

THE APPEARANCE OF THE FATHER AND THE SON TO JOSEPH SMITH IN 1820



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*An earlier version of this article, “Eight Contemporary Accounts of Joseph Smith’s First Vision—What Do We Learn from Them?” was authored by James B. Allen and appeared in the Improvement Era in April 1970.¹ That article was itself a historical landmark. Invited and published by the Church’s official periodical, this piece began the work of teaching Latter-day Saints about the various accounts of the vision. Since that time, the scholars whose work is featured in this book have learned much more about the documentary evidence and the historical context of the First Vision. That research is reflected in this version, prepared by James B. Allen and John W. Welch, the Robert K. Thomas Professor of Law at BYU and editor of BYU Studies. This chapter enhances the version of this material as it appeared in 2005 in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844*.²*

The Restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints began when God the Father and his Son Jesus Christ appeared to the youthful Joseph Smith in spring 1820.

THE 1970 ARTICLE

In 1970, at the request of the editors of the *Improvement Era*, I published the article titled “Eight Contemporary Accounts of Joseph Smith’s First Vision—What Do We Learn from Them?” By that time people had become aware of the various different accounts of the vision, and many, including Latter-day Saints as well as some people who were not friendly to the Church, began to raise questions. That 1970 *Improvement Era* article was the first discussion of these accounts to appear in any official Church publication. (Some discussion had appeared earlier in *BYU Studies*, but this was not widely known to Church members.) I was surprised and gratified when I received all kinds of compliments from people I knew as well as some that I did not know. The feedback I received from the editor of the magazine as well as other people indicated that it helped many who had heard about these various accounts but were unable to reconcile them until they saw an article that could put them together in a positive way. (James B. Allen, interview by Samuel Alonzo Dodge, July 27, 2009, Provo, UT)

In the brilliant light of this key event, almost everything else in Church history pales by comparison.

Fortunately, Joseph Smith spoke and wrote on several occasions about this sublime and formative experience now known as the First Vision. In addition to numerous circumstantial and secondary evidences that have expanded and supported our historical knowledge of this all-important event, ten accounts in thirteen documents have come down to modern readers from the hand or voice or time of Joseph Smith himself. Few events so central to the foundations of any of the world’s religions are so informatively documented.

What do these ten accounts say? What can we learn from them? Who wrote them, and when and why were they written? Why are they not all the same? Are they historically accurate and credible? How well documented is the historical record concerning the First Vision? This overview gives answers to such questions as it analyzes and synthesizes these various accounts, the texts of which are presented in full in “The Earliest

Documented Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision," by Dean C. Jessee.³

Serious historical interest in gathering and studying the First Vision accounts began in 1965 when Paul Cheesman, a graduate student at Brigham Young University, presented a gentle surprise to scholars studying Mormonism by including in his master's thesis an account of Joseph Smith's First Vision that was largely unknown at that time.⁴ What made the new discovery significant was the fact that most people had supposed that the Manuscript History of Joseph Smith, formally begun in 1838, was the first place where the Prophet had committed his remarkable experience to writing. Cheesman's master's thesis demonstrated that an account of the First Vision had, in fact, been recorded in 1832.

In the wake of that find, historians both inside and outside the Church took new interest in Joseph Smith's testimony. Shortly after the 1832 narrative was discovered, another account from 1835, also predating the 1838 Manuscript History, came to light; it was published in 1966.⁵ Three years later, Dean Jessee's article detailing four texts of First Vision accounts (1832, printed versions of the 1835 journal entries, and the 1838 manuscript) appeared in *BYU Studies*.⁶ In addition, other scholars in the late 1960s began to examine the setting of the vision, seeking to determine the extent to which the events described by Joseph Smith could be verified by other contemporary sources.⁷ Mormon historiography thus entered a new era of documentary research as more historical sources needed to be examined and as many outstanding scholars published insightful results from their research.⁸ To promote popular awareness and understanding, open treatments of these multiple accounts appeared in the *Improvement Era* and the *Ensign* in 1970, 1985, and 1996.⁹ The wave of interest in these important historical documents continues today, with a tide of

“THIS YOUNG MAN IS TELLING THE TRUTH”

The first time I saw the 1832 account of the First Vision was when I was allowed to see a microfilm copy of the manuscript in the Church Historian's Office. I will never forget how I felt when I put my head into that microfilm reader, started rolling the film, and saw Joseph Smith's handwriting. As I read through that first written account of the vision, a powerful spiritual feeling came over me that I don't think I had ever experienced before, and it was not quite like anything I have experienced since. It said to me, “This young man is telling the truth!” It was an absolutely convincing handwritten story. It did not use very good grammar and did not have much punctuation. There were only a few very long sentences. But the power that was in it, including the feelings of a young man trying to express how he felt before he went into the grove to pray, was absolutely profound to me. The honesty and integrity of young Joseph Smith as he wrote of his experience only confirmed more strongly than ever before the testimony I already had of that sacred experience. (James B. Allen, interview by Samuel Alonzo Dodge, July 27, 2009, Provo, UT)

studies raising a number of questions and expressing various opinions on several issues.¹⁰ But as interesting as the perspectives of these commentators may be, long after the scholars' personal conclusions have become obscure, the ten basic accounts will rightfully remain the focus of attention among serious investigators and diligent enquirers.

UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENCES IN THE ACCOUNTS

Whenever new historical information is published, a host of questions demand answers, and the disclosure that Joseph Smith told his story more than once was no exception. Scholars asked whether the Prophet's description of his experience squares with other known historical events, to what degree the various accounts are consistent with each other, and how one might explain the differences.

Several factors undoubtedly affected the nature of each of Joseph Smith's accounts: (1) the timing of his narrations, including his age and recent experiences at the time a particular account was given; (2) the circumstances under which he gave each account, including any special purposes he may have had in mind for each particular audience; (3) the possible literary influences of those who wrote for him as his scribes or who reported his words (namely Levi Richards, David Nye White, and Alexander Neibaur); and (4) the extent to which versions written by others (namely Orson Pratt and Orson Hyde) may have emphasized points that most impressed them personally, thus making each version different.

One would hardly expect to find every account to be precisely alike. Obviously, people answer a simple question such as "What happened at the soccer game?" differently depending on who has asked the question. If a man's teenage son, who happened to be a soccer fanatic, were to ask his father this question, the father would know that the son wanted to know who scored which goals and how many players were red-carded. If the man's wife, who had no interest in soccer, were to ask such a question, however, he might know to tell her who he met on the sidelines and if he had yelled too much. Only after such a question has been asked by a number of people and answered with each inquisitor's interests in mind does a full picture of the event begin to emerge.

So it is with the First Vision accounts. It is fortunate that these reports come from a wide variety of circumstances, for no single account tells the whole story. At the same time, all the details in each of the accounts add significantly to the entire picture. The purpose of the following study is to identify the nature of each of these accounts and to examine the details they each provide in order to explain the differences and accentuate the consistency that exists among them.

Actually, the differences in the accounts may be grossly overemphasized, for the truth is that there is wide and credible agreement in detail among them all. Another impressive fact is that the 1832 version, which was the first to be recorded, is very comprehensive. This early narrative includes the essential elements of the more carefully prepared Manuscript History and contains more additional details than any other source. When all the accounts are combined, only a couple of details call for explanation, as given below.

JOSEPH SMITH'S INITIAL AUDIENCES

One of the first steps in reading and understanding these ten historical accounts is to appreciate the various audiences that Joseph Smith had in mind as he wrote or spoke of this overwhelming experience. Processing the meanings and appreciating the implications of that life-changing event cannot have been a short or simple task for him. The vision served as a guiding star throughout his life, a star on which he often took his bearings, no matter his surroundings or circumstances.

Apparently Joseph Smith did not speak often of the First Vision in his teenage years. As he himself understandably said, he kept most of these things to himself and pondered them in his heart. His first audience was his mother, Lucy Mack Smith. Returning to the family log home shortly after his experience in the Sacred Grove, he told his mother, perhaps among other things, that he had learned “that Presbyterianism is not true” (Joseph Smith—History 1:20), as he noted in an addition to the manuscript of his history in 1842.¹¹ This was an understandable, yet courageous, thing for a young boy to emphasize to his mother, who had recently converted to Presbyterianism.

How much he told in those early years is unknown. Apparently he was judicious and cautious about telling all.

