would bolster the idea that Joseph learned something about the corporeality of God as early as 1820.<sup>16</sup>

By his own admission, there were "many things" which Joseph heard and saw in his vision which he could not fully describe (Joseph Smith—History 1:20). It is not clear, for instance, how long the vision lasted. As such, there will always be some remaining question as to what precisely the Prophet himself took away from his vision or how it otherwise affected him personally. What is clear, however, is that Joseph was completely confident in the reality of what he had experienced, and this confidence gave him encouragement in times of trial. "I had actually seen a light, and in the midst of that light I saw two Personages, and they did in reality speak to me," he testified. "I had seen a vision; I knew it, and I knew that God knew it, and I could not deny it" (Joseph Smith—History 1:25). Part of the excitement for Latter-day Saints today in studying the surviving First Vision accounts is trying to better appreciate the Prophet's testimony and unfold its true significance.



## WHAT ARE THE DOCTRINAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE FIRST VISION?

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**A**s members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have studied the accounts of Joseph Smith’s First Vision over many decades—particularly the account canonized in the Pearl of Great Price—they have come to understand that the vision makes a number of important doctrinal contributions to the Restoration.<sup>1</sup> In a 2016 worldwide devotional for young adults, Elder Richard J. Maynes of the Seventy urged, “Joseph Smith’s First Vision is the key to unlocking many truths that had been hidden for centuries. Let us not forget or take for granted the many precious truths we have learned from the First Vision.”<sup>2</sup> So what, exactly, are some of the important truths we learn from the First Vision?

Perhaps the most fundamental truth that is learned from the First Vision is the reality of a personal God who speaks to His children. Indeed, this appears to have been the chief significance Joseph himself took away from his encounter with the Father and the Son.<sup>3</sup> As President Henry B. Eyring testified, “Our challenge is to act so that we can receive the messages of truth Heavenly Father is ready to send to us as revelation and to recognize what He has already sent. Joseph Smith’s experience [in the Sacred Grove] provides an example of that.”<sup>4</sup> The factors to



receiving personal revelation that President Eyring felt were illustrated in the process leading up to the First Vision include diligently searching the scriptures, coming before the Lord with a contrite spirit and broken heart, and acting on faith in anticipation to receive an answer to prayer.

Another deeply important truth that Latter-day Saints today recognize from the First Vision concerns the nature of the Godhead. As President Dallin H. Oaks taught during the April 2017 general conference of the Church:

Our first article of faith declares, “We believe in God, the Eternal Father, and in His Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost.” We join other Christians in this belief in a Father and a Son and a Holy Ghost, but what we believe about Them is different from the beliefs of others. We do not believe in what the Christian world calls the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. In his First Vision, Joseph Smith saw two distinct personages, two beings, thus clarifying that the then-prevailing beliefs concerning God and the Godhead were not true.<sup>5</sup>

This point has been rightly emphasized by several Latter-day Saint writers.<sup>6</sup> So too has been what the First Vision demonstrates about the existence of Satan and his opposition to the work of God.<sup>7</sup> Joseph recorded in two of his four firsthand accounts of the vision that the adversary attempted to stop him from praying while seeking God in the grove.<sup>8</sup> In his 1835 account, Joseph recounted,

I made a fruitless attempt to pray; my tongue seemed to be swollen in my mouth, so that I could not utter. I heard a noise behind me, like some person walking towards me. I strove again to pray but could not. The noise of walking seemed to draw nearer. I sprung up on my feet and looked around but saw no person or thing that was calculated to produce the noise of walking.<sup>9</sup>

In his 1838–39 retelling, Joseph portrayed this encounter with Satan more vividly.

After I had retired to the place where I had previously designed to go, having looked around me, and finding myself alone, I kneeled down and began to offer up the desires of my heart to God. I had scarcely done so, when immediately I was seized upon by some power which entirely overcame me, and had such an astonishing influence over me as to bind

my tongue so that I could not speak. Thick darkness gathered around me, and it seemed to me for a time as if I were doomed to sudden destruction. (Joseph Smith–History 1:15)

The Prophet described this opposition he experienced as “the power of some actual being from the unseen world, who had such marvelous power as I had never before felt in any being” (Joseph Smith–History 1:16). He quickly learned like other prophets, however, that Satan’s power is limited and indeed impotent in the presence of the Almighty (Joseph Smith–History 1:16–17; cf. Moses 1:11–22). “That terrible opposition, which continued throughout Joseph’s life, came because Lucifer wanted to stop the revelation that would lead to the Restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ,” taught President Eyring. “Your prayers for revelation from God will face lesser opposition, but you need to follow Joseph’s example of courage and persistence.”<sup>10</sup>

A look at how Latter-day Saints over the years have come to understand the importance of the First Vision for bolstering and clarifying essential truths of the Restoration thus verifies the observation made by Milton V. Backman:

[Restoration doctrine] is, in the words of Stephen L. Richards (a former councilor in the First Presidency), “steeped in the verity of the First Vision.” It undergirds the doctrine of an anthropomorphic God and theomorphic man, of the relationships of the persons of the Godhead, and of continual revelation. Mormon prayers, hymns, forms of worship, and eschatology are all rooted in this understanding. It renews the witness of the Hebrew prophets that visions are not the least but the most reliable mortal access to the divine; that the majesty, glory, and power of God are “beyond description”; that the biblical record of face-to-face communion with God is more than a strained metaphor. It confirms the New Testament testimony of the apostles that God the Father and Jesus Christ are separate persons who manifest themselves as they are to the sons and daughters of God; and that the Son is in the similitude of the Father, and the Father in the similitude of the Son.<sup>11</sup>

## ARE THE CHRISTIAN CREEDS REALLY AN ABOMINATION?

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One of the more dramatic divine pronouncements delivered to Joseph Smith during his First Vision concerns the creeds being propounded by Christian leaders and theologians of his day. Upon asking the two glorious personages—God the Father and Jesus Christ—which of the Christian denominations he should join, Joseph recorded the following answer in his 1838–39 account of the vision:

I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong; and the Personage who addressed me said that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight; that those professors were all corrupt; that: “they draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me, they teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof.” (Joseph Smith—History 1:19)

This is, by any standard, a direct and harsh reply. It is also consistent with the accounts left by Joseph before and after this one. In his 1832 account of the vision, Joseph reported that the Lord told him, “Behold, the world lieth in sin at this time, and none doeth good, no, not one. They have turned aside from the gospel and keep not my commandments. They draw near to me with their lips while their hearts are far from me.”<sup>1</sup> Later in 1842, in a statement that seems to have been carefully worded to lessen any offence to its intended public audience, Joseph paraphrased what he learned from the heavenly personages thus: “They told me that all religious denominations were believing in incorrect doctrines and that none of them was acknowledged of God as his church and kingdom.”<sup>2</sup>

In order to assess the intention behind the language of the 1838–39 account that spoke of the Christian creeds being an “abomination,” a number of considerations need to be kept in mind. The first is the historical setting of the composition of this account. As historian Steven Harper has noted, Joseph Smith composed his 1838 history at a time when he and other Latter-day Saints were

experiencing bitter persecution. The troubles of the Kirtland apostasy of 1837 and mounting tensions that would lead to the outbreak of the Missouri War of 1838 undoubtedly influenced the defensive tone of this history.<sup>3</sup> Little wonder that Joseph began his account refuting what he deemed “many reports which have been put in circulation by evil-disposed and designing persons, in relation to the rise and progress of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, all of which have been designed by the authors thereof to militate against its character as a Church and its progress in the world” (Joseph Smith–History 1:1).

This context also explains why the theme of Joseph’s boyhood persecution as a consequence to him telling others about the First Vision is prominent in this narrative (Joseph Smith–History 1:21–26), an element that goes underplayed or omitted from his other accounts of the First Vision. Keeping in mind that the 1838 account has Joseph paraphrasing what the Lord told him, it therefore seems likely that the harsher tone of this account was deliberate on Joseph’s part. “In [Joseph] Smith’s 1839 present, persecution dominated his past,” writes Harper.

He had triumphed over mobs and militias, and now he made sense of his present position as the embattled president of a new church. The combination of Smith’s past and present consolidated a defensive, resolute memory in which reporting his first vision catalyzed his lifetime of persecution. . . . [The 1838–39 account of the First Vision] shapes [Latter-day Saints’] identity as a people persecuted from transcending creedal Christianity and accessing God directly.<sup>4</sup>

Beyond the setting and tone of the 1838 account is the consideration of what creeds specifically Joseph may have had in mind with this account. After all, over the many centuries of Christian history, hundreds of creeds have been issued by orthodox Christians of different theological traditions. Are there particularly problematic creeds that Joseph perhaps had in mind?

Deriving from the Latin *credo*, meaning “I believe,” a creed, at its most basic definition, is “a statement of the shared beliefs of (an often religious) community in the form of a fixed formula summarizing core tenets.”<sup>5</sup> Latter-day Saints, who affirm that as a result of the Great Apostasy many important points of the pure doctrine of Jesus Christ were distorted or lost, have traditionally been very suspicious of and even sometimes outrightly hostile towards the orthodox creeds

of Christendom, viewing them as the product of a time when revelation was not guiding the formulations of perhaps sincere but still misguided churchmen.<sup>6</sup>

Sometimes it's the specific content of certain creed that riles Latter-day Saints, such as in the case with the Westminster Confession of 1647, which affirms: "There is but one only living and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions, immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible . . ." <sup>7</sup> This formulation of the nature of God runs directly at odds with the Latter-day Saint belief in an embodied God who is knowable through revelation and certainly not immutable, without passions (Doctrine and Covenants 130:22–23; Moses 7:26–31). More often, however, it is what creeds represent than what they contain that makes Latter-day Saints uneasy. As Joseph Smith himself remarked: "I cannot believe in any of the creeds of the different denominations because they all have some things in them [that] I cannot subscribe to, though all of them have some truth. But I want to come up into the presence of God and learn all things; but the creeds set up stakes and say 'hitherto shalt thou come, and no further' — which I cannot subscribe to."<sup>8</sup> For the Prophet, creeds were an impediment to receiving new light and knowledge from God because they needlessly constricted believers into narrow boxes of dogma. As he said on another occasion: "[T]he most prominent point of difference in sentiment between the Latter-day Saints and sectarians [is] that the latter [are] all circumscribed by some peculiar creed, which deprived its members the privilege of believing anything not contained therein; whereas the Latter-day Saints have no creed, but are ready to believe all true principles that exist, as they are made manifest from time to time."<sup>9</sup>

In addition to all of this, scholar John W. Welch has pointed out that the multitudinous creeds of Protestant Christianity that were written and circulated during the three centuries leading up to Joseph's lifetime led to increased "protest and confusion" as believers atomized into increasingly niche subgroups.<sup>10</sup> Whereas the credal statements in the New Testament were



*A Christian icon depicting Emperor Constantine (center) and the Fathers of the First Council of Nicaea (325) holding the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381.*

personal statements of testimony, and the main creeds of the early Christian councils were institutional statements internally defining orthodoxy,<sup>11</sup> beginning in the Reformation,

Creeds now became statements of belief, formulated for the purpose of distinguishing and differentiating one religious group from another. Into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the number of creeds climbed and the verbosity and complexity of these confessions soared. While all of this positioning may have been understandably necessitated by the political and rational forces that surrounded the various Protestant denominations or sects, the result was precisely as Joseph's experience depicts. Confusion, dissension, and self-serving manipulation characterized much of the religious fervor of his day, erupting in many cases (not only against the Mormons) in hostility, persecution, and violence.<sup>12</sup>

“By 1820,” Welch continues, “numerous creeds of various denominations had been brought into existence,” with no sign of slowing down.<sup>13</sup> With their often highly polemical language and stridently contentious aims, the formulation of many of the creeds Joseph would have been reacting against coincided not only with the bloody wars of religion fought in Europe, but also with the “the tumultuous times of the First and Second Awakenings in the mid-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries” in North America.<sup>14</sup> It was precisely because of these creeds that Joseph grew up in a religious environment “of great confusion and bad feeling[s],” with “priest contending against priest, and convert against convert; so that all their good feelings one for another, if they ever had any, were entirely lost in a strife of words and a contest about opinions” (Joseph Smith—History 1:6). Inasmuch as Jesus himself proclaimed that contention and disputation was of the devil (3 Nephi 11:29), there can be little doubt as to why Jesus would have expressed regret and dismay at the way creeds were being utilized by competing and intransigent ministers and professors of religion in Joseph's day.

The stark language of the 1838 account of the First Vision which denounces the creeds as “abominations” forces readers to make a decision about the ultimate truthfulness of Joseph Smith's visionary claims.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, however, most Latter-day Saints, while concurring with the negative assessment of creedal Christianity in the Prophet's account, are eager to approach this subject judiciously and with the same kind of fair-mindedness they ask of other Christians for their beliefs. Latter-day Saints should be careful not to misrepresent or misconstrue what

the orthodox creeds actually say,<sup>16</sup> much less use them as a bludgeon to attack sincere Christians of either Catholic or Protestant backgrounds. Although Joseph Smith was highly critical of the Christian creeds, he was also sensitive to the fact that they do contain many things that are true, which the Saints readily recognize and welcome into their own religious paradigms where appropriate.<sup>17</sup>

## THE VISIONARY WORLD OF JOSEPH SMITH

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Joseph Smith was not the only person who claimed visionary experiences during the “unusual excitement on the subject of religion” (Joseph Smith—History 1:5) known as the Second Great Awakening (circa 1790–1840). As several American cultural historians, including Richard Bushman and others, have documented, many men and women during this time were reporting extraordinary visions and dreams.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, even members of Joseph’s own family experienced remarkable dreams during this time.<sup>2</sup> Like Joseph Smith, some of these visionaries—such as Charles G. Finney, a prominent evangelist and revival preacher during the 1820s and 30s—would go on to play important roles in the history of American Christianity.<sup>3</sup> Many of the men and women who claimed visions during this time published their accounts in pamphlets and tracts, which allows historians to situate their experiences in a broader cultural and historical context alongside Joseph’s First Vision of the Father and the Son.<sup>4</sup> But, as historians have observed, while there are very clear parallels between Joseph’s visionary claims and those of others, there are also some key differences which set the Prophet apart from his contemporaries.

For example, Bushman points out that the focus of the visionary accounts common in Joseph’s day are in many ways different than the focus of the First Vision. “The narratives of dreams and miraculous appearances [of heavenly beings] did not imply the construction of any institutional forms; they did not propose doctrine; they did not proclaim commandments,” writes Bushman. “They were apocalyptic warnings, visions of worldly wickedness and onrushing doom. In a sense, they were titillations of the religious sensibilities that imposed no obligations beyond a general revulsion against sin and responsiveness to divine purpose. The visionary writings were a later version of the Puritan preoccupation with wonders. They inspired awe at the presence of invisible powers made visible but were an occasion to marvel rather than to act.” By contrast, Bushman notes that Joseph Smith’s visions “radically redirected peoples lives. His writings became authoritative



statements of doctrine and the divine will. They implied an ecclesiastical polity and a reorganization of society.”<sup>5</sup>

In addition, the *my* Joseph related his experience in the grove,<sup>6</sup> while again finding some overlap with contemporary writings, diverged in some important respects from what was typical or expected for his time. As historian Christopher C. Jones elaborates, typical conversion narratives of this period often used circumspect language in describing what the visionary saw. Using Methodist conversion narratives as his primary example, Jones explains,

Methodists of the day carefully qualified the nature of their visionary experiences with phrases like “by faith, I saw . . .” or by affirming that it was just a dream. . . . Most commonly, individuals described their visions in ambiguous terms. . . . Joseph Smith, by contrast, affirmed unambiguously that “it was nevertheless a fact, that I had had a vision. . . . I had actually seen a light and in the midst of that light I saw two personages, and they did in reality speak to me. . . . I knew it, and I knew that God knew it, and I could not deny it.” It was thus not necessarily a matter of what Joseph Smith experienced, but rather how he explained it.<sup>7</sup>

The marked differences noted by Bushman and Jones are among the reasons why historians attempting to adequately situate Joseph Smith in the visionary culture of antebellum American Christianity continue to grapple with the task.<sup>8</sup> In fact, so radical was the message of Joseph’s First Vision—that *all* existing Christian denominations were in apostasy and the fulness of the gospel would be restored at the future time—that it was downright offensive to many in his generation. “[R]eports of visions and divine appearances were commonplace at the time,” remarks the non-Latter-day Saint historian Robert Remini in his biography of the Prophet. Joseph merely claiming to have had a vision was not in and of itself problematic.

