

*Chapter Two*

# The Probation of a Teenage Seer

*Joseph Smith's Early Experiences  
with Moroni*

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Millennia before Joseph Smith reached his teen years in rural New York, the God of Israel revealed that he would raise a choice seer from among the descendants of Joseph of Egypt and command him and give him “power to bring forth my word” (see 2 Nephi 3:6–13). Although Joseph Smith was foreordained to be a seer, he had to learn and grow through his life experiences and rise to his calling to bring forth the Lord’s word—the Book of Mormon. His early experience with seer stones seemed to provide some foundation for this later work, and the angel Moroni offered valuable tutoring through a four-year probationary period.

## JOSEPH’S EARLY YEARS

Joseph Smith’s 1838–39 history says that after his First Vision in the spring of 1820, he “continued to pursue [his] common vocation” (Joseph Smith—History 1:27), meaning that he farmed with his father and took odd jobs to supplement the family income. Joseph talked about his teenage struggles and sins and his efforts to overcome them. For instance, an early draft of his manuscript history reads:

During the space of time which intervened between the time I had the vision and the year Eighteen hundred and twenty three, (having been forbidden to join any of the religious sects of the day, and being of very tender years, and persecuted by those who ought to have been my friends, and to have treated me kindly and if they supposed me to be deluded to have endeavoured in a proper and affectionate manner to have reclaimed me) I was left to all kinds of temptations, and mingling with all kinds of society I frequently fell into many foolish errors and displayed the weakness of youth and the corruption of human nature which I am sorry to say led me into divers temptations to the gratification of many appetites offensive in the sight of God.<sup>1</sup>

A few years later, while preparing the history for publication under Joseph's direction, Willard Richards clarified Joseph's confession by deleting some words and by adding the following ones:

In making this confession, no one need suppose me guilty of any great or malignant sins. A disposition to commit such was never in my nature. But I was guilty of levity, and sometimes associated with jovial company, etc., not consistent with that character which ought to be maintained by one who was called of God as I had been. (Joseph Smith—History, 1:28)<sup>2</sup>

Joseph was not guilty of sins that unalterably shaped his destiny, but evidence indicates that he was troubled by a nagging covetousness, complicated by his family often being on the verge of, but never finally attaining, a comfortable living. God had work for Joseph Smith to do, but Satan determined to thwart it. Joseph's autobiographies, his mother's memoir, Oliver Cowdery's historical letters, and Joseph Knight's autobiography enable us to watch the teenager struggle to choose between God's plan for him and Satan's efforts to undermine the acquisition and translation of the gold plates. These records make it possible to observe how God sent a messenger (Moroni) to tutor, chasten, and empower Joseph, finally enabling the vulnerable, unlearned farmer to begin a most marvelous work and a wonder: the translation and publication of the Book of Mormon.

To identify Joseph as a tempted—even at times a foolish—teenager may seem antithetical to the justified praises sung to “the man who communed with Jehovah.”<sup>3</sup> But this is the story of how he became such, so it must first establish what he candidly admitted about his flawed beginnings and need for development.

Aside from his confession above, he wrote in 1832 that many days after his First Vision in 1820, “I fell into transgressions and sinned in many things which brought a wound upon my soul.” He said further, “When I was seventeen years of age I called again upon the Lord and he shewed unto me a heavenly vision for behold an angel of the Lord came and stood before me and it was by night and he called me by name and he said the Lord had forgiven me my sins.”<sup>4</sup>

Joseph’s faith in Jesus Christ, humility, and resulting repentance, including his choice to respond positively to chastisement, suggest why the Lord called Joseph to be the seer to bring forth the Book of Mormon. Relying on the Lord and responding faithfully to his instructions, he overcame these sins and struggles to bring forth a marvelous work indeed.

## CONTEXT FOR JOSEPH SMITH THE SEER

Knowing about Joseph’s activities and surrounding culture between 1820 (when he received the First Vision) and 1823 (when Moroni appeared to him) helps to clarify his growth and experiences with the gold plates.

Joseph’s world was shifting rapidly from an agrarian economy to an industrialized, capitalistic marketplace. For many, that meant opportunity and wealth. But for many others, including the Smith family, it meant one setback after another. Like the markets, churches were becoming more free and open, competing for converts the same way that shoemakers or whiskey distillers were competing for consumers. Many, including Joseph Smith, struggled with the twin developments of market revolution and the multiplication of churches from which to choose. His family experienced these developments as pressure, an escalation of stress and anxiety about both their home economy and their eternal salvation.