Indeed, the hostile reactions of clergy and the violent opposition from neighbors would have been enough to deter any boy in his midteens. As Joseph stated in his 1838 account, dictated about eighteen or nineteen years after the following reactions occurred, one Methodist preacher responded “with great contempt” when Joseph gave him “an account of the vision” which he had had (Joseph Smith—History 1:21). Joseph soon found that whenever he told his story, it “excited a great deal of prejudice . . . and was the cause of great persecution, which continued to increase. . . . [I continued] to attract the attention of the great ones of the most popular sects of the day, and in a manner to create in them a spirit of the most bitter persecution and reviling” (vv. 22–23).

Indeed, there is no contemporary evidence (that is, documents from the 1820s) to show that Joseph Smith told his story very widely in 1820; and it is not clear, even from his own accounts, how long he continued to tell it. With the reception he apparently received, it was probably not very long. The lack of evidence is not surprising, however, for even if certain ministers warned people not to believe young Joseph, they were also preoccupied with many other things that to them were more important. Since this was a time when many were claiming spiritual experiences, the claims of a fourteen-year-old boy were hardly something the ministers would record. Nor would such a youth have much likelihood of finding his way into the newspapers or diaries of the time, even though he later said that all the “great ones” were against him. To a young boy, the rejection of such an experience by those whom he respected would have been most frustrating, and he would tend to emphasize this frustration as he told of the experience in later years.

In the hostile environment during the fledgling years of the Restoration, even after the Church was first organized, Joseph apparently did not relate the account of his First Vision very widely, for neither the earliest Latter-day Saint nor regional

COHERENT, CREDIBLE, AND CONSISTENT

These accounts are coherent, credible, and more consistent than some people have surmised. With the full record in view, one sees that Joseph Smith shared his vision experience with intimate groups, the general public, and newspapermen, and he did so spontaneously at their request. The details supplied by each of these accounts add understanding and enhance the credibility of the Prophet's story, as he addressed the particular interests and needs of various audiences. (John W. Welch, interview by Samuel Alonzo Dodge, July 27, 2009, Provo, UT)

publications of the 1830s carried accounts of it.¹² Although early Church literature included several clear allusions to the First Vision,¹³ none of these brief references gave specific details. However, the *Reflector*, a contemporary newspaper published in Palmyra, New York, confirms that at least by 1831, those in the community had heard allusions to Joseph Smith's vision (and an indication of the criticism he continued to receive). On February 14, 1831, the clearly anti-Mormon publisher reported on news of the Mormons in Ohio. Joseph Smith, he said, claimed to have received a "commission from God" to establish a religion, and those who would not submit to his authority "would speedily be destroyed." Further, the publisher reported, Joseph Smith's followers affirmed that he "had seen God frequently and personally."¹⁴ While this report did not refer specifically to the First Vision, it is significant that members of the community had at least heard of the Latter-day Saint belief that God had appeared to their leader and that this belief was used as part of the continuing denunciation of the Church.

Because of the scant evidence of the vision in early publications, one writer prematurely suggested in 1945 that Joseph Smith did not even "make up" the story until 1835 or later.¹⁵ That view clearly may be dismissed, for we now know that the Prophet wrote his first account of this vision in 1832. Beginning at least as early as spring 1835, and continuing until his death in

1844, he felt more confident in openly describing his experience to friends, converts, inquisitive visitors, faithful congregations, the public at large, dignitaries, and publishers.

THE AUDIENCES FOR JOSEPH SMITH'S SURVIVING ACCOUNTS

With this background in mind, it becomes all the more evident that each document that preserves a contemporary account of the Prophet's First Vision was directed toward a particular audience. Striving to understand the objective that Joseph Smith had in mind as he communicated with each audience helps today's readers appreciate the particular details uniquely conveyed in each of these statements. Editorial marks include angle brackets < > to indicate insertions made by the author of the document. Strikeouts are shown by ~~strikeouts~~. Brackets [] indicate editorial comments. Any underlining is reproduced from the original document.

The 1832 account. This important account was written in the second half of 1832, a time when the Church was very small, still only a few hundred members. It is an intimate, personal statement, preserved in the handwriting of Joseph Smith and composed when he was only twenty-six years old.

Significantly, LDS scholars have noted that the language of this first effort to write the story of the First Vision is somewhat reflective of the revivalistic language of the time.¹⁶ This seems only natural, given Joseph Smith's likely memory of attending revivalistic meetings in his youth and probably hearing intensive revival-type preaching that vividly reminded listeners of their sinful nature. In this context, it is not surprising that the 1832 account should strongly emphasize his private feelings, his mourning for his own sins, his exclamation of awe before God, and the individual forgiveness and personal guidance that he

received from the Savior as part of the First Vision experience. Having been commanded repeatedly to “say nothing but repentance unto this generation” (D&C 6:9; 11:9; see also 14:8; 19:21), he strongly emphasized his own experience in seeking and obtaining forgiveness.

Joseph also told how a pillar of light came down upon him, how he was filled with the Spirit of God, how the heavens were opened before him, and how he saw and conversed with the Lord, who said to him in the first person, “I was crucified for the world that all those who believe on my name may have Eternal life.” Precise identifying details or descriptions of externalities are infrequent amidst the rapture of this very personal account. Indeed, Joseph uniquely introduced the vision here by affirming that God “seeketh such to worship him as worship him in spirit and in truth,” echoing the New Testament text that “true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth” (John 4:23); and, in direct fulfillment of this personal requirement, Joseph said that, as the pillar of light came to rest upon him, “I was filled with the spirit of God.”

It is doubtful that the 1832 manuscript was planned for straight publication, at least not in the unpolished form in which it survives. It seems, rather, to have been an early and fervent effort to express, for the benefit of already faithful members of the Church, the Prophet’s youthful religious feelings and the powerful spiritual impact that the First Vision had upon him personally. The Church was hardly over two years old at this time, and Joseph had already acted upon the commandment that the Church should begin keeping such historical records.¹⁷ He was successfully gathering faithful followers such as Sidney Rigdon, Frederick G. Williams, Newel K. Whitney, Brigham Young, Parley P. Pratt, William E. McLellin, and Charles C. Rich. As Joseph Smith sat down to write at this time, he could look back on the amazing publication of the Book of Mormon,

the restoration of the priesthood, the successful relocation of the Church from New York to Ohio, and other profound events in the promising rise of the Church. His mind reflected on the truly “marvilous experience” and “mighty acts” that his own remarkable life had already enjoyed, and this early account is a powerful expression of how it all began.

In many but not all respects, the year 1832 was good for Joseph Smith, and the 1832 account reflects the positive prospects of this time. Work on the translation of the Bible was progressing smoothly. Eighteen revelations would be received that year, including the major sections 76, 84, and 88 of the Doctrine and Covenants. Missionary work was successfully going forth as several of the brethren had answered calls to serve. Joseph had survived a painful tarring and feathering in March in Hiram, Ohio, but he had traveled successfully to Missouri, the second center of gathering, and returned at the end of July. In October he would travel to Manhattan; and in November, to Albany, New York, and Boston, Massachusetts. He returned on November 6, the joyous day on which his son Joseph Smith III was born. Sometime between the end of July and November, the Prophet found time to begin writing his history. His pages exude an optimistic tone, making no mention of the dark struggles or persecutions that he had experienced during and after the First Vision.

The 1835 accounts. The entry in Joseph Smith’s journal for November 9, 1835, tells how he explained his early experiences to Robert Matthias, a curious visitor in Kirtland, Ohio, who claimed to be a Jewish minister called Joshua. His appearance was “some thing singular.” He had a grey beard; was about fifty to fifty-five years old; was slender; wore a green coat, pantaloons, and a black fur hat and frequently shut his eyes “with a scowl” when he spoke. Warren Parrish, the Prophet’s scribe, recorded the interview as part of the Prophet’s daily record. Parrish was

necessarily selective in remembering and choosing the points that he included.

Speaking to a total stranger, 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. We are told that the Prophet remarked "upon the subject of Religion" and spoke "concerning the Bible" (laying a broad foundation for belief), that he then spoke about "the circumstances connected with the coming forth of the book of Mormon" (apparently not saying much about the specific details), and that he focused on his concern about "matters that involve eternal consequ[e]nces" (formulating his anxiety about salvation in generic terms, with which a person of any religious persuasion, Jewish or Christian or other, could identify). This account only briefly alludes to the contention that had arisen among the Protestant sects, simply indicating that Joseph did not know "who was right or who was wrong." Squabbles between Christian ministers would have been of little interest to a Jew. Instead, Joseph turned directly in this narration to the supernatural opposition that soon impeded his petition: his swollen tongue and the alarming sound like some person walking toward him. A Jewish minister would have related to powers of religious opposition such as these. (Ironically, two days later, Joseph would invite Joshua to leave Kirtland, as his doctrines were of the devil.)