But what was objectionable . . . was the message [of the First Vision], namely, that all the churches were wrong and an abomination in God’s sight. . . . Here, then, was one of the first and most important reasons why Joseph came to be hated and reviled by ministers and their congregations: the charge that all other faiths were offensive to God and their preachers corrupt. That accusations, they argued, was not simply wrong and insulting but damnable.<sup>9</sup>

Situating Joseph Smith in the visionary world of his day can help elucidate some useful clarification and context to his life and ministry. However, it is important not to overstate the parallels. As Brodhead notes, “The differences between Smith and [and other prophetic figures of the time such as Nat Turner] are so clear as scarcely to require mention.”<sup>10</sup> And as Bushman urges, one should not to carelessly lump the Prophet’s visionary claims in with others that, upon closer inspection, exhibit considerable differences.

Joseph Smith’s experiences can be compared to reports from the visionaries of his time, just as he can be linked to other nineteenth-century cultures—universalism, rational skepticism, republicanism, progress, revivalism, magic, communitarianism, health reform, restorationism, Zionism, and a host of others. But no one of these cultures, or even all of them added together, encompasses the whole of his thought. Joseph went beyond them all and produced a culture and society that the visionaries around him could not even imagine. Visions and revelations lay at the core of the Restoration, but the doctrinal and institutional outworks extended well beyond the limits of [typical nineteenth-century] visionary culture.<sup>11</sup>



## OBSERVATIONS ON THE TIMING OF THE FIRST VISION

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**W**hy did God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ wait until “early in the spring of eighteen hundred and twenty” (Joseph Smith—History 1:14) to reveal themselves to the Prophet Joseph Smith and usher in the dispensation of the fulness of times?<sup>2</sup> This question naturally rises as individuals ponder the timing of Joseph Smith’s First Vision. Over the years, Latter-day Saint scholars have pointed to a number of possible reasons for why the year 1820—or at very least the general time period of the early American Republic—may have been the right time for Joseph, under heavenly direction, to begin the process of restoration.<sup>1</sup>

First, it should be recognized that the specific timing of the First Vision seems to have depended in large measure on Joseph himself. Joseph did not suddenly wake up one morning in 1820 and decide to pray in the grove. He was born in 1805 in Sharon, Vermont, not long after the establishment of the United States of America, offering an unprecedented political situation that protected the free exercise of religion. And then his family needed to move from Vermont into Western New York. Due to economic and weather conditions, the Smith family settled in Palmyra in 1816.<sup>2</sup> Not only was the Hill Cumorah in that immediate area, it was also an area of considerable religious enthusiasm at a time of individual freedom and choice, making that particular time unusually opportune for the young Joseph to probe, spiritually prepare, and muster the determination to approach God in prayer.<sup>3</sup> As he recounted in his 1832 history, as a young teenager “at about the age of twelve years, [Joseph’s] mind become seriously impressed with regard to the all-important concerns for the welfare of [his] immortal soul.” This internal struggle lasted “from the age of twelve years to fifteen” as Joseph “pondered many things in [his] heart concerning the situation of the world of mankind.”<sup>4</sup> It was only after “serious reflection and great uneasiness” that Joseph “at length” finally felt decided

to follow the direction given in James 1:5 (Joseph Smith—History 1:8, 13). Thus, in Joseph’s own personal and family life, the First Vision could scarcely have happened earlier than 1818 or 1819.

Whatever the personal factors were that brought Joseph to his knees in the spring of 1820, on a macrolevel it is apparent from broad historical and societal trends of the time that the First Vision occurred during a pivotal moment in history. As religious historian Richard Bennett has recently documented, the Restoration emerged out of an epoch of reform, revolution, and progress the likes of which had never been seen.<sup>5</sup> Not only the American Revolution (1765–1783) but revolutions in Europe (such as the French Revolution [1789–1799] and the Napoleonic Wars [1803–1815]) and South America (such as the military campaigns of Simon Bolivar [1811–1830]) prepared the world politically for the establishment of what would grow into a new worldwide religious movement.<sup>6</sup> Had these movements’ efforts of political, social, and economic liberalization—which strove to secure freedoms of travel, speech, assembly, religion, and the press, among other rights, for the common man—not gained traction, it is hard to imagine a world environment that would have seen the publication and distribution of the Book of Mormon and the rapid establishment and spread of the Church of Jesus Christ at any time much earlier than 1830.



*William Tyndale (c. 1494 – c. 1536), English reformer.*

The First Vision occurred at a time of crucial intellectual progress as well. The very fact that Joseph had personal access to a Bible in his native language where he could encounter James 1:5 was because of the efforts of reformers like William Tyndale and inventors like Johannes Gutenberg to make scripture accessible in English to everybody,<sup>7</sup> as well as the gains made by Enlightenment thinkers who stressed the need for religious pluralism and tolerance.<sup>8</sup> In the decades leading up to 1820, Protestant Christian missionary and Bible societies in both Europe and North America began a

renewed crusade to make the Bible the focus of study and the chief proselytizing tool among all classes of people.<sup>9</sup>

What's more, the religious environment of North America fostered by of the First (1730s–1740s) and Second (1790–1840) Great Awakenings not only encouraged young Joseph to urgently seek a personal relationship with God but also allowed the boy to openly question the dominant Christian sects of his day.<sup>10</sup> Bennett astutely sees young Joseph “inheriting this [cultural] atmosphere” of revolution, reform, and progress (both religious and secular) that led him “his own sacred grove near Rochester, New York, in the spring of 1820 in a determination to ask his God” how he could make sense of the dizzying effects of this new world he found himself in. “While the answer to his prayer led to the sunrise of a new world religion, his quest must also be seen as part of a time that was changing old ways, mannerisms, and streams of thought in a wide range of human endeavor.”<sup>11</sup>

These personal and historical forces have also been detected by legal historian John Welch, who draws attention to a number of remarkable providential parallels between the origin and growth of the Church of Jesus Christ in the Meridian of Time with similar conditions allowing for the restoration and growth of the Church of Jesus Christ in the Fulness of Times.<sup>12</sup> For example, Welch points out that

in 31 BC, Augustus Caesar defeated Marc Anthony at the battle of Actium and ushered in an unprecedented era of world peace known as the Pax Augusti. Similarly, thirty years before the birth of Joseph Smith, the American colonies united in revolution against England and defeated the British forces to establish a new American nation that championed liberty and peace. In both of these worlds, optimism abounded. People were open to new ideas and forms of organization. Old legal and social arrangements had been overthrown. New horizons beckoned temptingly. The feelings of instability that result from overturning traditional orders were in both cases assuaged by elevating new figures or families to demi-divine status. In the Roman situation, the family of Augustus Caesar provided the overall society with a fundamental organizational foundation. In the American situation, the leading families of Virginia and Massachusetts became icons of the new republic, providing its first forty years of presidents.<sup>13</sup>

Other parallels between the first- and nineteenth-century origins for the Church of Jesus Christ detected by Welch include comparable foundings, group behaviors, patterns of growth, and outside historical settings. All this suggests that many things must be in place for a fragile new religious movement to take root and succeed, and that divine preparations may well have influenced the timing of the births and deaths of both Jesus Christ and Joseph Smith. This, Welch writes, invites us to view history through a providential paradigm that “is interested in pictures and patterns that include divine purposes and influences as part of the human drama.”

A Latter-day Saint approach to history invites careful detection of places and ways in which God may have been involved in the affairs of history. While making some historical sense of the following providential analogues or similarities remains an elusive challenge, looking for God in history is at least as interesting a quest as is trying to detect the influences of other metaforces at work in the sweep of history, such as economic pressures, class conflicts, or intellectual developments.<sup>14</sup>

Until times were right, neither Jesus nor Joseph could have accomplished their foreordained and necessary missions. And if either had been born thirty years earlier or thirty years later, it is not hard to see that neither would have had much of a chance.

While many points such as these help answer the question as to why the Restoration had to wait several centuries until it could happen, Latter-day Saints should not be overeager to artificially project their own view of history onto the pre-Restoration past. As Bennett cautions:

In attempting to place the Restoration into a wider context, there is the temptation of some Latter-day Saint readers to see all of history pointing to Palmyra . . . when in fact it wasn't so. A worldwide history cannot be artificially bent to fit a narrow, preconceived, faith-promoting paradigm of interpretation and self-fulfilling prophecy, that everyone and everything were somehow all part of a divine Latter-day Saint hymnbook.<sup>15</sup>

Likewise, Welch ends his evaluation of these numerous points of evidence for the timing of the Restoration with this caveat: “As proof that God has once again set His hand to work in a divine restoration of His Kingdom as originally established in the meridian of time, the foregoing data can, of course, provide only

circumstantial evidence, but such evidence is not without merit.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, while himself perceiving the importance of patterns and forces “so pertinent to the rise of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,”<sup>17</sup> Bennett invites students of history “to make his or her own connections and conclusions”<sup>18</sup> as they encounter what Welch describes as “God and mankind both act[ing] on a world stage with all its necessary props and fixtures.”<sup>19</sup>

While there is still room for individual Latter-day Saints to tease out the exact degree to which God influenced the worldwide events leading up to the Restoration, there can be no doubt that such things take time. As Elder M. Russell Ballard has recently testified, “The Lord prepared the world for the Restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ long before the Father and the Son appeared to Joseph Smith in 1820.” It is therefore “appropriate to remember the numerous women and men over the course of centuries who were inspired by the Lord as He prepared the world for the Restoration that began when the Father and the Son appeared to young Joseph Smith, who was seeking forgiveness and direction in 1820.”<sup>20</sup>

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# APPENDIX 1: WHEN DID JOSEPH SMITH KNOW THAT THE FATHER AND THE SON HAVE “TANGIBLE” BODIES?

John W. Welch

*“The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man’s; the Son also.”*

*Doctrine & Covenants 130:22*

Joseph Smith learned many things in the burst of knowledge that poured down upon him in his First Vision in the spring of 1820. Most obviously, he was greeted by two divine beings, “whose brightness and glory defy all description.” The first of the two, “pointing to the other,” said, “This is my beloved son, Hear Him.” Joseph then listened as Jesus spoke. That experience authoritatively answered more questions about the Godhead than anyone in the world had received since the vision of Stephen, in which he saw a heavenly vision of Jesus, “the Son of man, standing on the right hand of God,” only a few years after Jesus’s crucifixion and resurrection (Acts 7:55-56).

During his lifetime, Joseph spoke fairly often about his First Vision. Historians have grouped these accounts as four written by Joseph, five others composed by others, and a dozen later reminiscences.<sup>1</sup> In addressing a variety of audiences, both formally and informally, these accounts regularly speak of the Father and the Son as two separate personages. They are described as embodied and looking like each other. The Father called Joseph by name. They both spoke to him in English. He was told that his prayers were answered, that his sins were forgiven, that he should not join any of the existing churches, should keep God’s commandments, and many other things. He was left totally exhausted but completely filled with love and joy, knowing that God had a work for him to do. In many ways, this experience was both spiritual and physical.

Twenty-three years later, on Sunday April 2, 1843, in Ramus, Illinois, Joseph spoke more clearly than ever before about the *tangible* nature of the exalted bodies of God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ. He also stated how those two divine beings relate to and are different from the Holy Ghost, the third member of the Godhead. “The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man’s; the Son

also; but the Holy Ghost has not a body of flesh and bones, but is a personage of Spirit. Were it not so, the Holy Ghost could not dwell in us. A man may receive the Holy Ghost, and it may descend upon him and not tarry with him” (as in D&C 130:22-23).

To best understand these words found in D&C 130, it helps to consider the context in which these statements were made. The events of that day are reported in detail in the journal kept for Joseph by his scribes and are now available in the Joseph Smith Papers.<sup>2</sup> It was a conference Sunday. Apostle Orson Hyde had been asked to speak. It may have been something of a homecoming for him. He had arrived back in Nauvoo only four months earlier, on December 7, 1842, “having been away from his family for 967 days and traveling over twenty thousand miles”<sup>3</sup> on his famous mission to dedicate the Holy Land for the return of the Jewish people. During his almost three-year’s away, Orson had missed a season of booming growth and soaring doctrinal developments in Nauvoo.

Beginning on page 35 of that journal, we learn that Elder Hyde opened his remarks in the 10:00 AM session with words about the second coming of Christ found in 1 John 3:2, which reads, “When he shall appear *we shall be like him*.” Toward the end of his remarks, Hyde spoke about John 14:23, which reads, “If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make *our abo[d]e* with him.” He then added, “It is our privilege to have *the father & son dwelling in our hearts. &c.*”

During the noon hour, Joseph and others had a meal at his sister Sophronia’s. Joseph kindly said to Apostle Hyde, “I am going to offer *some corrections* to you,” to which Elder Hyde sincerely replied, “They shall be thankfully received.” Joseph then said, “When he shall appear we shall **see him as he is**. We shall see that **he is a man like ourselves**.— And that same sociality which exists amogt [amongst] us here will exist amo[n]g us there only it will be coupled with eternal glory which glory we do not now enjoy.” And then, regarding John 14:23, Joseph added, “The appearing of the Father and of the Son in that verse is a personal appearance. To say that the Father and the Son dwells in a mans heart is an old Sectarian notion and is not correct. There is are [sic] no angels who administer to this earth but who belong to or have belonged to this earth.”<sup>4</sup>

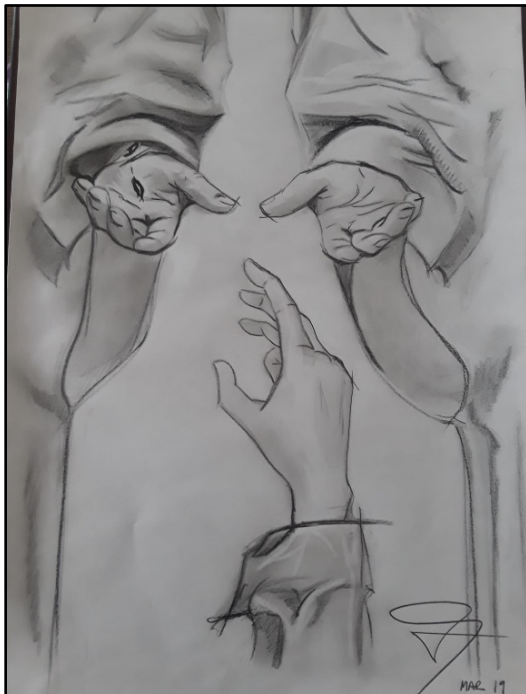
Following the 1:00 PM session, the Church authorities had dinner at Benjamin Johnson’s home, gathering there at 7:00 PM. There Joseph elaborated further,

giving other words of revelation that have long been included in D&C 130: “Whatever principle of intelligence we attain unto in this life, it will rise with us in the revalatin [sic], and if a person gains more knowledge and intelligen[ce], through his obedience & diligence than another he will have so much the advantage in the world to come—There is a law irrevocably decreed in heaven before the foundation of the world upon which all blessings are predicated and when we obtain a blessing it is by obedi[en]ce to the law upon which that blessing is predicated.”