Joseph then went on to say in this 1835 narrative that "a personage appeared" in the midst of the pillar of fire that rested above his head and that "another personage soon appeared like unto the first." He (the second personage?) said, "Thy sins are forgiven," and one of them testified that "Jesus Christ is the Son of God." Terms such as "pillar of fire" (as with Moses and Israel in the wilderness, Exodus 13:21) and "like unto" (see Deuteronomy 18:18) would have resonated with Jewish

expectations concerning divine manifestations; and the 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 comported with Jewish sensitivities. Yet 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 the relatively young Church leader (not yet thirty years old) to deliver to a listener whom he thought was Jewish.

Three days after dismissing Joshua, on November 14, Joseph told his story to yet another visitor, Erastus Holmes, who wanted to learn about the establishment of the Church and “to be instructed more perfectly in [its] doctrine.” The brief journal entry shows that Joseph spoke openly about “the first visitation of Angels which was when I was about 14. years old,” other visitations, the Book of Mormon, and the progress of the Church. These were the subjects about which Erastus had asked. Exactly what Joseph said is not reported, but the reference to the visitation of angels suggests that he most likely told Holmes much the same thing that he told Robert Matthias.

This was an opportune time in the Prophet’s life for him to be speaking openly about his experiences. In a change from previous years, people were now coming to him and inquiring about the Church. The Quorum of the Twelve Apostles had been organized in February and had gone together on a mission to New England, returning in September. New revelation was coming forth in the form of the Book of Abraham, which Joseph began translating in July and worked on through the fall. The first edition of the Doctrine and Covenants had been published to the world in October, with twelve witnesses resolutely attesting to its divine inspiration. Joseph was meeting regularly with the School of the Prophets. The Kirtland Temple was nearing completion, its dedication only a few months away. In this context, Joseph

spoke confidently about the First Vision throughout the year. He also allowed his personal journal with its account of the vision to be copied into the historical record of the Church.

The 1838–39 account. This account is from Joseph Smith’s Manuscript History and is the source for the version of the First Vision published in the *Times and Seasons* in 1842 and later in the *Pearl of Great Price*.¹⁸ The Prophet began working on this history on April 27, 1838, and his journal records that the First Presidency was engaged in this official work May 1–4. On September 3, James Mulholland began working for Joseph as a scribe, but their efforts were soon interrupted by the onset of the Missouri War, convoluted courtroom appearances, and Joseph’s incarceration. After his release, Joseph recommenced work on the history on June 11, 1839, with Mulholland serving again as scribe and taking down the Prophet’s testimony verbatim, as would a court reporter.

The pages covering the First Vision were apparently written in April–May 1838 and later copied into Joseph’s Manuscript History before the end of 1839.¹⁹ Whenever the writing occurred, it is evident that the Prophet intended this narrative to become the basic source for Church literature and that he had a special purpose in mind that does not seem as clear in the earlier renditions. Long the object of almost merciless public abuse, he now told his story in order to correct erroneous reports “put in circulation by evil disposed and designing persons” and “to disabuse the publick mind, and put all enquirers after truth into possession of the facts.” With such a purpose in mind, to set the record straight once and for all, it is likely that Joseph would more carefully consider this account than he had the earlier versions.

Public abuse and persecution continued to plague Joseph Smith during this period of his life. Apostasy and the excommunication of several prominent Church leaders also took place. Serious opposition in Kirtland grew to the point that on

TO ENHANCE OUR UNDERSTANDING

Some people have asked why it's important to study all the different accounts of the First Vision. Why don't we focus only on the one we have in the Pearl of Great Price and leave it at that? That is all right, of course. It's a wonderful account, and it's the official account we use when we are telling our story to the world. But as historians, if we want to know more about Joseph Smith and his feelings and emotions, if we want to know more about the nature of this young man, if perhaps we want to know some of things that he didn't put into the 1838–39 account but that he told to other people, it's important that we study all the accounts in order to enhance our understanding. (James B. Allen, interview by Samuel Alonzo Dodge, July 27, 2009, Provo, UT)

January 12, 1838, in the dead of winter, the Prophet and a large company of followers left Kirtland for Missouri, arriving at Far West on March 12. By October, troubles had erupted into violence, and in November, Joseph Smith was imprisoned in Liberty Jail. He finally arrived at Quincy, Illinois, on April 22, 1839, and only a few weeks later resumed work on his history where he had left off. 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.

Vindicating the Saints also may have been on the Church leader's mind. If so, a full and detailed account was needed in order to be convincing—one that gave dates (1820), descriptions of the weather (“a beautiful clear day”), the time of day (“morning”), and precise quotations of conversations as well as the words of the Lord. A compelling and persuasive narrative was needed to hold and win the attention of a prejudiced public. Like Paul before Agrippa some twenty-five years after the appearance of the resurrected Lord on the road to Damascus, Joseph Smith testified unshakably of what he had seen some eighteen or nineteen years previous. “Who am I that I can withstand

God,’ or why does the world think to make me deny what I have actually seen?” he asked. By denying, he would “offend God and come under condemnation.” But just as God had delivered Joseph from the unseen powers when he seemed “doomed to sudden destruction,” God would sustain and deliver his Saints in their darkest hours of despair and affliction.

The 1842 account. The beginning of the year 1842 was the heart of Nauvoo’s boom time. Property was selling; buildings were being constructed, immigrants were arriving, the Nauvoo Temple was under construction, a third printing of the Book of Mormon was under way, tithing was being collected, and political and religious difficulties were imperceptibly over the horizon. On February 15, 1842, Joseph became the editor of the *Times and Seasons*, involving him directly in the newspaper business.

An account of the First Vision written by the Prophet in 1842 was tied to the newspaper world in several ways. In the same year that his Manuscript History began to be published in the *Times and Seasons*, he was invited to prepare a brief history of the Church for publication by John Wentworth in the *Chicago Democrat*. The resulting letter containing this account was published in the *Times and Seasons* on March 1, 1842. In 1843, Joseph Smith provided Israel Daniel Rupp, a historian who planned to publish a compendium about religious denominations in the United States, with a history of the Church at Rupp’s request. The First Vision account submitted to that publication is nearly identical to the account in the letter sent to Wentworth. Rupp published his work in 1844.

From its inception as part of the Wentworth letter, this account was meant for publication by the non-Mormon press. It has the characteristics that one would expect to find in a public relations statement: it is concise, straightforward, unadorned, informative, and matter-of-fact. Its content is reported in a

strong, first-person voice: “I began,” “I found,” “I went,” “I determined,” “I had confidence,” “I retired,” “I was enwrapped,” “I was expressly commanded.” Of particular interest in the public sphere is the unique element in this account that none of the churches “was acknowledged of God as his church and kingdom.” Concluding this brief release was an enticing “promise that the fulness of the gospel should at some future time be made known.” The tone of this account of the First Vision is confident and self-assured, in keeping with the concluding prediction of the Wentworth letter that the restored gospel would visit every clime and sound in every ear.

The 1843 Levi Richards report. Levi Richards was a prominent citizen of Nauvoo who attended a lecture on June 11, 1843, and heard Joseph Smith tell about his First Vision. Richards’s diary entry for that day contains a very brief summary of the Prophet’s experience. Joseph’s comments came after the lecture of Elder G. J. Adams, who told how “the everlasting covenant which was set up by Christ & the apostles had been broken.” The Prophet then testified that, in the grove, he learned “that the Everlasting covenant was broken” and that he understood “the fulness of the Gospel from beginning to end,” including “the order of the priesthood in all its ramifications” (the ordinances of baptism for the dead and the endowment had only recently been introduced). Richards was impressed by the confident testimony that “Earth & hell had opposed him & tryed to destroy him—but they had not done it & they <never would.>” This reference to opposition may have included the forces of evil in the grove as well as many other persecutions.

The 1843 David Nye White report. In summer 1843, David Nye White, the editor of the *Pittsburgh Weekly Gazette*, visited Joseph Smith in Nauvoo. White’s report, which included an account of the First Vision as related to him by the Prophet, appeared in the *Gazette* on September 15 and was later reprinted

in the *New York Spectator* on September 23. It reads as if Joseph Smith's words have been rephrased and paraphrased, making the account seem a bit odd, although obviously consistent with his authentic first-person narratives.²⁰

The 1844 Alexander Neibaur report. An entry in the personal diary of Alexander Neibaur illustrates that the Prophet sometimes told the story to small, rather intimate groups. Born in Germany of Jewish parents, Neibaur was converted to the Church in England, where he practiced dentistry. He immigrated to Nauvoo in 1841, where he set up a dental practice and soon became an intimate friend of the Prophet and also taught German and Hebrew to Joseph and others. On May 24, 1844, Joseph told his sacred experience to Neibaur, who recorded it in his diary in the sincere, unpolished style that one would expect from a humble devotee not used to writing in English. A few unique, intimate details contained in this account, such as the description of God the Father ("light complexion blue eyes a piece of white cloth drawn over his shoulders his right arm bear"), bespeak the intimate setting of this narration by Joseph, in the privacy of his home, to his tutor.

THE AUDIENCES OF ORSON PRATT AND ORSON HYDE

Two additional accounts of the First Vision published during Joseph Smith's lifetime were prepared by members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles for inclusion in missionary pamphlets. As close associates of the Prophet, Orson Pratt and Orson Hyde undoubtedly heard the story directly from him and likely had early access to the official 1838–39 version. Their reports are close to that account in style and content, though both also adapted the basic story in ways that were suitable for and reflected their particular audiences, their interests, and their own literary proclivities.

The 1840 Orson Pratt report. In 1840, Orson Pratt of the Quorum of the Twelve published in Scotland a missionary tract entitled *A[n] Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions, and of the Late Discovery of Ancient American Records*. His narrative was similar to Joseph's 1838 account, except that it elaborated upon several details. Whether these were given to him by Joseph or whether he was using literary license is not known, but some of his additions find corroboration in other accounts as well.

As a person interested in science, Orson Pratt featured how Joseph was concerned about leaving matters of eternal consequence to "chance, or uncertainties," how problems "occurred to his mind," how he sought "certainty, and knowledge, of his own," and how the Epistle of James had brought him to see that "there was, not only, a possibility, but a probability; yea, more, a certainty, that he should obtain a knowledge." Pratt's detailed description of the light, its brightness and magnitude, its effect on the surrounding trees and "the whole wilderness, for some distance around," and Joseph's mind being "caught away, from the natural objects with which he was surrounded" provides the kinds of empirical data that a scientist would relish and that Scottish empiricism would appreciate.

The 1842 Orson Hyde report. Another member of the Twelve, Orson Hyde, published a missionary tract in Germany in 1842 entitled *Ein Ruf aus der Wüste, eine Stimme aus dem Schoosse der Erde* (A Cry from the Wilderness, a Voice from the Dust of the Earth). This tract contained an account of the vision similar to Orson Pratt's account, much of it, in fact, having been translated directly from the earlier publication. To the rationalistic Germans, Hyde emphasized Joseph Smith's concern about basing his hopes not just on uncertainty but on "blind uncertainty," and Hyde averred that the Prophet had been endowed by nature "with a keen critical intellect and so he looked through

the lens of reason and common sense and with pity and contempt” on the various “systems of religion.” When the forces of evil beset the prayerful youth, the opposition came in the form of “doubts” and “inappropriate images” that filled his “mind,” and in the end, Joseph was promised “the complete truth of the gospel.” Germans also being known for their authoritarianism, Hyde added that the scripture gave “an authorization for him to solemnly call upon his creator.”

CONSOLIDATING THE ACCOUNTS

Mindful of such factors as why, when, where, and to whom the First Vision accounts were given, we turn to an examination of what these accounts actually say. Latter-day Saints believe that Joseph Smith was telling the truth each time he related his experience and that the scribes recorded his ideas as accurately and suitably as possible. Thus, a study of the combined accounts presents some fascinating new insights into the experience and personal development of the young prophet. Not only do we discover in each account more details about what happened both before and after he entered the Sacred Grove, but we also gain valuable insight into how these events affected him personally and helped him in his spiritual growth. What follows is an attempt to weave these accounts into a composite story of Joseph’s sacred experience in order to show their collective value and consistency. In the explanations that follow, these accounts are considered. The 1835 account of the Prophet’s comments to Erastus Holmes is not listed or discussed because of its brevity.²¹ The 1835 journal entry is listed together with its restatement in a later history in column two, and the 1842 Wentworth letter and its virtually identical 1843 reprint are combined in column five. Then we list the 1838 account in Joseph Smith’s Manuscript



Joseph Smith and his parents, brothers, and sisters lived in what is now Manchester Township in western New York. Because of the intense outpouring of religious enthusiasm that characterized this region in the early nineteenth century, it has been dubbed the “Burned-Over District.” (Photo of replica of the Joseph Smith Sr. farmhouse by Brent R. Nordgren)

History, which has been excerpted in the *Pearl of Great Price*. We also list the contemporary secondary accounts. For a table presenting all of these details, see pp. 79–83 below.

SITUATING THE VISION

In 1819, young Joseph Smith and his parents, brothers, and sisters lived in what is now Manchester Township in western New York. This region would later be dubbed the “Burned-Over District” because of the intense outpouring of religious enthusiasm that characterized it in the early nineteenth century.²² While the 1843 White report simply states that Joseph Smith spoke of “a reformation among the different religious denominations in the neighborhood,” and while the Neibaur diary briefly mentions “a Revival meeting,” only the

1838 narrative gives any detail about the religious excitement that stirred young Joseph's interest. In this light, the question has arisen as to whether a general religious movement of the proportions described by the Prophet in the 1838 account actually took place around 1820 in his area and, if so, whether his description agrees with the known facts. It has even been argued, for example, that no such movement took place in the town of Palmyra in spring 1820, and that therefore Joseph's account is seriously flawed.²³

The Prophet's words, however, do not present such a problem. The 1838 account merely says that the excitement began "sometime in the second year after our removal to Manchester," which could mean almost any time in 1819 or 1820. Further, his narrative does not specifically state that such a movement centered or even began in Palmyra. By 1819, the Smith family lived outside the village of Palmyra on a farm that was actually in the township (not village) of Manchester.²⁴ The phrase "in the place where we lived" could easily refer, in context, not to a specific town but rather to the general area.

In addition, this 1838 account referred to the "whole district of Country" being affected by the awakening, and this can be interpreted very broadly. Professor Milton Backman has demonstrated conclusively that there was considerable religious excitement in the general area of the Burned-Over District of western New York in 1819 and 1820 and that "spiritual quickenings" were particularly intense in 1819, as mentioned in Joseph's 1838 account. Indeed, itinerant preachers, camp meetings, intense spiritual experiences, and conversions were all common in the area, and in 1819–20 some sort of revival activity took place in at least ten towns within a twenty-mile radius of the Smith home.²⁵ Thus Joseph had ample opportunity to know of and become involved in camp meetings and other religious activities in the vicinity of his home during 1817, 1818, or 1819,

and none of the accounts of his vision are inconsistent with these facts.

Whether he actually attended very many of these camp meetings is less clear. His 1838 narrative reports that his mind “at different times was greatly excited” because “the cry and tumult were so great and incessant,” but the confusion and strife that troubled him so deeply probably extended into general religious discussions and were not limited to camp meetings as such. The Neibaur diary affirms that “the first call he had [came at (?)] a Revival meeting.” Joseph’s mother, brother, and sister “got Religion” on that occasion, and Joseph “wanted to feel & sho-out like the Rest but could feel nothing.” The observation that general confusion rather than revival meetings alone caused his agitation would explain why most of the First Vision accounts make little mention of revivalist excitement.

DATING THE VISION

Joseph Smith reached his fourteenth birthday on December 23, 1819. In the familiar 1838 First Vision account, he said that he was “at this time in my fifteenth year,” and the Orson Hyde account uses these same words (meaning Joseph was fourteen years old). A few paragraphs later in the 1838 account, Joseph said, “I was an obscure boy only between fourteen and fifteen years of age <or thereabouts,>”²⁶ the last two words being inserted in the manuscript above the line, possibly at his direction, but not included when it was published in the *Times and Seasons* in 1842. The words “or thereabouts” should not be taken necessarily to contradict the previous statement of his age when the vision occurred, but, rather, simply as part of a very careful approach to writing history. As edited and then published in 1842, the account reflected what Joseph Smith intended the public to understand.