Then, at that point, Joseph “again revertd to Elders Hyde mistake. &c.” Joseph said: **“The Father has a body of flesh & bones as tangible as mans** [the manuscript here may also be read as saying “as tangible as *ours*”], **the Son also**, but the Holy Ghost is a personage of spirit, and a person cannot have the personage of the Holy Ghost in his heart. He may recive the gift of the holy Ghost. **It may descend upon him but not to tarry with him.**”<sup>5</sup>

At the end of the dinner, Joseph “calld upon Elder Hyde to get up & fulfil his covenant [or agreement] to preach ¼ of an hour. . . . [But] Elder Hyde arose & said ‘Brothe[r]s & Sisters, I feel as though all had been said that can be said. I can say nothing but bless you.’”<sup>6</sup>

While Joseph spoke politely in correcting Orson Hyde, the Prophet was firm in rejecting any idea that God is “a spirit” who “dwells” or “abides” in our hearts. He called this idea “an old Sectarian notion.” He said it “is not correct.” While the Holy Ghost may “descend” upon us (as occurred at Christ’s baptism), His role is not to “tarry” with us. Joseph also said that when Christ appears, we shall see him “as he is,” namely, that he is “a man *like ourselves*.” “The Father has a body of flesh & bones as *tangible as man’s*.” And regarding the “coming” of the Father and





the Son, as promised in John 14:23, Joseph said that those words refer to “a *personal appearance*.” All of these points relate to the central truth that the Father in Heaven has a tangible body, differing from a spirit body.

Over his lifetime, Joseph had come to know the essential, tangible nature of the celestial bodies of God the Father and his Son. Joseph had learned these things in several ways. (1) Most of all, he had learned this from his experience with the Father and the Son to him during his First Vision in 1820. (2) His inspired and reasoned works translating the Book of Mormon in 1829 and the Bible in 1832 mutually confirmed this certitude. And (3) many personal appearances to him by other embodied heavenly messengers from 1823 to 1836 reinforced his knowledge of divine physicality. Considering each of these three ways adds to our appreciation of Joseph’s learning.

(1) Joseph’s First Vision in the grove in 1820 would seem to be the primary and most likely point in time at which Joseph learned that the Father has a tangible body of flesh and bones. On no other occasion known of was Joseph in such close proximity with Heavenly Father.

Joseph’s reports of the First Vision repeatedly emphasize the reality and physicality of that experience. He remarked about the beautiful weather that day, about where he had left his ax the night before, about the trees, and other concrete details. He described the thickness of the darkness of the evil power that bound his tongue and almost killed him. He especially noted the extreme brightness and heat of the pillar of fiery light that gave him at first great alarm. The realities in his account ring true. Joseph does not speak of this visitation as a dream or as an out-of-body experience. As the Joseph Smith Papers podcast states, Joseph was “adamant that this is something more real, that this is something more tangible” than just a vision.<sup>7</sup>

Also significantly, in 1843 Joseph did not say that the Father and the Son have “physical” bodies. Saying that would not be the same as saying that they have tangible bodies. Many “physical” things cannot be touched. For example, they may be too hot to be touched, but they are still physical. Or they may be in a gaseous state that cannot be handled. Wind is physical, and air molecules are matter, but one would not call them tangible, even though one can feel the wind when it blows.

Indeed, the word “tangible,” which Joseph used in 1843, comes from the Latin *tango*, meaning “I touch.” It clearly meant then, as still does today, “to be perceptible

by the touch; tactile; the quality of being perceptible to the touch or sense of feeling.”<sup>8</sup> The word thus implies some actual human contact by touching.

So, one might well wonder, what might it have been that calmed the desperately anxious young Joseph as his First Vision unfolded in 1820? First, his fears dissipated as the manifestation gradually descended. It was reassuring to see that God was neither abrupt nor remote. He was not transcendent. He was there, “exactly over” Joseph’s head. These two beings drew near to Joseph. That nearness was gentle and intimate. Next, the Father spoke to Joseph, perhaps softly, calling him by name. It was clear that this Being knew the young man personally. Joseph must have wondered, how does he know my name? And, in that amicable setting, it is not impossible that the Father gestured with open arms. He may have extended a welcoming hand. It could have been a natural gesture of peace and friendship, as if extending a hand of assistance or a handshake of re-acquaintance. Perhaps Joseph cautiously and courteously extended his hand too. If so, Joseph would have felt the hand of God. He would have known that it was tangible, that it felt like a man’s hand, a hand of flesh and bones. While we don’t know, of course, that this is what transpired, something like this could have happened as they met.

At that point, the finger of God was then extended. One thinks of the premortal Jehovah extending his finger to touch the sixteen stones of the Brother of Jared (Ether 3:6), and of the finger of the Great I Am writing the Ten Commandments on tablets of stone for Moses (Exodus 8:19; 31:18). Regarding Joseph’s experience is a little-known account told by John Alger<sup>9</sup> in St. George, Utah on February 2, 1893, which was written down that day in the detailed diary of Charles Lowell Walker.<sup>10</sup> According to Alger’s account, “God touched his [Joseph’s] eyes with his finger and said ‘Joseph this is my beloved Son hear him.’ As soon as the Lord had touched his eyes with his finger he immediately saw the Savior.” This allowed Joseph to turn attention more particularly the Son, who then instructed him. According to Alger, he had heard Joseph give this account when “he, John, was a small boy” in Kirtland, Ohio, and in “the house of Father Smith,” so that would have been around 1833, when John would have been about thirteen years old. To make the point that Joseph had felt the touch, Alger went on to say “that Joseph while speaking of it put his finger to his right eye, suiting the action with the words so as to illustrate and at the same time impress the occurrence on the minds of those unto whom He was speaking.”<sup>11</sup> While this account is a late and singular recollection, Alger mentioned details of his experience clearly and specifically. It is

not inconsistent to think that the finger of God first touched Joseph's eyes and then also gestured toward the Son as the 1838 account mentions.

It is also possible that other tangible contacts occurred. Jesus may have lovingly encircled Joseph in His arms. And since the apostle Thomas in Jerusalem and 2,500 people in the Nephite city of Bountiful had been allowed to touch the wounds of the resurrected Jesus's hands, feet, and side, might Jesus not have offered the same to Joseph Smith? This would have been especially poignant as Jesus said, "Joseph, my son, thy sins are forgiven thee. . . . I was crucified for the world that all who believe on my name may have Eternal life."<sup>12</sup>

As early as August, 1836, it was reported by Reverend Truman Coe, a Presbyterian minister in Kirtland, that the Latter-day Saints "believe that the true God is a material being, composed of body and parts" as other statements by Latter-day Saints around that time continued to confirm.<sup>13</sup> In Philadelphia in 1840, Orson Pratt and others discussed how God has revealed his corporeality often and how "in these last days hath his bodily presence been manifested."<sup>14</sup> As Steven C. Harper has concluded from a dozen statements that he has assembled, Joseph Smith and others "were telling of the vision in the 1830s, and its implications for the trinity and materiality of God were asserted that early"<sup>15</sup>—earlier than people have previously thought—and which Joseph made unambiguously clear in Ramus, Illinois, in 1843.

In addition, Joseph affirmed on April 2, 1843, that "the *appearing* of the Father and of the Son," as mentioned in John 14:23, "is a *personal appearance*." It would seem that Joseph had in mind here a specific "personal appearance" of the Father and of the Son, and what appearance of the Father and the Son could have been more "personal," "tangible," and real to Joseph than his own First Vision?

(2) From the scriptures, Joseph also learned and consistently taught several things about the tangible nature of the Godhead. From the New Testament, Joseph knew that Jesus had appeared to many with a tangible resurrected body on several occasions before he ascended into heaven from the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. And from the Book of Mormon, Joseph knew that Jesus had retained his physical resurrected body when he appeared to the Nephites even *after his ascension* to the Father (see 3 Nephi 15:1). Do not these scriptures imply that God the Father also has a tangible body of flesh and bones?

From his work on the Joseph Smith Translation, Joseph learned much about the embodiment of God. One such instance comes from his work on John 4:24. Shortly before February 16, 1832, as Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon were working through the Gospel of John, they encountered the words of Jesus to the Samaritan woman at the well. After telling her that the time was coming when righteous people will no longer worship the Father either on Mount Gerizim in Samaria or on the temple mount in Jerusalem, Jesus revealed that, indeed, the hour had then come “when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him” (John 4:23). Continuing, Jesus elaborated, “God is a spirit and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth” (4:24), or so reads the King James Version. In his rendition in the JST, however, Joseph excised the words “God *is* a spirit” and replaced them to read: “For unto such [true worshippers] *hath* God ~~is~~ a *promised his* Spirit: and they who worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.” Thus Joseph had learned by his own experiences in worshipping and communing with God that the Father is not a spirit. And actually, the Greek behind the King James Version, while being ordinary enough, is open to interpretation and elaboration. The Greek simply reads: *pneuma ho theos* (“spirit God”).<sup>16</sup>

Another verse that Joseph also modified is 1 John 4:12. Here the King James Version reads, “No man hath seen God at any time.” Again the JST adds an important proviso: “No man hath seen God at any time, *except them who believe.*” Indeed, God the Father had been, or would be, seen by Joseph Smith and other believers with him on at least four occasions between 1831–1836, namely: on June 4, 1831, at the Morley farmhouse outside of Kirtland, Ohio; on February 16, 1832 in the John Johnson home in Hiram, Ohio (see D&C 76:19-23); on March 18, 1833 in the School of the Prophets, upstairs in the Newell K. Whitney Store; and on January 21, 1836, in the partially completed Kirtland Temple (partially canonized in D&C 137).<sup>17</sup> However, while God the Father was *seen* on these occasions, nothing indicates that Joseph learned on those occasions that the Father had a *tangible* body.

Simple points of logic also surround Joseph’s conclusive understanding of God’s tangibility. If Jesus still has a tangible resurrected body, and since He is “the express image of [God the Father’s] person” (Heb 1:3), then the Father has a body every bit as much as does the Son. To the same effect, Jesus said, “He that hath seen me hath seen the Father” (John 14:9). And on April 2, 1843, when Joseph cited 1

John 3:2, “When he shall appear, we shall see him as he is,” he explained that statement by affirming, “We shall see that he is a man *like ourselves*.”

(3) Finally, numerous angelic visitations repeatedly confirmed for Joseph that resurrected beings have tangible bodies. While being ordained to the Aaronic Priesthood by John the Baptist and to the Melchizedek Priesthood by Peter, James, and John, in 1829, Joseph and Oliver Cowdery felt *hands* placed upon their heads. They spoke often of the impression those hands made upon their heads and souls as priesthood powers were conferred upon them. At the end of a chapter by Brian Q. Cannon discussing all known priesthood restoration accounts,<sup>18</sup> these 70 statements are readily compiled. They were made between 1829–1848, mainly by Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery, but also by 25 other people who could have heard Joseph or Oliver personally describing these supernal events. These documents speak generally and often of Joseph and Oliver being “authorized,” given “authority,” being “commissioned,” “ordained,” or having the priesthood “conferred,” “confirmed,” or “bestowed” upon them as part of their “reception” of the high priesthood. While such words may well imply the transfer of authority by the laying on of hands, many of these accounts mention specifically the “hand” or “hands” that were placed on their heads to bestow upon them the power to administer the ordinances of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

For example, Oliver’s patriarchal blessing speaks of him having been ordained to the lesser priesthood “by the *hand* of the angel in the bush [a reference to the Angel John the Baptist],” and also makes reference to the holy priesthood being bestowed “under the *hands* of those [Peter, James, and John] who had received it under the hand of the Messiah” (document #8, 1833). Joseph spoke directly of “being ordained under the *hands* of the Angel” (#11, 1836), and of the messenger from heaven “having laid his *hands* upon us” (#12, 1839), and also that the Angel “laid his *hands* upon my head” (#17, 1844; #19, 1844). Oliver Cowdery similarly testified that they received “under [the Angel’s] *hand* the holy priesthood” (#23, 1834), and also that which was bestowed on them “by the laying on of the *hands* of those who were clothed with authority” (#27, 1836). Others, such as Orson Pratt (#39, 1840; #40, 1848), John Taylor (#43, 1840), Orson Hyde (#49, 1841; #50, 1842), George Adams (#54, 1849), Warren Foote (#57, 1842), William Appleby (#62, 1848), and Brigham Young (#69, 1847), mention particularly the *hands* under which the powers and keys of the priesthood were restored. As these hands were

felt by Joseph and Oliver on these occasions, they certainly experienced, knew, and never forgot, the physical weight and feel of those tangible hands upon their heads.

Even earlier, when Joseph first saw Moroni in 1823, he was immediately struck especially by this angel's body: "He had on a loose robe . . . His hands were naked, as were his legs, a little above the ankles. His head and neck were also bare. I could discover that he had no other clothing on but this robe, as it was open, so that I could see into his bosom. . . . His whole person was glorious beyond description, and his countenance truly like lightning" (Joseph Smith—History 1:31–32). The materiality of Moroni's personhood was stunning to Joseph. In vivid details, he remembered this angel's hands, legs, ankles, head, neck, chest, and face. While Moroni and Joseph apparently did not touch each other on that first occasion, the two of them met on many other occasions. Moroni handed to Joseph, and Joseph returned to Moroni, several tangible physical objects. In these interactions, Joseph could well have touched Moroni's physical robe, fingers, and hands, although he never says so. But, in order to tell whether or not a purported messenger was truly of God, Joseph counseled his followers on February 9, 1843, to extend a hand. Resurrected messengers from God, he said, will not shy away from such a request for a tangible confirmation (D&C 129:4–5). The implication here may well be that Joseph himself had used that test, with positive results, to separate the good from the evil.

At the conclusion of his remarks on April 2, 1843, it is possible that Joseph was thinking of Moroni, John, and others who had visited him. Joseph ended by adding: "Angels who administer to this earth . . . belong to or have belongd [sic] to this earth." As Joseph had learned by his experiences, these heavenly beings were once mortal. They were of this human family, physically, tangibly, and literally. The same declaration would equally apply to our incarnate Savior and elder brother Jesus Christ.

Thus, for over twenty years, Joseph had many experiences in which he saw, heard, or even felt the embodied realities of God and his angelic messengers. Few theologians would imagine that God is embodied in any way, let alone in an exalted body of flesh and bones. Long before 1843, Joseph Smith had come to reject the idea that God is simply a spirit and to know of something dramatically and tangibly otherwise.

## APPENDIX 2: HOW DID A PASSAGE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT INSPIRE THE PROPHET JOSEPH SMITH?

John Gee

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints today numbers sixteen million members in over thirty thousand congregations throughout the earth. It all began two hundred years ago when a young boy, Joseph Smith, went into the woods near his home where he had been clearing trees. He went to where he had put his ax into a tree stump the evening before and prayed. What caused Joseph Smith to enter the grove of trees was a passage that he read in the New Testament. This point is mentioned in several historical accounts.