In three other accounts, Joseph simply said (or was reported to have said) that he was “about fourteen years old” when the First Vision was received, when God first revealed himself to him, “a mere boy” (White 1843; see also November 9 and 14, 1835); and the 1842 Wentworth letter account says that Joseph was “about fourteen years of age” when he began to reflect upon the importance of his soul’s future state. These uses of the word “about” remind us that the validity of his experience does not hinge on knowing the precise day, month, or year on which that vision occurred, and in light of this uncertainty, it is interesting to note that the scientifically minded Orson Pratt allowed in 1840 that Joseph Smith was “somewhere about fourteen or fifteen” when his spiritual awakening began.

The account that cannot be squared exactly with his having been fourteen when the First Vision was received is the earliest draft, the 1832 narrative. There, 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.

In sum, this examination leads to the conclusion that the First Vision, in all probability, occurred in spring 1820, when Joseph was fourteen years old. The preponderance of the evidence supports that conclusion.

JOSEPH SMITH'S CONCERNS

Joseph Smith's personal spiritual awakenings began at the age of twelve and grew over a period of about two or three years. Several issues, not just a single problem, concerned and perplexed him.

At first, his thoughts turned inward. He was concerned about the eternal welfare of his own soul, as he had become "convicted of [his] sins" (1832). He became almost overwhelmed with the awesomeness of the eternities (1832), and "he began seriously to reflect upon the necessity of being prepared for a future state of existence: but how, or in what way, to prepare himself, was a question, as yet, undetermined in his own mind: he perceived that it was a question of infinite importance, and that the salvation of his soul depended upon a correct understanding of the same" (Pratt 1840).

With so much religious activity going on around him, young Joseph Smith found himself influenced in many ways as he sought answers. He saw four members of his family join the Presbyterian Church, while his own "mind became somewhat partial toward the Methodist sect" (1838). It would not be inconsistent with any of these accounts to conclude that Joseph then became involved in the religious excitement known to have occurred in his area during summer or fall 1819, while he was thirteen years old. At first he desired but could not find

the emotional experience he had witnessed in others, as he told Alexander Neibaur, but he continued his quest.

As Joseph struggled, more questions came to his mind. According to his earliest statement, this led to an intensive searching of the scriptures. For a period of time, he tried to evaluate the different denominations and found that they did not agree with what he saw in the scriptures. He determined that various churches had “apostatized from the true and living faith” (1832). He was shocked by the confusion, strife, insincerity, and bad feelings he found among those who professed to be religious. Such apprehensions about the world worked within him for several months. He became concerned with the “wicke[d]ness and abominations” of the world and came to mourn “for the sins of the world” as much as for his own sins (1832).

These concerns caused him to consider joining one of the various denominations. Here, however, as recorded in practically all the accounts,²⁷ he became disillusioned, especially with the fact that the ministers would contend so bitterly for converts. It became so bad, he wrote in 1838, that “great confusion and bad feeling ensued—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).

At this point, the youth became even more confused. He still wanted to join a church. When he finally decided to make it a matter of prayer, he had in mind specifically that he wanted to “know what Church to join” (White 1843). In looking at all the churches, he said, “I knew not who was right or who was wrong, but considered it of the first importance to me that I should be right” (History 1835). This burning question is, in fact, mentioned in all the accounts, excepting only Neibaur’s short diary entry.

At the same time, young Joseph began to suspect that perhaps none of the churches were right. The first time he recorded the vision he declared that in searching the scriptures he “found that ~~man~~ <mankind> did not come unto the Lord but that they had apostatised from the true and liveing faith and there was no society or denomination that built upon the gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the new testament” (1832). Later he explained his feelings this way: “I often said to myself, what is to be done? Who of all these parties are right? Or are they all wrong together?” (1838).²⁸ His youthful mind apparently still clung to the hope that one of the contending sects was “right,” but at the same time he could not ignore the disturbing possibility that “the true and liveing faith” no longer existed (1832). Orson Hyde went so far as to write that “the hope of ever finding a sect or denomination that was in possession of unadulterated truth left him.”²⁹

Amid this war of words and feelings, the Prophet’s mind was drawn especially to James 1:5. “If any of you lack wisdom,” he read, “let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.” Joseph Smith said:

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. . . .

At length I came to the conclusion that I must either remain in darkness and confusion, or else I must do as James directs, that is, ask of God. (Joseph Smith—History 1:12–13)

The influence of this passage is mentioned explicitly in eight of the accounts, and it probably stands behind the 1832 account’s affirmation that God is “no respecter to persons” as well.³⁰

JOSEPH SMITH'S QUEST AND STRUGGLE IN THE GROVE

Joseph took this provocative scripture deeply to heart, being convinced by the scriptures of God's power and goodness (1832). Having been emboldened by "the lens of reason and common sense" that told him "that there was only one truth" (Hyde 1842), he did not want to rely on chance but to decide in the light of "positive and definite evidence" (Pratt 1840). The youthful Joseph decided then, for the first time in his life, to pray vocally about the matter (1835, 1838). After months of struggle, he finally knew the course he must follow, and sometime in spring 1820 he went "immediately" to a familiar spot in the woods near his home to make the attempt (White 1843).



After months of struggle, Joseph Smith finally knew the course he must follow, and sometime in spring 1820 he went "immediately" to a familiar spot in the woods near his home to make the attempt (White 1843). (Sacred Grove photo by Brent R. Nordgren)

The months of anguish had resulted in obvious spiritual maturity, and he had at least three serious and related questions on his mind as he bowed in fervent prayer: (1) he was concerned for his own salvation and sought forgiveness of his sins (1832); (2) he was concerned for the welfare of mankind in general, for, he said, "I felt to mourn for my own sins and for the sins of the world" (1832); and (3) he wanted to know which, if any, of the churches was right, and which he should join.

No one knows how long young Joseph remained in the grove, but it is clear that before the object of his prayer was accomplished he had a long, desperate, and perhaps almost fatal struggle with the forces of evil from the unseen world. His first effort to pray was fruitless, for, he said, "<siezed> upon by some power which entirely overcame me and <had> such astonishing influence over me as to bind my tongue so that I could not speak" (1838). He later told his friends that his tongue seemed swollen in his mouth, so much so that he could not utter a word (1835, 1844).

As he struggled to pray, several strange things happened. Unwanted and distracting thoughts ran through his mind: "The adversary then made several strenuous efforts to cool his ardent soul. He filled his mind with doubts and brought to mind all manner of inappropriate images to prevent him from obtaining the object of his endeavors" (Hyde 1842).

At one point, Joseph said, "I heard a noise behind me like some one walking towards me: I strove again to pray, but could not; the noise of walking seemed to draw nearer; I sprang upon my feet and looked round, but saw no person, or thing that was calculated to produce the noise of walking" (History 1835).

During the struggle, "thick darkness" (1838) or a "dark cloud" (Hyde 1842) seemed to gather around him. He was "severely tempted by the powers of darkness" (Pratt 1840), and he felt that he was "doomed to sudden destruction" and must

abandon himself “to the power of some actual being from the unseen world” (1838). It was more of a struggle, more of an agony, than readers may stop to think about. This experience left a deep, indelible impression on Joseph Smith.

WHAT JOSEPH SMITH SAW

Despite this alarm, Joseph was able to gather enough inner strength to continue his fervent supplication and to call upon God for deliverance. It was then that he saw overhead “a pillar of fire light” (1832). Every account, except for Richards, mentions “light,” two calling it “fire.” Three accounts use the word “pillar” (1832, 1835, 1838), and three state that it shone “above the brightness of the sun” (1832, 1838; see also Wentworth Letter 1842). Pratt simply called it “glorious.”

It seemed to begin far away, in the heavens (1840), gradually descending (1838, 1840, 1844) above his head (1835, 1838), even increasing in brightness so that “by the time that it reached the tops of the trees, the whole wilderness, for some distance around, was illuminated in a most glorious and brilliant manner. He expected to have seen the leaves and boughs of the trees consumed, as soon as the light came in contact with them. . . . It continued descending, slowly, until it rested upon the earth, and he was enveloped in the midst of it” (1840).

The light first rested upon the trees (1840, 1844); then it seemed that flames spread all around, but nothing was consumed (1835). When the light “rested upon the earth” (1840), it rested upon Joseph, surrounding or enveloping him in light, as five accounts state (1832, 1835, 1838, 1840, 1844).

As soon as the light had come to rest, Joseph felt himself freed from his spiritual enemy, and as the light rested upon him, he was “filled with the spirit of god and the <Lord> opened the heavens upon me” (1832). As Elder Pratt described later, “When it first

came upon him, it produced a peculiar sensation throughout his whole system; and, immediately, his mind was caught away, from the natural objects with which he was surrounded; and he was enwrapped in a heavenly vision” (1840), and Elder Hyde explained that the natural world was excluded so that he would be open to heavenly things (Hyde 1842). Joseph Smith simply described it as a “heavenly vision” (Wentworth Letter 1842).



According to three of the First Vision accounts, Joseph saw within the light a single personage, who was soon joined by a second personage. They seemed to stand above him in the air, and their own “brightness and glory” defied all description (1838). There is no doubt that the Prophet intended to convey the message that they were the Father and the Son. (© Gary L. Kapp, The Heavens Were Opened)

According to three of the First Vision accounts, Joseph then saw within the light a single personage, who was soon joined by a second personage (1835, White 1843, 1844). Four of the accounts (1838, 1840, Wentworth Letter 1842, Hyde 1842) simply report that Joseph beheld two personages, without saying whether they both appeared at the same time or one and then the other. Four accounts make the additional point that the two beings were like each other or “exactly resembled each other in features, and likeness” (Wentworth Letter 1842; see also 1835, 1840, Hyde 1842). They seemed to stand above him in the air, and their own “brightness and glory” defied all description (1838). There is no doubt that the Prophet intended to convey the message that they were the Father and the Son.

Because the 1832 account does not explicitly 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?³¹ 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 accounts besides the 1832 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.³² 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 <un>to 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.

The various versions of the event do not contradict each other regarding the number of personages, even though they emphasize different ideas and details. Similarly, in two of his accounts, Joseph mentions that he saw “Angels” or “many angels in this vision” (November 9 and 14, 1835), a point that does not contradict but rather supplements the other accounts and confirms that multiple beings were involved.

WHAT JOSEPH SMITH HEARD

The messages and information received by Joseph as the vision progressed were all that a person with his concerns could ask for and more. As he listened, he was told several things. Exactly how many things were said we do not know, but the cumulative information from all these accounts presents a clear and consistent collection that could have taken several minutes to deliver.

First in importance, Joseph received an unmistakable knowledge of the reality of Christ, as one of the two personages pointed to the other and said, “This is my beloved Son, Hear him” (1838; see also White 1843 and 1844). Later in the vision, the Savior himself declared, “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” (1832). From this, Joseph learned

that eternal life was possible for all who truly believe on the name of Jesus Christ.

Second, he learned that the Father and the Son knew him personally, for one of them (seemingly the Son) called him intimately by name, “Joseph <my son>,” and told him, “Thy sins are forgiven thee” (1832; see also November 9, 1835). Thus purified and filled with the Spirit of God, Joseph Smith was able to stand in the presence of God and behold his glory.

Third, young Joseph was encouraged to go his way and to keep the commandments.

Fourth, undoubtedly astonished at all that was happening, Joseph gained possession of himself and asked the main questions that were on his mind: “which of all the sects was right” and which he should join (1838). Neibaur recalled that Joseph asked, “Must I join the Methodist Church[?]” In response, he was informed that he should join none of them, for all were wrong and none was doing good.

Fifth, he learned something more about the current state of Christianity as the Lord confirmed Joseph’s personal conclusion, reached through study of the scriptures, about the Great Apostasy, namely that all churches had gone astray. Even before going into the grove, he understood that the gospel had been preached originally in truth and purity, but that the world had strayed from it. The 1832 account adds to that understanding with these words spoken by the Lord: “The world lieth in sin and at this time and none doeth good no not one they have turned asside from the gospel and keep not <my> commandments they draw near to me with their lips while their hearts are far from me.” Levi Richards (1843) reported Joseph Smith as saying he was told “that none of them were right, that they were all wrong, & that the Everlasting covenant was broken.” Alexander Neibaur emphasized this same point: “They are not my People, all have gone astray there is none that doeth good no not one, but this is my Beloved son harken ye him.”

Sixth, he was instructed that the causes and manifestations of the Apostasy were to be found in sin, corruption, and the teaching of false doctrine. Joseph was told “that all the religious denominations were believing in incorrect doctrines; and, consequently, that none of them was acknowledged of God, as his church and kingdom” (1840), and he was expressly commanded a second time not to join with them (1838). The speaking personage pointedly warned young Joseph that the churches “were all wrong, and . . . all their Creeds were an abomination in his sight,” explaining further that some professors of religion “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’” (1838). While the 1838 account is the only one that mentions the “Creeds” explicitly, most of the accounts contain equally unambiguous words to the effect that the churches of his day had “erred in doctrine” (Hyde 1842). The word “abomination” also appears exclusively in the 1838 account as one of the words used by the Savior.³³ This biblical term has a range of meanings, all pointing to any impure practices that take people away from God.³⁴

Seventh, the Prophet learned that God was not the author of the confusion and contention in the lives of those who professed to be followers of Christ. It was one thing for people to disagree in civility and kindness while pondering various inscrutable mysteries of divine truth; it was another thing for chaos and conflict to reign. At the age of twelve, Joseph was pierced to the soul by “the contentions and divi[s]ions the wicke[d]ness and abominations and the darkness which pervaded the ~~of the~~ minds of mankind” (1832). In the 1835 history, he similarly spoke of “being wrought up in my mind respecting the subject of Religion, and looking at the different systems taught the children of men.” Being torn by the “tumult . . . so great

FOUNDATIONAL DOCUMENTS

The value of these documents is immeasurable. In the history of world religions, no other body of foundational documentation rivals it for its immediacy and size. Think, for example, how few documents have survived from the time of Mohammed. And what would New Testament scholars give for a single letter from Mary about the raising of Lazarus? Or a diary entry by someone who was present when Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River? Or a brief report from Peter to the Twelve about what he had just seen and heard on the Mount of Transfiguration? In the case of Joseph Smith and the key events of the Restoration, we enjoy, by comparison, an overwhelming abundance. (John W. Welch, interview by Samuel Alonzo Dodge, July 27, 2009, Provo, UT)

and incessant” as various professors of religion “used all their powers of either reason or sophistry to prove their errors, or at least to make the people think they were in error” (1838), Joseph turned to the Lord for mercy and help.

Eighth, he learned that God was not pleased with the situation in the world. In fact, the Lord said, “Mine anger is kindling against the inhabitants of the earth” (1832).

Ninth, Joseph learned that the Second Coming of the Lord was close at hand. “And lo I come quickly as it [is] written of me in the cloud <clothed> in the glory of my Father” (1832).

Finally, Joseph received a promise that “the fulness of the gospel should at some future time be made known unto me” (Wentworth Letter 1842). Elder Hyde stated, “He was further commanded, to wait patiently until some future time, when the true doctrine of Christ and the complete truth of the gospel would be revealed to him” (Hyde 1842). This promise of further revelation would seem to indicate Joseph Smith’s initial calling as a prophet of God.

In addition, Joseph was told “many other things” that he was unable to write (1838).

AFTERMATH OF THE VISION

According to scripture, it is impossible for any person to behold Deity with natural eyes (see John 1:18; D&C 67:10–13; Moses 1:2). Joseph Smith made it clear that this profound experience transcended his physical senses (Wentworth Letter 1842; see also Pratt 1840, Hyde 1842) and that it had an exhausting effect upon him. “When I came to myself again,” he wrote in 1838, “I found myself lying on <my> back looking up into Heaven,” and he told Alexander Neibaur that he endeavored to rise but felt uncommonly feeble.

The effect of this vision on the mind of the youthful prophet was great. After all his earlier confusion, he now felt comforted, and his mind was left “in a state of calmness and peace, indescribable” (Pratt 1840; see also Hyde 1842). Joseph said in his earliest account, “My soul was filled with love and for many days I could rejoice with great Joy and the Lord was with me” (1832). Having been commanded to be patient, he pondered these things in his heart, and he felt that the Lord was with him (1832).

This early account best expresses the tender feelings that must have overwhelmed young Joseph. It is little wonder that he should wish to tell his experience to friends and acquaintances, and one can sense his profound disappointment when, as he stated in the same account, he “could find none that would believe the hevny vision” (1832). Later he described in detail the immediate unfriendly reception he received upon telling of the vision. He was particularly disappointed at the surprising reaction of a Methodist preacher who “treated my communication not only lightly but with great contempt, saying it was all of the Devil, that there was no such thing as visions or revelations in these days, that all such things had ceased with the apostles and that there never would be any more of them” (1838).