In Joseph Smith's 1838 account he says that he "was one day reading the Epistle of James" (Joseph Smith—History 1:11). We often picture Joseph Smith being a regular reader of the Bible (and there are paintings that depict this). Other accounts also give this impression. For example, according to the 1840 version as told by Orson Pratt, Joseph "commenced perusing the sacred pages of the Bible, with sincerity, believing the things that he read."<sup>1</sup> This makes it sound like the disputations about religion had caused Joseph to start a program of Bible study. But as Pratt immediately adds, "His mind soon caught hold of the following passage"—James 1:5.<sup>2</sup> That passage in the epistle of James comes near the end of the Bible, not at the beginning of the Bible, let alone the beginning of the New Testament. What sort of program of biblical study would arrive so soon at James?

There is another historical problem here. Joseph Smith's mother, Lucy Mack Smith, described him as "a boy 16 <19> yars of age who had never read the Bible through by course in his life for Joseph was less inclined to the study of books than any child we had but much more given to reflection and deep study."<sup>3</sup> Joseph himself said "we were deprived of the bennifit of an education[,] suffice it to say I was nearly instructtid in reading and writing and the ground <rules> of Arithmatic which constuted my whole literary acquirements."<sup>4</sup> Four years later, Joseph Smith had still not read the Bible. So what type of study would take him "soon" to James?

Orson Hyde said that Joseph "began in an attitude of faith his own investigation of the word of God the best way to arrive at a knowledge of the truth. He had not proceeded very far in this laudable endeavor when his eyes fell upon

the following verse.”<sup>55</sup> Again, he seems to have started some sort of study but “had not proceeded very far” before he got to James. The actual approach is made a little clearer in another account. In 1844, Joseph Smith told Alexander Neibaur and a small group of listeners that he “opened his Bible the first Passage that struck him was if any man lack Wisdom let him ask of God who giveth to all Men liberality & upbraided not.”<sup>56</sup> Apparently, in 1820 Joseph just opened his Bible and began reading.

This is made clear in the account that Joseph gave to David Nye White in 1843: “While thinking on this matter, I opened the Testament promiscuously on these words in James.”<sup>57</sup> Joseph had no program of study. He was concerned about the dispute among various Christian sects and simply opened the Bible up, at random, and opened it up to the epistle of James. And there, in James 1:5, he found, not the answer to his question, but the way to find the answer to his question.

Joseph says of this encounter, “Never did any passage of scripture come with more power to the heart of man than this did at this time to mine. It seemed to enter with great force into every feeling of my heart. I reflected on it again and again, knowing that if any person needed wisdom from God, I did” (Joseph Smith—History 1:12). The passage in James impressed him, deeply. One of the interesting things about the various accounts is that Joseph Smith quotes the passage precisely from memory. His audience, however, was not as familiar with the passage as he was. They often misheard the passage and wrote it down incorrectly. So Alexander Neibaur writes “liberality” rather than “liberally.” David White writes “Ask of the Lord” instead of “let him ask of God.” Joseph Curtis in 1835 recorded “if a man lack wisdom” instead of “if any of you lack wisdom.”<sup>58</sup> Joseph, however, had absorbed and knew the passage cold.

But what was it in the passage that inspired Joseph? Of all of the verses in the New Testament, this is perhaps the passage whose historical circumstances were most relevant to Joseph’s situation.

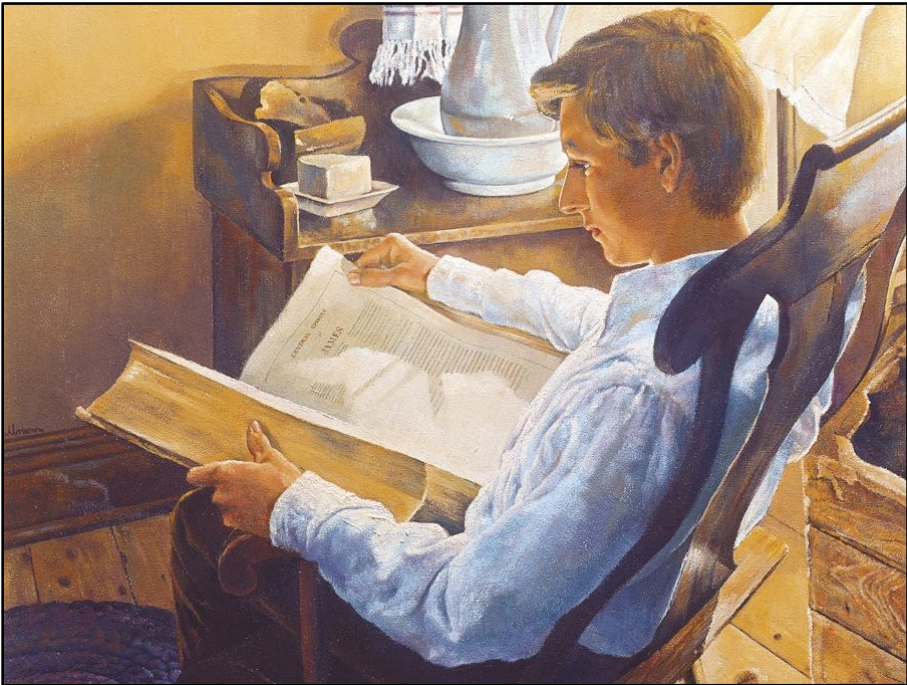
The epistle of James is probably the earliest of all the books in the New Testament. Indeed, it begins addressing “the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad” (James 1:1). But the Greek term for scattered, *diaspora*, is used elsewhere in the New Testament only for the scattering of the disciples from Jerusalem by Saul, immediately after the stoning of Stephen, which itself was soon after the crucifixion (Acts 8:1, 4; 11:19). The infant Church at that time was in dire straits.



Most of them were new converts. While they had been learning at the feet of the apostles, now they had returned home and had to fend for themselves, often relying on fellow Christians who had little more experience than they had. What were they to do? Where were they to find the wisdom to act?

The apostle James begins his epistle addressing this very problem. If and whenever they lacked the necessary wisdom, they could ask God, who would give them the wisdom they needed and not fault them for turning to him. This was the message that Joseph Smith needed to hear, and he was able to apply the same assuring solution to his problem that James had advocated to the early Saints.

By applying the earliest Christian remedy to the problem, Joseph Smith ushered in the restoration of the same Church that the Lord Jesus Christ himself had established eighteen centuries earlier.



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## IMAGE CITATIONS

**Page 3.** The four primary accounts of Joseph Smith’s First Vision. Images via the Joseph Smith Papers website.

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**Page 27.** Lithograph by Hugh Bridport (1794–ca. 1868). Image via Wikimedia.

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## ENDNOTES

### *Foreword*

<sup>1</sup> See Scott Taylor, [“2020 a ‘Bicentennial Year,’ with April Conference ‘Different from Any Previous Conference,’ President Nelson Says.”](#) Church News, 6 October 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Russell M. Nelson, [“Closing Remarks,”](#) *Ensign*, November 2019, 122.

<sup>3</sup> [“The Restoration of the Fulness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ”](#); see also [“Prophet Introduces a New Proclamation to the World: ‘The Restoration of the Fulness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.’”](#) Church News, 5 April 2020.

### *Joseph Smith’s Firsthand Accounts of the First Vision*

<sup>1</sup> “Fiftieth Semi-Annual Conference,” *Deseret News* (13 October 1880).

<sup>2</sup> See the discussion and overview of the importance of the First Vision in Latter-day Saint thought in Terryl Givens, *The Pearl of Greatest Price: Mormonism’s Most Controversial Scripture* (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2019), 223–240; Steven C. Harper, *First Vision: Memory and Mormon Origins* (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> Richard J. Maynes, [“The First Vision: Key to Truth,”](#) *Ensign*, June 2017, 60–65.

<sup>4</sup> See [“Primary Accounts of Joseph Smith’s First Vision of Deity,”](#) online at the Joseph Smith Papers website.

<sup>5</sup> Steven C. Harper, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision: A Guide to the Historical Accounts* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2012), 31.

<sup>6</sup> Harper, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision*, 32.

### *The 1832 First Vision Account*

<sup>1</sup> See [History, circa Summer 1832](#); cf. Karen Lynn Davidson et al., eds. *The Joseph Smith Papers, Histories, Volume 1: Joseph Smith Histories, 1832–1844* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church Historian’s Press, 2012), 3–23.

<sup>2</sup> History, circa Summer 1832, 1.

<sup>3</sup> Davidson et al., eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers, Histories, Volume 1*, 6.

<sup>4</sup> See [Articles and Covenants, ca. Apr. 1830](#) [D&C 20:5]; cf. Michael Hubbard MacKay et al., eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers, Documents, Volume 1: July 1828–June 1831* (Salt Lake City, UT: Salt Lake City, UT: The Church Historian’s Press, 2013), 121.

<sup>5</sup> Davidson et al., eds. *The Joseph Smith Papers, Histories, Volume 1*, 6.

<sup>6</sup> Steven C. Harper, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision: A Guide to the Historical Accounts* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2012), 34.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew C. Godfrey, “The Second Sacred Grove: The Influence of Greenville, Indiana, on Joseph Smith’s 1832 First Vision Account,” *Journal of Mormon History* 44, no. 4 (October 2018): 1–18.

<sup>8</sup> See Godfrey, “The Second Sacred Grove,” 15–18.

<sup>9</sup> History, circa Summer 1832, 3.

<sup>10</sup> James B. Allen, [“Eight Contemporary Accounts of Joseph Smith’s First Vision—What Do We Learn from Them?”](#) *Improvement Era*, April 1970, 7; Matthew B. Brown, *A Pillar of Light: The History and Message of the First Vision* (American Fork, UT: Covenant, 2009),

92–94; Steven C. Harper, [“A Seeker’s Guide to the Historical Accounts of Joseph Smith’s First Vision.”](#) *Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel* 12, no. 1 (2011): 168; James B. Allen and John W. Welch, [“Analysis of Joseph Smith’s Accounts of His First Vision.”](#) in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestation, 1820–1844*, ed. John W. Welch, 2nd ed (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2017), 66–67.

<sup>11</sup> History, circa Summer 1832, 3.

<sup>12</sup> [Letter to William W. Phelps, 27 November 1832](#), 4, spelling and punctuation standardized.

<sup>13</sup> Paul R. Cheesman, [An Analysis of the Accounts Relating Joseph Smith’s Early Visions](#) (Master’s Thesis, Brigham Young University, 1965), 126–132.

<sup>14</sup> Dean C. Jessee, [“The Early Accounts of Joseph Smith’s First Vision.”](#) *BYU Studies* 9, no. 3 (1969): 278–280; Allen, “Eight Contemporary Accounts of Joseph Smith’s First Vision—What Do We Learn from Them?” 4–13; Milton V. Backman Jr., *Joseph Smith’s First Vision* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1971; 2nd edition, 1980), 155–157; [“Joseph Smith’s Recitals of the First Vision.”](#) *Ensign*, January 1985, 8–17; *Eyewitness Accounts of the Restoration* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1986), 17–32; Dean C. Jessee, ed. *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1984. rep. ed. 2002), 4–6; *The Papers of Joseph Smith, Volume 1: Autobiographical and Historical Writings* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1989), 3–10; Anderson, “Joseph Smith’s Testimony of the First Vision,” 10–21; Ronald O. Barney, [“The First Vision: Searching for the Truth.”](#) *Ensign*, January 2005, 14–19; Brown, *A Pillar of Light*, 178–180; Davidson et al., eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers, Histories, Volume 1*, 10–16; MacKay et al., eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers, Documents, Volume 1*, 279–285; Allen and Welch. “Analysis of Joseph Smith’s Accounts of His First Vision,” 37–77; Richard J. Maynes, [“The First Vision: Key to Truth.”](#) *Ensign*, June 2017, 60–65.

<sup>15</sup> Harper, Joseph Smith’s First Vision, 33.

## ***The 1835 First Vision Account***

<sup>1</sup> See [“Matthews, Robert”](#) online at the Joseph Smith Papers website.

<sup>2</sup> [Journal, 1835–1836](#), 23; cf. Dean C. Jessee, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers, Journals, Volume 1: 1832–1839* (Salt Lake City, UT: Salt Lake City, UT: The Church Historian’s Press, 2008), 87–88.

<sup>3</sup> [Journal, 1835–1836](#), 23–24.

<sup>4</sup> Steven C. Harper, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision: A Guide to the Historical Accounts* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2012), 41.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph opens this account with the detail that “while setting in my house between the hours of nine & 10 11 this morning a man came in, and introduced himself to me.” [Journal, 1835–1836](#), 23.

<sup>6</sup> James B. Allen and John W. Welch, [“Analysis of Joseph Smith’s Accounts of His First Vision.”](#) in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestation, 1820–1844*, ed. John W. Welch, 2nd ed (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2017), 49.

<sup>7</sup> Allen and Welch, “Analysis of Joseph Smith’s Accounts of His First Vision,” 49.

<sup>8</sup> Allen and Welch, “Analysis of Joseph Smith’s Accounts of His First Vision,” 49–50.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew B. Brown, *A Pillar of Light: The History and Message of the First Vision* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2009), 31–32.

<sup>10</sup> Journal, 1835–1836, 37.

<sup>11</sup> [History, 1834–1836](#), 120–121; cf. Karen Lynn Davidson et al., eds. *The Joseph Smith Papers, Histories, Volume 1: Joseph Smith Histories, 1832–1844* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church Historian’s Press, 2012), 115–116.

<sup>12</sup> Davidson et al., eds. *The Joseph Smith Papers, Histories, Volume 1*, 26.

<sup>13</sup> Harper, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision*, 42; cf. Dean C. Jessee, [“The Early Accounts of Joseph Smith’s First Vision.”](#) *BYU Studies* 9, no. 3 (1969): 283–286.

### ***The 1838 First Vision Account***

<sup>1</sup> For background and historical context, see Karen Lynn Davidson et al., eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers, Histories, Volume 1: Joseph Smith Histories, 1832–1844* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church Historian’s Press, 2012), 192–202; Dean C. Jessee, [“The Earliest Documented Accounts of Joseph Smith’s First Vision.”](#) in *Exploring the First Vision*, ed. Samuel Alonzo Dodge and Steven C. Harper (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2012), 12–13; also published in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844*, ed. John W. Welch, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Salt Lake City and Deseret Book, 2017), 13–15; James B. Allen and John W. Welch, [“The Appearance of the Father and the Son to Joseph Smith in 1820.”](#) in *Exploring the First Vision*, 54–56; also published in *Opening the Heavens*, 50–52.

<sup>2</sup> For more details on the events in Joseph Smith’s life in 1838, including the persecutions he faced, see Alexander L. Baugh, [“Joseph Smith in Northern Missouri, 1838.”](#) in *Joseph Smith: The Prophet and Seer*, ed. Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and Kent P. Jackson (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and BYU Religious Studies Center, 2010), 291–346.

<sup>3</sup> [History, circa June 1839–circa 1841, \[Draft 2\]](#), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Allen and Welch, “Appearance of the Father and the Son,” 55.

<sup>5</sup> Steven C. Harper, *First Vision: Memory and Mormon Origins* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), 18.

<sup>6</sup> See Davidson et al., eds. *The Joseph Smith Papers, Histories, Volume 1*, 193.

<sup>7</sup> Allen and Welch, “Appearance of the Father and the Son,” 54.

<sup>8</sup> Steven C. Harper, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision: A Guide to the Historical Accounts* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2012), 44.