It seemed to young Joseph that he was being attacked from all sides:

I soon found however that my telling the story had excited a great deal of prejudice against me among professors of religion and was the cause of great persecution which continued to increase and though I was an obscure boy only between fourteen and fifteen years of age <or thereabouts,> and my circumstances in life such as to make a boy of no consequence in the world, yet men of high standing would take notice sufficiently to excite the public mind against me and create a hot persecution, and this was common <among> all the sects: all united to persecute me. (1838)

CONCLUSION

This chapter does not presume, of course, to provide all the details of what happened at the time of Joseph Smith's First Vision. Joseph himself testified that "many other things did he say unto me, which I cannot write at this time" (Joseph Smith—History 1:20). Nor does this discussion presume to answer all the questions that may be raised about the meaning and implications of the vision. It has simply demonstrated that the account was repeated several times and on several different occasions, even by the Prophet, and that although each narrative emphasizes different ideas and events, none is incompatible with other accounts. There is, in fact, striking consistency throughout the narratives; they combine impressively to give a consistent and coherent picture. A high percentage of the elements shown in the table sporadically appear in multiple accounts, showing a high degree of independent, cumulative corroboration among these accounts.

We offer this information in hopes that it will correct misinformation that has been put in circulation about the authorship, variations, historicity, publications, awareness, and reception of

Joseph Smith's First Vision. Despite the impossibility of providing all the details and answering all conceivable questions,³⁵ we believe that the documentary evidence amply shows that the First Vision can in truth become meaningful in a personal way when one seeks, as Joseph Smith sought, to reach God through earnest and sincere supplication, seeking to worship him in spirit, righteousness, and truth.

THE VARIOUS ELEMENTS OF JOSEPH SMITH'S
FIRST VISION, AS RECORDED OR CLEARLY IMPLIED
IN THE CONTEMPORARY ACCOUNTS

	1832 Smith	1835 Smith	1838 Smith	1840 Pratt	1842 and 1843 Smith	1842 Hyde	1843 Richards	1843 White	1844 Neibaur
SITUATING THE VISION									
Joseph's age 14 or about 14		•	•	•	•	•		•	
Joseph's age 15 or about 15	•			•					
Religious excitement of the period			•					•	•
Wanted to get religion									•
Joseph's concern for his soul (or future state)	•	•		•	•	•			
His quest for forgiveness of sin	•								
Joseph's concern for mankind in general	•								
Confusion or strife among denominations	•	•	•	•	•	•			
Insincerity and bad feelings among religionists			•			•			

	1832 Smith	1835 Smith	1838 Smith	1840 Pratt	1842 and 1843 Smith	1842 Hyde	1843 Richards	1843 White	1844 Neilbaur
No church built or set up as in New Testament	•						•		
His quest to know which church (if any) was right	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
Convinced of God's goodness and greatness	•					•			
Reason told him there was only one truth				•	•	•			
All could not be right, God not author of confusion					•				
Not to rely on chance but positive evidence				•		•			
His searching the scriptures, James 1:5	*	•	•	•	•	•		•	•
He prayed	•		•				•	•	•
He prayed mightily or fervently		•		•	•	•			
Cried for mercy	•								
Called on God for the first time		•	•						
Realized no church was built on scriptural gospel	•					•			
Wanted to know which church was right		•	•	•	•		•	•	
Heard footsteps		•							
Inability to speak, tongue swollen or bound		•	•						•

	1832 Smith	1835 Smith	1838 Smith	1840 Pratt	1842 and 1843 Smith	1842 Hyde	1843 Richards	1843 White	1844 Neibaur
Beset by doubts and strange images						•			
Tempted or beset by dark powers			•	•					
Thick darkness or cloud			•			•			
Exerted all powers			•						
Prayed again		•	•	•		•			
Felt easier									•
WHAT JOSEPH SAW AND HEARD									
Appearance of light or pillar of light	•		•	•	•			•	
Appearance of fire or pillar of fire		•							•
Light brighter than the sun	•		•		•				
Above his head		•	•						
Light descended from above	•		•	•					•
Gradually			•	•					•
Flame rested on trees				•					•
Light rested on Joseph	•	•	•	•					•
Light all around		•		•	•				
First one personage in pillar, then another	†	•						•	•
Two personages			•	•	•	•			
Exactly like each other		•		•	•	•			

	1832 Smith	1835 Smith	1838 Smith	1840 Pratt	1842 and 1843 Smith	1842 Hyde	1843 Richards	1843 White	1844 Neilbaur
Glory defies description			•	•	•	•		•	
Appearance of many angels		•							
Joseph asks which church to join or which is right			•					•	•
Father introduced or testified of the Son		•	•					•	•
Joseph called by name	•		•						
Your prayers are answered, special blessing to be given						•			
Thy sins are forgiven	•	•		•					
Go thy way, keep the commandments	•								
Jesus described himself	•								
Join no church			•			•		•	
Do not join Methodists									•
All wrong, none right	•		•						•
None do good	•								•
All in sin, gone astray, broken everlasting covenant	•						•		•
Certain professors were corrupt			•						
Creeds are an abomination			•						
All churches teach false doctrine				•	•	•			
Draw near with lips only	•		•						

	1832 Smith	1835 Smith	1838 Smith	1840 Pratt	1842 and 1843 Smith	1842 Hyde	1843 Richards	1843 White	1844 Neibaur
Form of godliness but deny the power thereof			•						
Forbidden again to join any church			•	•					
None acknowledged as his church, kingdom, people				•	•	•			•
Lord angry, comes quickly	•								
Gospel fullness promised				•	•	•			
THE AFTERMATH									
Lying on his back			•						
Uncommonly feeble									•
Joseph filled with love	•								
Joseph filled with joy	•	•							
Joseph filled with calmness, comfort, peace				•		•			•
Pondered in heart	•								
Lord was with Joseph	•								
Tried to get others to believe the story	•		•					•	•
Many tried to oppose Joseph unsuccessfully			•				•	•	

* Includes the phrase “no respecter of persons,” a principle reflected in James 1:5.

† Possibly implied; see discussion on pp. 72–73 above.

NOTES

1. James B. Allen, "Eight Contemporary Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision—What Do We Learn from Them?," *Improvement Era*, April 1970, 4–13.

2. John W. Welch and Erick B. Carlson, eds., *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844* (Provo, UT: BYU Studies; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005).

3. Dean C. Jessee, "The Earliest Documented Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision," in *Opening the Heavens*, 1–33.

4. Paul R. Cheesman, "An Analysis of the Accounts Relating to Joseph Smith's Early Visions" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1965), appendix D, 126–32.

5. This document, located by Dean Jessee in the Church Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, was first printed in 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): 40–41.

6. Dean C. Jessee, "The Early Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision," *BYU Studies* 9, no. 3 (1969): 275–94.

7. For example, Wesley P. Walters, "New Light on Mormon Origins from Palmyra (N.Y.) Revival," *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 10 (Fall 1967): 227–44; 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 (Spring 1969): 301–20; Wesley P. Walters, "New Light on Mormon Origins from the Palmyra Revival," *Dialogue* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1969): 60–81; Richard L. Bushman, "The First Vision Story Revived," *Dialogue* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1969): 82–93.

8. One of the most significant publications of that era was the spring 1969 issue of *BYU Studies*, in which Mormon writers presented the results of research on "Mormon Origins in New York."

9. James B. Allen, "Eight Contemporary Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision—What Do We Learn from Them?," *Improvement Era*, April 1970, 4–13; Milton V. Backman Jr., "Joseph Smith's Recitals of the First Vision," *Ensign*, January 1985, 8–17; Richard L.

Anderson, "Joseph Smith's Testimony of the First Vision," *Ensign*, April 1996, 10–21.

10. See, for example, the studies discussed in Dean C. Jessee, "Sources for the Study of Joseph Smith," in *Mormon Americana*, ed. David J. Whittaker (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 1995), 7–28; Grant H. Palmer, *An Insider's View of Mormon Origins* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 235–58, reviewed by Davis Bitton, "The Charge of a Man with a Broken Lance (but Look What He Doesn't Tell Us)," Steven C. Harper, "Trustworthy History?," Mark Ashurst-McGee, "A One-Sided View of Mormon Origins," and Louis Midgley, "Prying into Palmer," in *FARMS Review* 15, no. 2 (2003): 257–410, and by James B. Allen in *BYU Studies* 43, no. 2 (2004): 175–89. For dozens of other publications about the First Vision, consult the bibliography by James B. Allen, Ronald W. Walker, and David J. Whittaker, *Studies in Mormon History, 1830–1997* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), "Smith, Joseph, Jr., First Vision," 933.