### ***The 1842 First Vision Account***

<sup>1</sup> Karen Lynn Davidson et al., eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers, Histories, Volume 1: Joseph Smith Histories, 1832–1844* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church Historian’s Press, 2012), 489.

<sup>2</sup> [“Church History.”](#) *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 9 (March 1, 1842): 706; cf. Davidson et al., eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers, Histories, Volume 1*, 492.

<sup>3</sup> Davidson et al., eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers, Histories, Volume 1*, 489.

<sup>4</sup> Davidson et al., eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers, Histories, Volume 1*, 491.

<sup>5</sup> “Church History,” 706–707.

<sup>6</sup> James B. Allen and John W. Welch, [“Analysis of Joseph Smith’s Accounts of His First Vision.”](#) in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestation, 1820–1844*, ed. John W. Welch, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2017), 53.



<sup>7</sup> Alex D. Smith, Christian K. Heimbürger, and Christopher James Blythe, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers, Documents, Volume 9: December 1841–April 1842* (Salt Lake City, UT: Salt Lake City, UT: The Church Historian’s Press, 2019), 177; Bruce A. Van Orden, *We’ll Sing and We’ll Shout: The Life and Times of W. W. Phelps* (Provo and Salt Lake City, UT: Religious Studies Center at Brigham Young University and Deseret Book, 2018), 317–318.

<sup>8</sup> Davidson et al., eds. *The Joseph Smith Papers, Histories, Volume 1*, 491–492, 519–520; Smith, Heimbürger, and Blythe, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers, Documents, Volume 9*, 177.

<sup>9</sup> Allen and Welch, “Analysis of Joseph Smith’s Accounts of His First Vision,” 53.

<sup>10</sup> Smith, Heimbürger, and Blythe, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers, Documents, Volume 9*, 177–178. A generation later, Latter-day Saint historian B. H. Roberts blended the 1842 account with the canonical 1838 account in his retelling of the early visions of Joseph Smith. See the discussion in Steven C. Harper, *First Vision: Memory and Mormon Origins* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), 152–153, citing B. H. Roberts, “History of the Mormon Church: Chapter 5, The Early Visions of Joseph Smith,” *Americana* 4, no. 6 (September 1909): 610–627, esp. 616n8.

<sup>11</sup> [“Latter Day Saints,”](#) 1844; cf. Davidson et al., eds. *The Joseph Smith Papers, Histories, Volume 1*, 503–516.

<sup>12</sup> “Church History,” 707.

## ***Secondhand Accounts of the First Vision***

<sup>1</sup> Dean C. Jessee, [“The Early Accounts of Joseph Smith’s First Vision,”](#) *BYU Studies* 9, no. 3 (1969): 275–294; James B. Allen and John W. Welch, [“Analysis of Joseph Smith’s Accounts of His First Vision,”](#) in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestation, 1820–1844*, ed. John W. Welch, 2nd ed (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2017), 37–77.

<sup>2</sup> For an overview of these accounts, see Milton V. Backman, Jr., *Joseph Smith’s First Vision* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1971; 2nd edition, 1980), 170–177; Steven C. Harper, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision: A Guide to the Historical Accounts* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2012), 54–66.

<sup>3</sup> Karen Lynn Davidson et al., eds. *The Joseph Smith Papers, Histories, Volume 1: Joseph Smith Histories, 1832–1844* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church Historian’s Press, 2012), 519.

<sup>4</sup> Pratt, A[n] Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions, 3–5, reproduced in Davidson et al., eds. *The Joseph Smith Papers, Histories, Volume 1*, 522–524.

<sup>5</sup> Pratt, A[n] Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions, 5, reproduced in Davidson et al., eds. *The Joseph Smith Papers, Histories, Volume 1*, 524.

<sup>6</sup> Davidson et al., eds. *The Joseph Smith Papers, Histories, Volume 1*, 519–520.

<sup>7</sup> Davidson et al., eds. *The Joseph Smith Papers, Histories, Volume 1*, 519.

<sup>8</sup> Hyde, *Ein Ruf aus der Wüste*, 14–15, English translation via the Joseph Smith Papers website. The German original reads: “Er umnachtete seinen Verstand mit Zweifeln und führte seiner Seele allerlei unpassende Bilder vor, um ihn an der Erreichung des Gegenstandes seiner Bestrebungen zu hinder.”

<sup>9</sup> Steven C. Harper, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision: A Guide to the Historical Accounts* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2012), 60.

<sup>10</sup> Harper, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision*, 63–64.

<sup>11</sup> [Levi Richards, Journal, 11 June 1843, extract](#), pp. [15–16]

<sup>12</sup> See Pearl of Great Price Central, [“The 1832 First Vision Account,”](#) Joseph Smith–History Insight #2 (February 6, 2020).

<sup>13</sup> David White, [“The Prairies, Nauvoo, Joe Smith, the Temple, the Mormons, &c.”](#) *Pittsburgh Weekly Gazette* (September 15, 1843); reprinted in Dean C. Jessee, *The Papers of Joseph Smith, Volume 1: Autobiographical and Historical Writings* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1989), 438–444.

<sup>14</sup> Jessee, *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, Volume 1, 443.

<sup>15</sup> Jessee, *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, Volume 1, 459–461.

<sup>16</sup> Harper, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision*, 65.

<sup>17</sup> Jessee, *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, Volume 1, 459.

<sup>18</sup> See [“Bonney, Edward William”](#) online at the Joseph Smith Papers website; Quinten Zehn Barney, “A Contextual Background for Joseph Smith’s Last Known Recounting of the First Vision,” 8–9, unpublished manuscript in authors’ possession, cited with permission.

<sup>19</sup> Allen and Welch, “Analysis of Joseph Smith’s Accounts of His First Vision,” 55.

<sup>20</sup> Barney, “A Contextual Background for Joseph Smith’s Last Known Recounting of the First Vision,” 8.

<sup>21</sup> See Steven C. Harper, *First Vision: Memory and Mormon Origins* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), 53–57.

<sup>22</sup> Joseph Curtis reminiscences and diary, 1839 October–1881 March, p. 5 (CHL MS 1654). Historian Steven C. Harper, *First Vision*, 53, dates this retelling to 1839.

<sup>23</sup> Edward Stevenson, *Reminiscences of Joseph, the Prophet, And the Coming Forth of The Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City, UT: Edward Stevenson, 1893), 4. Stevenson, born in 1820, would have been a teenager when he first heard Joseph Smith recount his First Vision. Although the year is different, it is possible that Stevenson is recounting the same occasion of Joseph preaching in Michigan as in Curtis’ reminiscence. At the very least, these two sources corroborate the idea that Joseph was telling others his First Vision story in the mid-1830s.

<sup>24</sup> “Testimony of Sister M. Isabella Horne,” *Woman’s Exponent*, June 1910, 6. Horne died in 1905, which means although her reminiscence was published in 1910, it was recounted some years earlier. In the fall of 1837 when she first met Joseph Smith she would have been about 19 years old.

<sup>25</sup> On the contemporary retellings of the First Vision to Matthews and Holmes, see [Journal, 1835–1836](#), 23–24, 36–37. See further Matthew B. Brown, *A Pillar of Light: The History and Message of the First Vision* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2009), 195–215; Harper, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision*, 54n13.

<sup>26</sup> Harper, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision*, 66, 31.

### ***Religious Excitement near Palmyra, New York, 1816–1820***

<sup>1</sup> [History, ca. Summer 1832](#), p. 1, in *Joseph Smith Papers: Histories, vol. 1: 1832–1844*, ed. Karen Lynn Davidson et al. (Salt Lake City, UT: Church Historian’s Press, 2012), 11.

<sup>2</sup> [Journal, 1835–1836](#), p. 23, in *Joseph Smith Papers: Journals, vol. 1: 1832–1839*, ed. Dean C. Jessee et al. (Salt Lake City, UT: Church Historian’s Press, 2008), 87.

<sup>3</sup> [History, 1838–1856, vol. A-1](#), p. 1 in *Joseph Smith Papers: Histories, vol. 1*, 208.

<sup>4</sup> [History, 1838–1856, vol. A-1](#), p. 1–2 in *Joseph Smith Papers: Histories, vol. 1*, 208. See also the interview of Joseph Smith recorded by David Nye White, which quotes Joseph as explaining, “There was a reformation among the different religious denominations in the neighborhood where I lived, and I became serious, and was desirous to know what Church to join.” See [David Nye White, Interview, 21 August 1843](#), p. 3, online at josephsmithpapers.org.

<sup>5</sup> See [“Awakenings and Revivals.”](#) online at [history.churchofjesuschrist.org](http://history.churchofjesuschrist.org). Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800–1850* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1950). See also Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper’s Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815–1837*, rev. ed. (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 2004); Michael Barkun, *Crucible of the Millennium: The Burned-over District of New York in the 1840s* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1986); Rachel Cope, “From Smouldering Fires to Revitalizing Showers: A Historiographical Overview of Revivalism in Nineteenth-Century New York,” *Wesley and Methodist Studies* 2 (2012): 25–49, esp. 37–39; Richard E. Bennett, *1820: Dawning of the Restoration* (Provo and Salt Lake City, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, and Deseret Book, 2020), 317–342, esp. 329–342.

<sup>6</sup> For background on camp-meetings, see Milton V. Backman Jr., *Joseph Smith’s First Vision: Confirming Evidences and Contemporary Accounts*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City, UT: 1980), 71–74; D. Michael Quinn, “Joseph Smith’s Experience on a Methodist ‘Camp-Meeting’ in 1820,” *Dialogue Paperless* #3 (December 2006): 26–29.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York, NY: Alfred Knopf, 2005), 36.

<sup>8</sup> See Richard Lloyd Anderson, [“Joseph Smith’s Accuracy on the First Vision Setting: The Pivotal 1818 Palmyra Camp Meeting.”](#) in *Exploring the First Vision*, ed. Samuel Alonzo Dodge and Steven C. Harper (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2013), 104–116; Quinn, “Joseph Smith’s Experience,” 2–4. See also Matthew B. Brown, *A Pillar of Light: The History and Message of the First Vision* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2009), 11–12.

<sup>9</sup> Quinn, “Joseph Smith’s Experience,” 4, 30–40. Although this camp meeting may be too late to have directly influenced Joseph before his vision, Quinn argues that Joseph’s vision may have been later in the season than typically assumed (see pp. 23–24).

<sup>10</sup> See Backman, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision*, 81–82; Anderson, “Joseph Smith’s Accuracy,” 116–118; Brown, *Pillar of Light*, 12–13.

<sup>11</sup> [History, 1838–1856, vol. A-1](#), p. 2, in *Joseph Smith Papers: Histories, vol. 1*, 208–210. See also Alexander Neibaur, [Journal, 24 May 1844](#), p. 23, online at [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org): “Br Joseph tolt us the first call he had a Revival Meeting . . . he wanted to get Religion too wanted to feel & shout like the Rest but could feel nothing.”

<sup>12</sup> As cited in Backman, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision*, 89. Backman situates her description of the era in the period immediately after the 1819 Genesee Conference in Phelps, but Quinn, “Joseph Smith’s Experience,” 45–46 situates it in the context of the 1820 camp meeting in Palmyra.

<sup>13</sup> Backman, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision*, 77.

<sup>14</sup> See Milton V. Backman Jr., [“Awakenings in the Burned-over District: New Light on the Historical Setting of the First Vision.”](#) *BYU Studies* 9, no. 3 (1969): 301–320, esp. the map on pp. 312–313; reprinted in *Exploring the First Vision*, 171–197 (map on p. 182). See also Backman, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision*, 53–89 (map on pp. 86–87). Anderson, “Joseph Smith’s Accuracy,” 99–101, also documents significant religious growth throughout the broader region of western New York.

<sup>15</sup> See Backman, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision*, 88–89; Quinn, “Joseph Smith’s Experience,” 36; Brown, *Pillar of Light*, 13–16. Quinn, “Joseph Smith’s Experience,” 27. Later, Quinn documents ministers attending the Palmyra 1820 camp meeting from as far as 85 miles away, and notes that over 50 miles is not an unusual distance for even non-ministers to travel for such events (see pp. 47, 53). See also Milton V. Backman Jr., “Lo, Here! Lo, There! Early in the Spring of 1820,” in *The Prophet Joseph:*

*Essays on the Life and Mission of Joseph Smith*, ed. Larry C. Porter and Susan Easton Black (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1988), 24.

<sup>16</sup> See Brown, *Pillar of Light*, 13–16.

<sup>17</sup> Anderson, “Joseph Smith’s Accuracy,” 99.

<sup>18</sup> Anderson, “Joseph Smith’s Accuracy,” 137–138.

### ***How Old was Joseph Smith at the Time of the First Vision?***

<sup>1</sup> See “[The Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith](#)” online at churchofjesuschrist.org.

<sup>2</sup> Henry B. Eyring, “[The First Vision: A Pattern for Personal Revelation](#),” *Ensign*, February 2020, 13.

<sup>3</sup> [Journal, 1835–1836](#), 24; “[Church History](#),” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 9 (1 March 1842): 706.

<sup>4</sup> [Journal, 1835–1836](#), 37.

<sup>5</sup> [History, circa Summer 1832](#), 3.

<sup>6</sup> Orson Pratt, [A\[n\] Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions](#), [3], “When somewhere about fourteen or fifteen years old”; Orson Hyde, [Ein Ruf aus der Wüste \(A Cry out of the Wilderness\)](#), 13, “When he had reached his fifteenth year”; [Interview, 21 August 1843, extract](#), [3], “He revealed himself to me first when I was about fourteen years old, a mere boy.”

<sup>7</sup> D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1998), 141.

<sup>8</sup> Compare the language of the Universalist minister Sylvanus Cobb, who was born on July 17, 1798 and wrote of being converted in “the 16th year of [his] age” in “the autumn of 1813” when he was fifteen years old. Sylvanus Cobb, Jr., comp., *The Autobiography of the First Forty-One Years of the Life of Sylvanus Cobb, D.D.* (Boston: Universalist Publishing House, 1867), 23, 39; or the Reverend William Andrew Crocker, born on November 4, 1825, who wrote of his “formal profession of religion” in the “summer of 1841, in the 18th year of [his] age” when he was between sixteen and seventeen years old. John J. Lafferty, *Sketches of the Virginia Conference, Methodist Episcopal Church, South* (Richmond, VA: Christian Advocate Office, 1880), 37; or Dan Bradley, born on June 10, 1767, who “became a member of Yale College” in “September 1785” in “the 19th. year of [his] age” when he was eighteen years old. Israel Parsons, *The Centennial History, of the Town of Marcellus, Delivered in the Presbyterian Church, of Marcellus, Onondaga County, N.Y.* (Marcellus, NY: Reed’s Printing House, 1878), 36; or the poet Thomas Chatterton, born on November 20, 1752, who “in the summer of 1763, being then in the 12th year of [his] age, . . . contracted an intimacy with one Thomas Phillips” when he was eleven years old. *The Poetical Works of Thomas Chatterton* (Cambridge: W. P. Grant, 1842), 1: xvii, xxv. Additional examples could be multiplied (e.g. J. M. Russell, *The History of Maidstone* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1881], 392–393). It is also noteworthy that in the Book of Mormon the prophet-historian Mormon presented himself as being “fifteen years of age” (Mormon 1:15) at the commencement of his military career and yet in the next chapter, still in the same year, Mormon refers to himself as being “in [his] sixteenth year” (Mormon 2:1–2).

<sup>9</sup> As Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 460n46, and Matthew B. Brown, *A Pillar of Light: The History and Message of the First Vision* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2009), 99, point out, Joseph and other members of the Smith family sometimes experienced the same

confusion (age vs. year-of-life) when it came to remembering other important dates, such as the age of Alvin Smith, Joseph's older brother, at the time of his death.

<sup>10</sup> James B. Allen and John W. Welch, "[Analysis of Joseph Smith's Accounts of His First Vision](#)," in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestation, 1820–1844*, ed. John W. Welch, 2nd ed (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2017), 60.

<sup>11</sup> History, circa Summer 1832, 1.

<sup>12</sup> Brown, *A Pillar of Light*, 99–101. On the role of memory in shaping Joseph's accounts of the First Vision, see Steven C. Harper, *First Vision: Memory and Mormon Origins* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), esp. 9–44.

### ***Did Both the Father and the Son Appear to Joseph Smith in the First Vision?***

<sup>1</sup> James B. Allen, "[Eight Contemporary Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision—What Do We Learn from Them?](#)" *Improvement Era*, April 1970, 6.

<sup>2</sup> [JS History, ca. Summer 1832](#), 3.

<sup>3</sup> James B. Allen and John W. Welch, "[Analysis of Joseph Smith's Accounts of His First Vision](#)," in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestation, 1820–1844*, ed. John W. Welch, 2nd ed (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2017), 66–67, see also 44–48.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Lowell Walker preserved John Alger's 1893 report of Joseph Smith informing him (Alger) that God the Father appeared first to Joseph in the vision and physically touched his eyes, whereupon he then saw Christ. The detail in Alger's report of God the Father appearing first and then the Son directly afterwards is consistent with other secondhand reports of the First Vision, as well as one firsthand account from the Prophet, but the added detail that God touched Joseph's eyes is unique to Alger. The reliability of Alger's account is hampered by its late, thirdhand nature, meaning it must be accepted very cautiously (if at all). A. Karl Larson and Katharine Miles Larson, eds., *Diary of Charles Lowell Walker* (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 1980), 2:755–756.

<sup>5</sup> See Ryan Conrad Davis and Paul Y. Hoskisson, "Usage of the Title Elohim in the Hebrew Bible and Early Latter-day Saint Literature," in *Bountiful Harvest: Essays in Honor of S. Kent Brown*, ed. Andrew C. Skinner, D. Morgan Davis, and Carl Griffin (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute, 2011), 113–135; "[Usage of the Title Elohim](#)," *Religious Educator* 14, no. 1 (2013): 109–127.

<sup>6</sup> Allen, "Eight Contemporary Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision,"<sup>7</sup> writes that, as mentioned, in some of the accounts this detail is explicit, and that "nothing in [the remaining accounts, including the 1832 history] precludes the possibility that [Joseph] may have seen one personage first, and then the other." Compare the similar observation in Steven C. Harper, "[A Seeker's Guide to the Historical Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision](#)," *Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel* 12, no. 1 (2011): 168.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Lloyd Anderson, "[Joseph Smith's Testimony of the First Vision](#)," *Ensign*, April 1996.

<sup>8</sup> JS History, ca. Summer 1832, 1.

<sup>9</sup> [Minutes, ca. 3–4 June 1831](#); cf. Michael Hubbard MacKay et al., eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers, Documents, Volume 1: July 1828–June 1831* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church Historian's Press, 2013), 317–327.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew B. Brown, *A Pillar of Light: The History and Message of the First Vision* (American Fork, UT: Covenant, 2009), 92–94; Gregory L. Smith, "More Testimony from On High? A Note on the

Presence of God the Father in Joseph Smith's 1832 First Vision Account," forthcoming, manuscript in BMC staff possession, cited with permission.

<sup>11</sup> Brown, *A Pillar of Light*, 92.

<sup>12</sup> See for instance Dan Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents* (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1996), 1:60n22; Grant Palmer, *An Insider's View of Mormon Origins* (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 2002), 240n7.

<sup>13</sup> [Vision, 16 February 1832 \[D&C 76\]](#), 2–3; cf. Matthew C. Godfrey et al., eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers, Documents, Volume 2: July 1831–January 1833* (Salt Lake City, UT: Salt Lake City, UT: The Church Historian's Press, 2013), 179–192.

<sup>14</sup> Matthew C. Godfrey et al., eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers, Documents, Volume 2*, 183, 279.

<sup>15</sup> See further Ari D. Bruening and David L. Paulsen, "[The Development of the Mormon Understanding of God: Early Mormon Modalism and Other Myths](#)," *FARMS Review* 13, no. 2 (2001): 109–169, esp. 132–133.

<sup>16</sup> Allen, "Eight Contemporary Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision," 6.

### *The First Vision as a Divine Council Vision*

<sup>1</sup> For background on these different accounts, see "[Joseph Smith's Firsthand Accounts of the First Vision](#)," *Joseph Smith—History Insight* #1 (February 4, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> [Journal, 1835–1836](#), p. 24, in *Joseph Smith Papers: Journals, vol. 1: 1832–1839*, ed. Dean C. Jessee et al. (Salt Lake City, UT: Church Historian's Press, 2008), 87.

<sup>3</sup> See Stephen O. Smoot, "[The Divine Council in the Hebrew Bible and the Book of Mormon](#)," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* (2017): 161–163 for background on the divine council.

<sup>4</sup> Kevin L. Tolley, "[To 'See and Hear'](#)," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 18 (2016): 139–143.

<sup>5</sup> See Blake Thomas Ostler, "[The Throne-Theophany and Prophetic Commission in 1 Nephi: A Form-Critical Analysis](#)," *BYU Studies* 26, no. 4 (1986): 67–95; John W. Welch, "[Lehi's Council Vision and the Mysteries of God](#)," in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon: A Decade of New Research*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 24–25; Stephen D. Ricks, "[Heavenly Visions and Prophetic Calls in Isaiah 6 \(2 Nephi 16\), the Book of Mormon, and the Revelation of John](#)," in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, eds. Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 171–90; John W. Welch, "[The Calling of Lehi as a Prophet in the World of Jerusalem](#)," in *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*, eds. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 421–48.

<sup>6</sup> Neal E. Lambert and Richard H. Cracroft, "Literary Form and Historical Understanding: Joseph Smith's First Vision," *Journal of Mormon History* 7 (1980): 31–42 actually show that Joseph Smith's narrative form is (unsurprisingly) consistent with that of religious narratives of his own time and place. See also Christopher C. Jones, "The Power and Form of Godliness: Methodist Conversion Narratives and Joseph Smith's First Vision," *Journal of Mormon History* 37, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 88–114.

<sup>7</sup> See "[Religious Excitement near Palmyra, New York, 1816–1820](#)," *Joseph Smith—History Insight* #7 (February 24, 2020).

<sup>8</sup> For the "pillar of fire" expression, see [Journal, 1835–1836](#), p. 24, in *Joseph Smith Papers: Journals, vol. 1*, 87. See also History, ca. [Summer 1832](#), p. 3, in *Joseph Smith Papers: Histories, vol. 1: 1832–1844*, ed. Karen Lynn Davidson et al. (Salt Lake City, UT: Church Historian's Press, 2012), 11.

## ***Who Was the Minister Joseph Smith Spoke to About His Vision?***

<sup>1</sup> For context and background on the minister's reaction, see Christopher C. Jones, "[The Power and Form of Godliness: Methodist Conversion Narratives and Joseph Smith's First Vision.](#)" *Journal of Mormon History* 37, no. 2 (2011): 88–114, esp. 112–114.

<sup>2</sup> See Steven C. Harper, *First Vision: Memory and Mormon Origins* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), 9–12.

<sup>3</sup> See Oliver Cowdery, "Letter III," *Messenger and Advocate* 1, no. 3 (December 1834): 42; William Smith Interview with E. C. Briggs, 1893, in *Early Mormon Documents*, ed. Dan Vogel, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1996–2003), 1:513.

<sup>4</sup> For greater details on the life of George Lane, see Larry C. Porter, "[Rev. George Lane—Good 'Gifts,' Much 'Grace,' and Marked 'Usefulness,'](#)" in *Exploring the First Vision*, ed. Samuel Alonzo Dodge and Steven C. Harper (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2012), 199–226.

<sup>5</sup> George Peck, *Life and Times of Rev. George Peck* (New York, NY: Nelson & Phillips, 1874), 109.

<sup>6</sup> Cowdery, "Letter III," 42. Note that the phrase "the 15th year" refers to when Joseph was 14, i.e., the year 1820. See "[How Old was Joseph Smith at the Time of the First Vision.](#)" Joseph Smith—History Insight #8 (February 27, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> William Smith Interview, in *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:513.

<sup>8</sup> See Porter, "Rev. George Lane," 209–210, 216. Interestingly, as Porter notes (pp. 210–212), Lane's circuit at this time included Harmony, PA, making it likely that he knew the family of Emma Hale (Joseph's future wife), who were devout Methodists.

<sup>9</sup> See Oliver Cowdery, "Letter IV," *Messenger and Advocate* 1, no. 5 (February 1835): 78.

<sup>10</sup> On this confusing sequence in Oliver's narrative, see Roger Nicholson, "[The Cowdery Conundrum: Oliver's Aborted Attempt to Describe Joseph Smith's First Vision in 1834 and 1835.](#)" *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 8 (2014): 27–44. See also Richard Lloyd Anderson, "[Joseph Smith's Accuracy on the First Vision Setting: The Pivotal 1818 Palmyra Camp Meeting.](#)" in *Exploring the First Vision*, 121–131; Porter, "Rev. George Lane," 217–219.

<sup>11</sup> See Kyle R. Walker, *William B. Smith: In the Shadow of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2015), 45–49; Anderson, "Joseph Smith's Accuracy," 119–121, 130–131, 139–141.

<sup>12</sup> Porter, "Rev. George Lane," 215.

<sup>13</sup> Porter, "Rev. George Lane," 209–210, 215. On the 1819 conference being part of the religious excitement leading up to the First Vision, see "[Religious Excitement near Palmyra, New York, 1816–1820.](#)" Joseph Smith—History Insight #7 (February 24, 2020).

<sup>14</sup> See Anderson, "Joseph Smith's Accuracy," 130.

<sup>15</sup> Porter, "Rev. George Lane," 215.

<sup>16</sup> Anderson, "Joseph Smith's Accuracy," 130, makes note of a camp meeting (held in Honeoye, NY, about 22 miles southwest of Palmyra) which Lane attended in July 1820, but says "it seems a little too far and definitely too late to be relevant for the First Vision early that spring." Anderson does not mention anything about the possibility of Lane being the preacher Joseph spoke to after his vision.

<sup>17</sup> See D. Michael Quinn, "Joseph Smith's Experience on a Methodist 'Camp-Meeting' in 1820," *Dialogue Paperless* #3 (December 2006): 45, 51–54 for a review of potential candidates.

<sup>18</sup> Porter, “Rev. George Lane,” 215, 217.

### ***Why Was Joseph Smith Initially Reluctant to Tell Others About the First Vision?***

<sup>1</sup> Ronald O. Barney, [“Joseph Smith’s Visions: His Style and his Record.”](#) Presented at the 2013 FairMormon Conference, August 2013.

<sup>2</sup> On the possible, though unconfirmed, identity of this Methodist preacher, see [“Who Was the Minister Joseph Smith Spoke to About His Vision?”](#) Joseph Smith–History Insight #11 (March 10, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> See Steven C. Harper, *First Vision: Memory and Mormon Origins* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), 13–21.

<sup>4</sup> James B. Allen, [“The Significance of Joseph Smith’s ‘First Vision’ in Mormon Thought.”](#) *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 1, no. 3 (Autumn 1966): 30, emphasis in original.

<sup>5</sup> Allen, “The Significance of Joseph Smith’s ‘First Vision’ in Mormon Thought,” 31.

<sup>6</sup> Allen, “The Significance of Joseph Smith’s ‘First Vision’ in Mormon Thought,” 34.

<sup>7</sup> Allen, “The Significance of Joseph Smith’s ‘First Vision’ in Mormon Thought,” 34.

<sup>8</sup> Hugh Nibley, [“Censoring the Joseph Smith Story, Part I.”](#) *Improvement Era*, July 1961, 522.

<sup>9</sup> Barney, “Joseph Smith’s Visions: His Style and his Record.”

<sup>10</sup> Nibley, “Censoring the Joseph Smith Story, Part I,” 522; [“Censoring the Joseph Smith Story.”](#) *Improvement Era*, November 1961, 813.

<sup>11</sup> Allen, “The Significance of Joseph Smith’s ‘First Vision’ in Mormon Thought,” 35–37, quote at 35.

<sup>12</sup> See [“Joseph Smith’s Firsthand Accounts of the First Vision.”](#) Joseph Smith–History Insight #1 (February 4, 2020); [“Secondhand Accounts of the First Vision.”](#) Joseph Smith–History Insight #6 (February 19, 2020).

<sup>13</sup> Harper, *First Vision*, 53–57.

<sup>14</sup> Allen, “The Significance of Joseph Smith’s ‘First Vision’ in Mormon Thought,” 44.

<sup>15</sup> Joseph’s 1838–39 account was published in 1842 as part of the series “History of Joseph Smith” (*Times and Seasons* 3, no. 10 [March 15, 1842]: 726–728; *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 11 [April 1, 1842]: 748–749). At the same year Joseph also published his “Church History” editorial, known also as the Wentworth Letter, which was republished two years later. See [“The 1842 First Vision Account.”](#) Joseph Smith–History Insight #5 (February 18, 2020).

### ***Remembering Joseph Smith’s First Vision***

<sup>1</sup> See Steven C. Harper, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision: A Guide to the Historical Accounts* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2012), 94–110; Steven C. Harper, *First Vision: Memory and Mormon Origins* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), 9–44.

<sup>2</sup> Harper, Joseph Smith’s First Vision, 95.

<sup>3</sup> Harper, Joseph Smith’s First Vision, 95.

<sup>4</sup> Harper, Joseph Smith’s First Vision, 95.

<sup>5</sup> Harper, Joseph Smith’s First Vision, 95.

<sup>6</sup> Harper, Joseph Smith’s First Vision, 95.



<sup>7</sup> Harper, Joseph Smith's First Vision, 97.

<sup>8</sup> Harper, Joseph Smith's First Vision, 98.

<sup>9</sup> [History, circa June 1839–circa 1841 \[Draft 2\]](#), 2.

<sup>10</sup> [History, circa Summer 1832](#), 1.

<sup>11</sup> Harper, Joseph Smith's First Vision, 100.

<sup>12</sup> History, circa June 1839–circa 1841 [Draft 2], 3.

<sup>13</sup> Harper, Joseph Smith's First Vision, 104.

<sup>14</sup> Harper, Joseph Smith's First Vision, 97.

<sup>15</sup> Harper, Joseph Smith's First Vision, 97.

<sup>16</sup> Harper, Joseph Smith's First Vision, 103–104.

<sup>17</sup> For more details on the events in Joseph Smith's life in 1838, including the persecutions he faced, see Alexander L. Baugh, "[Joseph Smith in Northern Missouri, 1838](#)," in *Joseph Smith: The Prophet and Seer*, ed. Richard Neitzel Holzzapfel and Kent P. Jackson (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and BYU Religious Studies Center, 2010), 291–346.

<sup>18</sup> History, circa June 1839–circa 1841 [Draft 2], 3, addenda, Note B.