11. Backman, "Awakenings in the Burned-Over District," 312–13.

12. Allen, "Significance of Joseph Smith's 'First Vision,'" 30–32.

13. As early as June 1830, a revelation alluded to the remission of sins that probably occurred during the First Vision: "For, after that it truly was manifested unto this first elder, that he had received a remission of his sins, he was entangled again in the vanities of the world." Book of Commandments (Independence, MO: W. W. Phelps, 1833), 24:6, also published in "Revelations. The Articles and Covenants of the Church of Christ," *Evening and the Morning Star*, June 1832, 1, and Doctrine and Covenants 20:5. There are some slight variations in the latter references, including the dating of the revelation as April instead of June. This revelation, known as the Articles and Covenants of the Church, was widely used as the foundational document in the organization of the Church. In 1831, another early revelation read, "Wherefore, I the Lord, knowing the calamity which should come upon the inhabitants of the earth, called upon my servant Joseph, and spake unto him from heaven,

and gave him commandments.” Book of Commandments 1:4, also published in Doctrine and Covenants 1:17.

14. *Palmyra (NY) Reflector*, February 14, 1831, 102. Joseph’s own testimony on this subject is corroborated by his mother’s testimony, as well as by accounts of those in the community who knew him as a young man. Richard L. Anderson’s incisive article in the spring 1969 issue of *BYU Studies* carefully analyzes some of these writers, including Mother Smith, and presents convincing verification for Joseph’s claims with regard to what was happening both before and after his experience in the Sacred Grove. See Richard Lloyd Anderson, “Circumstantial Confirmation of the First Vision through Reminiscences,” *BYU Studies* 9, no. 3 (Spring 1969): 373–404.

15. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet* (New York: Knopf, 1945), 25.

16. 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; Richard L. Bushman, “The Visionary World of Joseph Smith,” *BYU Studies* 37, no. 1 (1997–98): 183–204.

17. In April 1830, a revelation (D&C 21) required that a record be kept in the Church. In March 1831, John Whitmer was appointed to keep a history (see D&C 47:1; 69:2–3).

18. There were a few minor changes between the original Manuscript History and the publication in the *Times and Seasons*. There have been a few additional changes in the account found in the Pearl of Great Price. The reason for these changes is not always clear, although in some cases it was probably simply a matter of improving grammatical style. In any case, the essential details and meaning of the account have not been changed, and the changes are not significant enough to discuss in the text above.

19. Dean C. Jessee, Mark Ashurst-McGee, Richard L. Jensen, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers: Journals, Volume 1, 1832–1839* (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2008), 260–61, and Dean C. Jessee, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 226.

20. In James Allen’s original 1970 article on the First Vision, Allen indicated that this report had been published in the *New*

York Spectator on September 23, 1843. Allen, "Eight Contemporary Accounts," 6. This is correct, but Allen did not realize at the time that it had appeared first in White's own newspaper, as indicated above, on September 15.

21. This account is reproduced in Jessee, "Earliest Documented Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision," 10–11.

22. For a full account of the period, see Whitney R. Cross, "The Prophet," in *The Burned-Over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800–1850* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1950), 138–50.

23. See both Walters articles referenced above.

24. Actually, Professor Milton Backman has found that this area was called Farmington township when the Smiths moved there, but the name was changed to Manchester township a few years later. Horatio Gates Spafford, *A Gazetteer of the State of New-York* (Albany, NY: B. D. Packard, 1824), 302–3; and Hamilton Child, *Gazetteer and Business Directory of Ontario County, N.Y., for 1867–8* (Syracuse, NY: printed by author, 1867), 49; quoted in Backman, "Awakenings in the Burned-Over District," 303n5.

25. Backman, "Awakenings in the Burned-Over District," 312–13.

26. The words "or thereabouts" were not included in the *Times and Seasons* account, April 1, 1842, 748, nor are they in the 1981 *Pearl of Great Price*. It is significant, however, that the Prophet should add them to his manuscript as he was preparing it.

27. The exception is Neibaur, and this account clearly implies the same thing.

28. By way of comparison, Joseph wrote in the 1842 Wentworth Letter, "I determined to investigate the subject more fully, believing that if God had a church it would not be split up into factions," and Orson Pratt wrote, "The great question to be decided in his mind, was—if any one of these denominations be the Church of Christ, which one is it?" The common point in all these accounts is the possibility that none of the churches could be correct.

29. At this point, an interesting problem occurs with respect to the 1838 account. After telling of his asking the heavenly

visitors which of all the sects was right, Joseph added, in parenthesis, “(for at this time it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong).” While this seems somewhat inconsistent, it may actually reflect the real confusion of the fourteen-year-old Joseph, who did not want to believe, deep in his heart, that there was no “true” church, even though his mind already asked the obvious questions: “Who of all these parties are right? Or are they all wrong together?” (1838). The confusion within the account, then, might reflect the actual experience of a young man who had thought the unthinkable and yet had not let it sink into his soul (or heart) because it was not what he wanted to believe. Certainly the deep, personal emotions described in nearly all the accounts could lead to a desire to join some church, and hence Joseph’s hesitancy to believe that all were wrong. Compare “History of Joseph Smith,” *Times and Seasons*, April 1, 1842, 748, and Joseph Smith—History 1:18. The words in parentheses were published in the *Times and Seasons* as well as in all editions of the Pearl of Great Price down to 1902. In the 1902 edition, the words were deleted and remained so until the 1981 printing, which re-introduced the phrase into the text.

30. We do not know what guided or prompted Joseph, but fortuitously he came to this passage in James.

31. For the best treatment of Joseph Smith’s concept of God, showing that the assumption is overstated that the Prophet’s ideas about God, the Godhead, and divine embodiment migrated over time, see David L. Paulsen, “The Doctrine of Divine Embodiment: Restoration, Judeo-Christian, and Philosophical Perspectives,” *BYU Studies* 35, no. 4 (1995–96): 6–94.

32. As Joseph wrote this line in the 1832 manuscript, he originally wrote “with the spirit of god and *the* opened the heavens” (emphasis added). Perhaps he had intended to write “and he opened the heavens.” Later, Joseph inserted the word “Lord,” the simplest correction of the error, although one that created an ambiguity. But if David could use the word “Lord” in Psalm 110:1, “The Lord said unto my Lord,” to refer first to the Father and then to the Son (see Mark 12:36), so could Joseph.

33. This word also appears in the 1832 account but in the context of Joseph having determined through his own searching of the scriptures and observation of the situation around him that “abominations” and “darkness . . . pervaded the ~~of the~~ minds of mankind.”

34. The term *abomination*, of course, is offensive and jarring to our friends of other faiths. And indeed, it was a very strong word in the vocabulary of Joseph Smith’s America. Webster’s 1828 *Dictionary of the American Language* defines “abomination” as “1. extreme hatred; detestation. 2. The object of detestation, . . . 3. Hence, defilement, pollution, in a physical sense, or evil doctrines and practices, which are moral defilements.” Nevertheless, an “abomination” in the biblical sense can include anything that takes a person away from God or his righteousness. The Bible uses the word *abomination* in connection with a wide range of sin or transgression, including idolatry (Deuteronomy 27:15), sexual transgression (Leviticus 18:22; 20:13), human sacrifice (Deuteronomy 12:31), eating ritually unclean animals (Leviticus 11:10–12; Deuteronomy 14:3–8), witchcraft and divination (Deuteronomy 18:9–14), and dishonest business dealings (Deuteronomy 25:13–16). Proverbs 6:16–19 gives a list of seven things, some more serious than others, that are counted as an abomination unto God: “A proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, an heart that deviseth wicked imaginations, feet that be swift in running to mischief, a false witness that speaketh lies, and he that soweth discord among brethren.” Thus, seeing the creeds as an abomination may be understood in a number of ways, mainly as a shorthand way of referring to the very problems that they had caused, as identified in the First Vision accounts, namely turning people aside from the gospel, teaching incorrect doctrines of men, professing errors and corruptions, and inciting tumult.

35. For further discussions of these and other questions, see Allen, review of Palmer, *Insider’s View of Mormon Origins*, 175–89.



The Sacred Grove in Manchester, New York, where Joseph Smith received the First Vision after years of searching for the true church of God. (Photo by George Edward Anderson, August 13, 1907, Anderson Collections, Church History Library)