<sup>19</sup> Harper, *First Vision*, 18. See pp. 13–19 for a more detailed discussion of how Joseph Smith's "persecuted present" shaped his account of 1838–39.

<sup>20</sup> Harper, Joseph Smith's First Vision, 110.

### ***How Did Joseph Smith Tell the Story of His First Vision?***

<sup>1</sup> Neal E. Lambert and Richard H. Cracroft, "[Literary Form and Historical Understanding: Joseph Smith's First Vision](#)," *Journal of Mormon History* 7 (1980): 35.

<sup>2</sup> Lambert and Cracroft, "Literary Form," 33.

<sup>3</sup> See *Memoirs of the Rev. James Fraser of Brae, Minister of the Gospel at Culross*, as quoted and discussed in Lambert and Cracroft, "Literary Form," 33. While Fraser identified eight stages in the prototypical story of a pilgrim's spiritual progress, more recent expositions compress these into five stages. See Virginia Brereton, *From Sin to Salvation: Stories of Women's Conversions, 1800 to the Present* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991), 6, quoted in Christopher C. Jones, "[The Power and Form of Godliness: Methodist Conversion Narratives and Joseph Smith's First Vision](#)," *Journal of Mormon History* 37, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 101.

<sup>4</sup> Lambert and Cracroft, "Literary Form," 37.

<sup>5</sup> See Pearl of Great Price Central, "[The 1838 First Vision Account](#)," Joseph Smith–History Insight #4 (February 13, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Lambert and Cracroft, "Literary Form," 39–40, even taking on qualities of "mythic narrative."

<sup>7</sup> Richard L. Bushman, "[The Visionary World of Joseph Smith](#)," *BYU Studies* 37, no. 1 (1997–1998): 183–204.

<sup>8</sup> Bushman, "Visionary World," 193.

<sup>9</sup> Jones, "The Power and Form of Godliness," 88–114.

<sup>10</sup> Jones, "The Power and Form of Godliness," 90.

<sup>11</sup> Christopher C. Jones, "[We Latter-day Saints are Methodists: The Influence of Methodism on Early Mormon Religiosity](#)," MA thesis, Brigham Young University (2009).

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Jones, "The Power and Form of Godliness," 89, see also 91n7.

<sup>13</sup> Jones, "The Power and Form of Godliness," 89.

<sup>14</sup> Jones, "The Power and Form of Godliness," 90.

<sup>15</sup> [Alexander Neibaur, Journal, May 24, 1844.](#)

<sup>16</sup> See Pearl of Great Price Central, [“The 1832 First Vision Account,”](#) Joseph Smith–History Insight #2 (February 6, 2020); [“The 1835 First Vision Account,”](#) Joseph Smith–History Insight #3 (February 11, 2020).

<sup>17</sup> Jones, “The Power and Form of Godliness,” 110–111.

<sup>18</sup> Jones, “The Power and Form of Godliness,” 113–114; cf. Pearl of Great Price Central, [“Why Was Joseph Smith Initially Reluctant to Tell Others About the First Vision?”](#) Joseph Smith–History Insight #12 (March 12, 2020).

<sup>19</sup> Jones, “The Power and Form of Godliness,” 114.

<sup>20</sup> See Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, rev. ed. (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2011); *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, rev. ed. (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2011).

<sup>21</sup> Lambert and Cracroft, “Literary Form and Historical Understanding” 32. For a detailed discussion of the audience for the nine main first- and second-hand accounts, see James B. Allen and John W. Welch, [“Analysis of Joseph Smith’s Accounts of His First Vision,”](#) in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestation, 1820–1844*, ed. John W. Welch, 2nd ed (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2017), 37–77. See also, [“Episode 5: ‘It Caused Me Serious Reflection’,”](#) The First Vision: A Joseph Smith Papers Podcast.

<sup>22</sup> Lambert and Cracroft, “Literary Form and Historical Understanding,” 38.

<sup>23</sup> Arthur Henry King, [“Joseph Smith as a Writer,”](#) in *Arm the Children: Faith’s Response to a Violent World* (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 1998), 288.

### ***The Significance of the First Vision***

<sup>1</sup> See Pearl of Great Price Central, [“Joseph Smith’s Firsthand Accounts of the First Vision,”](#) Joseph Smith–History Insight #1 (February 4, 2020); Steven C. Harper, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision: A Guide to the Historical Accounts* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> James B. Allen, [“The Significance of Joseph Smith’s ‘First Vision’ in Mormon Thought,”](#) *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 1, no. 3 (Autumn 1966): 29–45; [“Emergence of a Fundamental: The Expanding Role of Joseph Smith’s First Vision in Mormon Religious Thought,”](#) *Journal of Mormon History* 7 (1980): 43–61.

<sup>3</sup> Allen, “The Significance of Joseph Smith’s ‘First Vision’ in Mormon Thought,” 29–45; “Emergence of a Fundamental,” 43–61; J. B. Haws, “First Vision, doctrinal contributions of,” in *Pearl of Great Price Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2017), 123–125; Steven C. Harper, *First Vision: Memory and Mormon Origins* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), esp. 47–258; Terryl Givens, *The Pearl of Greatest Price: Mormonism’s Most Controversial Scripture* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), 223–240.

<sup>4</sup> See Pearl of Great Price Central, [“The 1832 First Vision Account,”](#) Joseph Smith–History Insight #2 (February 2, 2020); [“The 1835 First Vision Account,”](#) Joseph Smith–History Insight #3 (February 11, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> See Pearl of Great Price Central, [“The 1838 First Vision Account,”](#) Joseph Smith–History Insight #4 (February 13, 2020); [“The 1842 First Vision Account,”](#) Joseph Smith–History Insight #5 (February 18, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Orson Hyde, *Ein Ruf aus der Wüste, eine Stimme aus dem Schoosse der Erde* (Frankfurt: Im Selbstverlage des Verfassers, 1842), 14–15.

<sup>7</sup> See Harper, *First Vision*, 53–57.

<sup>8</sup> [Levi Richards, Journal, 11 June 1843](#), [pp. 15–16].

<sup>9</sup> Harper, *First Vision*, 55, observes, “It has been argued and now widely assumed in academic circles that Joseph Smith’s theology began with a Trinitarian concept that transformed later into emphasis on the separate, embodied natures of God and Christ. If that is true, the supporting idea—that Smith’s first vision story was employed only after 1840 and especially emphasized late in the nineteenth century to effect that transformation—is not true. Smith and others were telling of the vision in the 1830s, and its implications for the trinity and materiality of God were asserted that early.”

<sup>10</sup> B. H. Roberts, [The Mormon Doctrine of Deity: The Roberts-Van Der Donckt Discussion](#) (Salt Lake City, UT: The Deseret News, 1903); [“The Father and the Son: A Doctrinal Exposition by the First Presidency and the Twelve.”](#) *Improvement Era*, August 1916, 934–942.

<sup>11</sup> Allen, “Emergence of a Fundamental,” 45–50.

<sup>12</sup> Allen, “Emergence of a Fundamental,” 46–47.

<sup>13</sup> Allen, “Emergence of a Fundamental,” 52.

<sup>14</sup> Orson Pratt, [A\[n\] Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions, and of the Late Discovery of Ancient American Records](#) (Edinburgh: Ballantyne and Hughes, 1840), 3–6.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew McBride, [“The Vision.”](#) in *Revelations Context: The Stories Behind the Sections of the Doctrine and Covenants*, ed. Matthew McBride and James Goldberg (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2016), 148–154.

<sup>16</sup> Alexander L. Baugh, “Seventy-Six Accounts of Joseph Smith’s Visionary Experiences,” in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844*, ed. John W. Welch, 2nd ed. (Provo, UT: BYU Studies Press, 2017), 281–350.

<sup>17</sup> Harper, *First Vision*, 71–76.

<sup>18</sup> Harper, *First Vision*, 71–181; cf. Allen, “Emergence of a Fundamental,” 50–56.

<sup>19</sup> *Improvement Era*, April 1920; Harper, *First Vision*, 169–181.

<sup>20</sup> Heber J. Grant, [“A Marvelous Work and a Wonder.”](#) *Improvement Era*, April 1920, 472.

<sup>21</sup> Grant, “A Marvelous Work and a Wonder,” 472–474.

<sup>22</sup> Anthon H. Lund, *Conference Report*, April 1920, 18.

<sup>23</sup> Gordon B. Hinckley, [“The Marvelous Foundation of Our Faith.”](#) *Ensign*, November 2002, 80.

<sup>24</sup> Dieter F. Uchtdorf, [“The Fruits of the First Vision.”](#) *Ensign*, May 2005, 38.

<sup>25</sup> Joseph F. Merrill, [“Joseph Smith Did See God.”](#) *Ensign*, December 2015, 70–71; Richard J. Maynes, [“The First Vision: Key to Truth.”](#) *Ensign*, June 2017, 61–65; Henry B. Eyring, [“The First Vision: A Pattern for Personal Revelation.”](#) *Ensign*, February 2020, 13–17; cf. [“Eight Truths from the First Vision.”](#) *Ensign*, February 2020, 19–21.

<sup>26</sup> B. H. Roberts, [“Book of Mormon Translation.”](#) *Improvement Era*, July 1906, 713.

<sup>27</sup> Allen, “Emergence of a Fundamental,” 58.

### ***What Did Joseph Smith Learn from the First Vision?***

<sup>1</sup> J. B. Haws, “First Vision, doctrinal contributions of,” in *Pearl of Great Price Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2017), 123–125; [“Eight Truths from the First Vision.”](#) *Ensign*, February 2020, 19–21.

<sup>2</sup> See Pearl of Great Price Central, [“Joseph Smith’s Firsthand Accounts of the First Vision.”](#) Joseph Smith–History Insight #1 (February 4, 2020); [“Secondhand Accounts of the First Vision.”](#) Joseph Smith–History Insight #6 (February 19, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Charts adapted from James B. Allen and John W. Welch, [“Analysis of Joseph Smith’s Accounts of His First Vision.”](#) in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestation, 1820–1844*, ed. John W. Welch, 2nd ed (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2017), tables 3 and 4, [pp. 75–76].

<sup>4</sup> [History, circa Summer 1832](#), 3, spelling and punctuation standardized.

<sup>5</sup> See further Henry B. Eyring, [“The First Vision: A Pattern for Personal Revelation.”](#) *Ensign*, February 2020, 12–17.

<sup>6</sup> Kent P. Jackson, [“New Testament Prophecies of Apostasy.”](#) in *Sperry Symposium Classics: The New Testament*, ed. Frank F. Judd Jr. and Gaye Strathearn (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2006), 394–406.

<sup>7</sup> [History, circa Summer 1832](#), 3, spelling and punctuation standardized.

<sup>8</sup> [“Church History.”](#) *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 9 (March 1, 1842): 707.

<sup>9</sup> [Levi Richards, Journal, 11 June 1843, extract](#), [pp. 15–16].

<sup>10</sup> See Pearl of Great Price Central, [“Did Both the Father and the Son Appear to Joseph Smith in the First Vision?”](#) Joseph Smith–History Insight #9 (March 3, 2020).

<sup>11</sup> See [Journal, 1835–1836](#), 24.

<sup>12</sup> “Church History,” 707.

<sup>13</sup> See Terryl Givens, *Wrestling the Angel: The Foundations of Mormon Thought: Cosmos, God, Humanity* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015), 89–105; David L. Paulsen, [“The Doctrine of Divine Embodiment: Restoration, Judeo-Christian, and Philosophical Perspectives, Part I: Restoration of the Doctrine of Divine Embodiment.”](#) *BYU Studies* 35, no. 4 (1995–1996): 9–39; Jacob Neusner, [“Conversation in Nauvoo about the Corporeality of God.”](#) *BYU Studies* 36, no. 1 (1996–1997): 7–30.

<sup>14</sup> Givens, *Wrestling the Angel*, 72.

<sup>15</sup> A. Karl Larson and Katharine Miles Larson, eds., *Diary of Charles Lowell Walker* (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 1980), 2:755–756.

<sup>16</sup> See further Givens, *Wrestling the Angel*, 72–73, 89–95; Don Bradley, [“Joseph Smith’s First Vision as Endowment and Epitome of the Gospel of Jesus Christ \(or Why I Came Back to the Church\).”](#) delivered at the 2019 FairMormon Conference.

### ***What Are the Doctrinal Contributions of the First Vision?***

<sup>1</sup> For representative treatments, see Larry E. Dahl, “The Theological Significance of the First Vision,” in *Studies in Scripture, Volume Two: The Pearl of Great Price*, ed. Robert L. Millet and Kent P. Jackson (Salt Lake City, UT: Randall Book, 1985), 315–337; Larry C. Porter, “The Youth of the Grove and the Prophet of the Restoration,” in *Joseph: Exploring the Life and Ministry of the Prophet*, ed. Susan Easton Black and Andrew C. Skinner (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2005), 36–46; Richard D. Draper, S. Kent Brown, and Michael D. Rhodes, *The Pearl of Great Price: A Verse-by-Verse Commentary* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2005), 336–343; J. B. Haws, “First Vision, doctrinal contributions of,” in *Pearl of Great Price Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2017), 123–125; Taylor Halverson and Lisa Halverson, *Beautiful Truths from the First Vision* (American Fork, UT: Covenant, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Richard J. Maynes, [“The First Vision: Key to Truth.”](#) *Ensign*, June 2017, 65.

<sup>3</sup> See Pearl of Great Price Central, [“What Did Joseph Smith Learn from the First Vision?”](#) Joseph Smith—History Insight #16 (March 25, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Henry B. Eyring, [“The First Vision: A Pattern for Personal Revelation,”](#) *Ensign*, February 2020, 14. See also Halverson and Halverson, *Beautiful Truths of the First Vision*, 35–41.

<sup>5</sup> Dallin H. Oaks, [“The Godhead and the Plan of Salvation,”](#) *Ensign*, May 2017, 100.

<sup>6</sup> Dahl, “The Theological Significance of the First Vision,” 315–316; Draper, Brown, and Rhodes, *The Pearl of Great Price*, 341–342; Haws, “First Vision, doctrinal contributions of,” 123–124; Maynes, “The First Vision,” 65; Halverson and Halverson, *Beautiful Truths of the First Vision*, 15–21.

<sup>7</sup> Dahl, “The Theological Significance of the First Vision,” 321–324; Haws, “First Vision, doctrinal contributions of,” 123; Maynes, “The First Vision,” 64; Eyring, “The First Vision,” 16–17.

<sup>8</sup> See also the secondhand accounts preserved in Orson Pratt, [A\[n\] Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions, and of the Late Discovery of Ancient American Records](#) (Edinburgh: Ballantyne and Hughes, 1840), 5; Orson Hyde, [Ein Ruf aus der Wüste, eine Stimme aus dem Schooße der Erde](#) (Frankfurt: Im Selbstverlage des Verfassers, 1842), 14–15; Alexander Neibaur, [Journal, 24 May 1844, extract](#), [p. 23].

<sup>9</sup> [Journal, 9–11 November 1835](#), 23–24, spelling standardized.

<sup>10</sup> Eyring, “The First Vision,” 16.

<sup>11</sup> Milton V. Backman Jr., [“First Vision,”](#) in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow. MacMillan: New York, 1992), 1:516.

## ***Are the Christian Creeds Really an Abomination?***

<sup>1</sup> [History, circa Summer 1832](#), 3, spelling standardized.

<sup>2</sup> [“Church History,”](#) *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 9 (March 1, 1842): 707.

<sup>3</sup> Steven C. Harper, *First Vision: Memory and Mormon Origins* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), 13–21. See additionally Alexander L. Baugh, [“Joseph Smith in Northern Missouri, 1838,”](#) in *Joseph Smith: The Prophet and Seer*, ed. Richard Neitzel Holzapple and Kent P. Jackson (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and BYU Religious Studies Center, 2010), 291–346.

<sup>4</sup> Harper, *First Vision*, 18–19.

<sup>5</sup> [“Creed,”](#) online at Wikipedia.org.

<sup>6</sup> For representative examples of the traditional Latter-day Saint approach to the Great Apostasy, see B. H. Roberts, *Outlines of Ecclesiastical History* (Salt Lake City, UT: George Q. Cannon & Sons, 1893); James E. Talmage, *The Great Apostasy* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Deseret News, 1909). These older works, which are outdated in many regards on historical points, have been supplanted in popularity and utility more recently by Noel B. Reynolds, ed., *Early Christians in Disarray: Contemporary LDS Perspectives on the Christian Apostasy* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2005); Scott R. Petersen, *Where Have All the Prophets Gone? Revelation and Rebellion in the Old Testament and the Christian World* (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 2005); Tad R. Callister, *The Inevitable Apostasy and the Promised Restoration* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2006). For a recent academic treatment on the concept of apostasy in the Latter-day Saint tradition, see *Standing Apart: Mormon Historical Consciousness and the Concept of Apostasy* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> The Westminster Confession of Faith (III), in Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (New York, NY: Harper, 1877), 3:606.

<sup>8</sup> [Discourse, 15 October 1843, as Reported by Willard Richards](#), [pp. 128–129], spelling standardized.

<sup>9</sup> [History, 1838–1856, volume D-1 \[1 August 1842–1 July 1843\]](#), p. 1433, spelling standardized. See generally, Gary P. Gillum, “[Creeds](#),” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (MacMillan: New York, 1992), 1:343.

<sup>10</sup> John W. Welch, “[All Their Creeds Were an Abomination?: A Brief Look at Creeds as Part of the Apostasy](#),” in *Prelude to the Restoration: From Apostasy to the Restored Church* (Provo, UT and Salt Lake City: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University and Deseret Book, 2004), 240.

<sup>11</sup> For a chart comparing the texts of seven main Post-Apostolic Creeds, see “[The Post-Apostolic Creeds](#),” in John W. Welch and John F. Hall, eds., *Charting the New Testament* (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2002).

<sup>12</sup> Welch, “All Their Creeds Were an Abomination?,” 240.

<sup>13</sup> Welch, “All Their Creeds Were an Abomination?,” 240.

<sup>14</sup> Welch, “All Their Creeds Were an Abomination?,” 244.

<sup>15</sup> See the thoughts in Joseph Fielding McConkie “[The First Vision and Religious Tolerance](#),” in *A Witness for the Restoration: Essays in Honor of Robert J. Matthews*, ed. Kent P. Jackson and Andrew C. Skinner (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2007), 177–199.

<sup>16</sup> For an exemplary Latter-day Saint approach to the Nicene Creed—which is a target in popular and often misinformed Latter-day Saint polemics—see Lincoln Blumell, “Rereading the Council of Nicaea and Its Creed,” in *Standing Apart*, 196–217. In this piece, Blumell engages with the Nicene Creed carefully and thoughtfully, articulating rightful points of critique while also acknowledging areas of agreement between it and Latter-day Saint theology. See also his interview with Laura Harris Hales in “[Episode 112: The Council of Nicaea and Its Creed with Lincoln H. Blumell](#),” online at LDS Perspectives Podcast.

<sup>17</sup> [Discourse, 23 July 1843, as Reported by Willard Richards](#), p. 14, transcribed in [History, 1838–1856, volume E-1 \[1 July 1843–30 April 1844\]](#), p. 1681, thus: “Have the Presbyterians any truth? Yes. Have the Baptists, Methodists &c. any truth? Yes, they all have a little truth mixed with error. We should gather all the good and true principles in the world and treasure them up or we shall not come out pure Mormons.” See further Terryl Givens, “We Have Only the Old Things?: Rethinking Mormon Restoration,” in *Standing Apart*, 335–342; *Wrestling the Angel: The Foundations of Mormon Thought: Cosmos, God, Humanity* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015), 23–41.

### ***The Visionary World of Joseph Smith***

<sup>1</sup> Richard Lyman Bushman, “[The Visionary World of Joseph Smith](#),” *BYU Studies* 37, no. 1 (1997–1998): 183–204; Richard H. Brodhead, “Prophets in America circa 1830: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nat Turner, Joseph Smith,” in *Joseph Smith Jr.: Reappraisals after Two Centuries*, ed. Reid L. Neilson and Terryl L. Givens (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009), 13–29; Christopher C. Jones, “[We Latter-day Saints are Methodists’: The Influence of Methodism on Early Mormon Religiosity](#),” MA thesis, Brigham Young University (2009); “[The Power and Form of Godliness: Methodist Conversion Narratives and Joseph Smith’s First Vision](#),” *Journal of Mormon History* 37, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 88–114.

<sup>2</sup> [Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1845](#), 51–55, 63–72.

<sup>3</sup> For an autobiographical account of Finney’s vision of Christ that led to his conversion, see Charles G. Finney, *Memoirs of Rev. Charles G. Finney: Written by Himself* (New York: A.S. Barnes & Company, 1876), 12–23.

<sup>4</sup> Bushman, “The Visionary World of Joseph Smith,” 183–204; see also *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois, 1984), 43–59; *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 30–41. For discussions of the broader context of this phenomenon, see David F. Holland, *Sacred Borders: Continuing Revelation and Canonical Restraint in Early America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011); Richard E. Bennett, *1820: Dawning of the Restoration* (Provo and Salt Lake City, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, and Deseret Book, 2020), 317–342.

<sup>5</sup> Bushman, “The Visionary World of Joseph Smith,” 193.

<sup>6</sup> On which see Pearl of Great Price Central, [“How Did Joseph Smith Tell the Story of His First Vision?”](#) Joseph Smith–History Insight #14 (March 19, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Jones, “The Power and Form of Godliness,” 113.

<sup>8</sup> For different approaches, see John W. Welch, ed., *The Worlds of Joseph Smith: A Bicentennial Conference at the Library of Congress* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2006); Nelson and Givens, *Joseph Smith Jr.*; RoseAnn Benson, *Alexander Campbell and Joseph Smith: Nineteenth-Century Restorationists* (Provo, UT and Abilene, TX: Brigham Young University Press and Abilene Christian University Press, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Robert V. Remini, *Joseph Smith* (New York, NY: Viking, 2002), 40.

<sup>10</sup> Brodhead, “Prophets in America circa 1830,” 17.

<sup>11</sup> Bushman, “The Visionary World of Joseph Smith,” 197.

### ***Observations on the Timing of the First Vision***

<sup>1</sup> For recent treatments exploring this line of thought, see Steven C. Harper et al., eds., [Prelude to the Restoration: Apostasy to the Restored Church](#) (Provo and Salt Lake City, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, and Deseret Book, 2004); John W. Welch, [“Early Mormonism and Early Christianity: Some Providential Similarities,”](#) in *Window of Faith: Latter-day Saint Perspectives on World History*, ed. Roy A. Prete (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2005), 17–38; Richard E. Bennett, *1820: Dawning of the Restoration* (Provo and Salt Lake City, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, and Deseret Book, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 27–35.

<sup>3</sup> See Pearl of Great Price Central, [“Religious Excitement near Palmyra, New York, 1816–1820.”](#) Joseph Smith–History Insight #7 (February 24, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> [History, circa Summer 1832](#), 1–2, spelling standardized.

<sup>5</sup> Bennett, *1820*.

<sup>6</sup> Bennett, *1820*, 1–30, 57–80, 207–230, 259–286.

<sup>7</sup> David Rolph Seely, [“Words ‘Fity Spoken’: Tyndale’s English Translation of the Bible,”](#) in *Prelude to the Restoration: From Apostasy to the Restored Church*, ed. Steven C. Harper et al. (Provo and Salt Lake City, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University and Deseret Book, 2004), 212–227; Keith J. Wilson, [“From Gutenberg to Grandin: Tracing the Development of the Printing Press,”](#) in *Prelude to the Restoration*, 269–286; Kent P. Jackson, [“The English Bible: A Very Short History,”](#) in *The King James Bible and the Restoration*, ed. Kent P. Jackson (Provo, UT: Religious

Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2011), 11–24; [“The King James Bible in the Days of Joseph Smith,”](#) in *The King James Bible and the Restoration*, 138–161.

<sup>8</sup> David Pigott, [“What We Hold So Dear: Religious Toleration as a Precondition to the Restoration,”](#) in *Prelude to the Restoration*, 142–158; Robert R. Newell, Carma T. Prete, and Roy A. Prete, [“European Origins of Freedom in America,”](#) in *Window of Faith*, 311–329.

<sup>9</sup> Bennett, *1820*, 231–258; [“The Rising of the Holy Bible to the Restoration,”](#) in *Prelude to the Restoration*, 40–58.

<sup>10</sup> Bennett, *1820*, 317–342.

<sup>11</sup> Bennett, *1820*, xiv.

<sup>12</sup> Welch, “Early Mormonism and Early Christianity,” 17–38.

<sup>13</sup> Welch, “Early Mormonism and Early Christianity,” 20.

<sup>14</sup> Welch, “Early Mormonism and Early Christianity,” 17–18.

<sup>15</sup> Bennett, *1820*, viii.

<sup>16</sup> Welch, “Early Mormonism and Early Christianity,” 35.

<sup>17</sup> Bennett, *1820*, x.

<sup>18</sup> Bennett, *1820*, vii.

<sup>19</sup> Welch, “Early Mormonism and Early Christianity,” 36.

<sup>20</sup> M. Russell Ballard, [“How the Lord Prepared the World for the Restoration,”](#) *Ensign*, January 2020, 15–16.

### ***Appendix 1: When Did Joseph Smith Know that the Father and the Son Have “Tangible” Bodies?***

<sup>1</sup> Dean C. Jessee, “The Earliest Documented Accounts of Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820-1844*, ed. John W. Welch 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Provo: Utah, Brigham Young University Press, 2017), 1–34; reprinted in Dean C. Jessee, [“The Earliest Documented Accounts of Joseph Smith’s First Vision,”](#) in *Exploring the First Vision*, ed. Samuel Alonzo Dodge and Steven C. Harper (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 2012), 1–40.

<sup>2</sup>See [Journal, December 1842–June 1844; Book 2, 10 March 1843–14 July 1843](#), pp. 35–45.

<sup>3</sup> Roy B. Huff, [“Orson Hyde: A Life of Lessons Learned,”](#) *Religious Educator* 3 no. 2 (2002), 167–183.

<sup>4</sup>Journal, pp. 37–38 (certain spellings adjusted; emphasis and some punctuation added throughout this section).

<sup>5</sup>Journal, pp. 42–43.

<sup>6</sup>Journal, p. 44.

<sup>7</sup>[“It Caused Me Serious Reflection” \(The First Vision Podcast, Episode 5\): Transcript.](#)

<sup>8</sup>Noah Webster, *American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828), s.v. “tangible.”

<sup>9</sup>John Alger (1820–1897)—no known relation to Fanny Alger, Joseph Smith’s first plural wife—joined the Church in March, 1832, at the age of 11. John married Sarah Pulsipher on January 6, 1842, with Joseph performing their wedding in Nauvoo. They arrived in Utah in 1848, and settled in St. George in 1864.

<sup>10</sup>*Diary of Charles Lowell Walker*, edited by A. Karl Larson and Katharine Miles Larson (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1980), 2:755–56.

<sup>11</sup>Diary of Charles Lowell Walker, 2:756.



<sup>12</sup> [History, circa Summer 1832](#), 3.

<sup>13</sup> Milton V. Backman, Jr., ed., [“Truman Coe’s 1836 Description of Mormonism.”](#) *BYU Studies* 17, no. 3 (1977): 354. “Composed of body and parts” stands in direct opposition to the language in the Westminster Confession. Another early assertion of God being embodied is Parley P. Pratt, *Mormonism Unveiled: Zion’s Watchman Unmasked, and its Editor, Mr. L.R. Sunderland, Exposed: Truth Vindicated: The Devil and Priestcraft in Danger!* (New York: Parley P. Pratt, 1838), 29. Samuel Bennett, *A Few Remarks By Way of Reply to an Anonymous Scribbler; Calling Himself a Philanthropist: Disabusing the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints of the Slanders and Falsehoods Which he has Attempted to Fasten Upon It* (Philadelphia: Brown, Bicking & Guilpert, 1840), 11.

<sup>14</sup> See Bennett, *A Few Remarks By Way of Reply to an Anonymous Scribbler*, 11.

<sup>15</sup> Steven C. Harper, *First Vision: Memory and Mormon Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 53–57. In addition to the recollection of John Alger (see note 10 above), others reporting that Joseph spoke at least briefly about the First Vision on other occasions, including (a) in a testimony in 1833 (as remembered by Milo Andrus on July 17, 1853; Papers of George D. Watt. MS 4534 box 2 disk 1. May 1853–July 1853 images 231–256, partial transcript in CR 100 317 box 2 folder 15; transcribed by LaJean Purcell Carruth, 3 October 2012, corrected October 2013); (b) to believers in the spring of 1835 in Michigan (as written by Joseph Curtis in 1839; “History of Joseph Curtis,” MSS 1654, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT, 5), (c) in a sermon in June of 1835 in Kirtland (as William Phelps recalled; William W. Phelps to Sally Phelps, June 2, 1835, MS, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT); (d) in a personal conversation on November 9, 1835 in Kirtland (as recorded in Joseph’s Journal; [JS, Journal, 9–11 Nov. 1835, pp. 23–24](#)), and (e) to a congregation in the summer of 1837 in Toronto (as Mary Home heard and stated; M. Isabella Home, “The Prophet Joseph Smith, Testimony of Sister M. Isabella Home,” *Relief Society Magazine* (March 1951): 158–60).

<sup>16</sup> The Greek would normally be translated as “God is a spirit,” but can also be saying “God is spirit,” “God is spiritual,” or “God [promises] spirit.” Joseph is not the only to notice the incompleteness of this intentionally cryptic saying of Jesus. After all, Jesus spoke in veiled terms to the Samaritan woman throughout their encounter.

<sup>17</sup> See Alexander L. Baugh, “Parting the Veil: Joseph Smith’s Seventy-six Documented Visionary Experiences,” in *Opening the Heavens*, 280–83.

<sup>18</sup> Brian Q. Cannon and BYU Studies Staff, “Seventy Contemporaneous Priesthood Restoration Documents,” *Opening the Heavens*, 215–264.

## ***Appendix 2: How Did a Passage in the New Testament Inspire the Prophet Joseph Smith?***

<sup>1</sup> Orson Pratt, [A\[n\] Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions](#) (Edinburgh, Scotland: Ballantyne and Hughes, 1840), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Pratt, [A\[n\] Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions](#), 4.

<sup>3</sup> [Lucy Mack Smith, History, book 4](#), 1.

<sup>4</sup> [History, circa Summer 1832](#), 1.

<sup>5</sup> Orson Hyde, [Ein Ruf aus der Wüste \(A Cry out of the Wilderness\)](#), 1842, [extract, English translation](#), p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> [Alexander Neibaur, Journal, 24 May 1844, extract](#).

<sup>7</sup> [Interview, 21 August 1843, extract](#), [3].

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Curtis reminiscences and diary, MS 1654, 5, Church History Library.