This financial stress drove a substantial group of settlers to “an unconquerable expectation of finding buried treasure in the earth.”<sup>5</sup> There is evidence that both Joseph and his father joined in some of the activities of a group of neighborhood treasure seekers who looked for buried riches in nocturnal rituals.<sup>6</sup> For them and many other Christian people, treasure seeking made good sense, though most “respectable” folks, the type Joseph thought ought to have befriended him if they were good Christians, thought treasure seeking was beneath them.<sup>7</sup> But historian Alan Taylor explained why treasure seeking made sense in that time and place: it met the needs of some people who felt pressured by the culture’s demand to get more possessions

and more religion. In other words, treasure seeking promised “both quick wealth and a sense of power over the supernatural world.”<sup>8</sup>

Many treasure seekers appealed to guardian spirits or charted the cycles of the moon to increase their chances of discovering riches. They also “turned increasingly to ‘seer stones’ or ‘peep stones’” in order to find riches.<sup>9</sup> While such a practice may seem odd today, this skepticism is an assumption of modern culture. It has not always been the dominant idea. As the Bible attests, in ancient Israel certain stones were associated with the priestly or prophetic office and considered a means of revelation.<sup>10</sup> The Bible says that Jacob, Moses, and Aaron had powerful rods and that Joseph of Egypt had a cup “whereby indeed he divineth” (Genesis 44:5).<sup>11</sup> In the Book of Mormon, Alma taught his son Helaman a prophecy from the Lord, saying, “I will prepare unto my servant Gazelem, a stone which shall shine forth in darkness unto light” (Alma 37:23). And the Lord prepared two stones for Jared’s brother to bury with his records, stones that could be used to translate (see Ether 3:22–24). Perhaps basing their hopes and ideas on biblical precedents like these, several magician-mathematicians, including Isaac Newton, sought after or used marvelous stones in Renaissance and early modern Europe. John Dee, for example, taught algebra and navigation, sought to commune with angels, and used a translucent stone that has been on display in the British Museum.<sup>12</sup>

Joseph evidently discovered one or more seer stones after his First Vision and before he knelt to pray for forgiveness before Moroni’s first visit in September 1823.<sup>13</sup> There is no reason to reject the basic assertion that Joseph searched for buried treasure using a marvelous stone, even though the claim is made by some of his antagonists. Joseph did not dispute that claim, and people who loved, trusted, and followed him confirmed that he had such a stone.<sup>14</sup> A man who hired Joseph reported that Joseph’s search for a seer stone was inspired by an earlier experience of seeing it through a stone that belonged to a neighbor girl.<sup>15</sup> Another neighbor said that Joseph could see in a stone they found while digging a well.<sup>16</sup> Joseph’s mother also acknowledged his gift of seership, saying that Joseph “was in possession of certain means, by which he could discern things that could not be seen by the natural eye.”<sup>17</sup> Joseph Knight, who employed Joseph in 1826 and who converted shortly after the Church was organized, wrote that Joseph “looked in his glass,” meaning his stone.<sup>18</sup> Brigham Young later used the term *seer stone* to describe this object, called “means” by Lucy and “glass” by Joseph Knight.<sup>19</sup>

However, the most important point here is not the revelatory object, or what the scriptures repeatedly call the “means” (Mosiah 8:18; 28:13; Alma 37; Doctrine and Covenants 8:9; 10:4; 20:8). The point of emphasis here is the gift of revelation itself. As evidenced by the above accounts, Joseph had a gift similar to the one described in this Book of Mormon passage:

A seer is a revelator and a prophet also; and a gift which is greater can no man have. . . . But a seer can know of things which are past, and also of things which are to come, and by them shall all things be revealed, or, rather, shall secret things be made manifest, and hidden things shall come to light, and things which are not known shall be made known by them, and also things shall be made known by them which otherwise could not be known. Thus God has provided a *means* that man, though faith, might work mighty miracles; therefore he becometh a great benefit to his fellow beings. (Mosiah 8:16–18; emphasis added)

Thus Joseph, as a teenager, had the “means” that, through faith, he could “work mighty miracles.” But although he evidently had the ability of seership early on, he was in the process of becoming the Lord’s seer, learning how to apply the gift of revelation (see Doctrine and Covenants 8:2–4).

## MORONI’S INSTRUCTIONS

On September 21, 1823, Joseph went to bed but not to sleep. “I was very conscious,” he later said of that night, “that I had not kept the commandments, and I repented hartily for all my sins and transgression, and humbled myself.”<sup>20</sup> Then light flooded the room, making it brighter than at midday, and an angel appeared, striking, luminous, and standing in the air. Joseph shrank in fear for a moment before the messenger spoke his name, introduced himself as Moroni, and announced that God had work for Joseph to do.<sup>21</sup>

Moroni told Joseph that whoever had the stones and could see in them was a seer, and to Joseph the news was both fascinating and somewhat familiar. He knew that he had the gift of which Moroni spoke because he had already discovered it through his use of seer stones. Now the Lord had sent the angel as a mentor to help Joseph rise to the gift’s innate potential to perform a marvelous work.

Moroni launched his first lesson: “He told me of a sacred record which was written on plates of gold,” Joseph remembered, adding, “I saw in vision the place where they were deposited.”<sup>22</sup> It was the sacred history of a lost

civilization, Christians the Savior had visited, Moroni said, and with it were two stones—means God had prepared for its translation. The golden plates were now concealed in a nearby hill with these seer stones.<sup>23</sup>

Then Moroni “commenced quoting the prophecies of the Old Testament,” first from Malachi, who described the coming day “that shall burn as an oven” and said that the wicked would be left without root or branch. He then made Malachi’s distant prophecy proximate: “I will reveal unto you [Joseph] the Priesthood, by the hand of Elijah the prophet, before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. . . . And he shall plant in the hearts of the children the promises made to the fathers, and the hearts of the children shall turn to their fathers. If it were not so, the whole earth would be utterly wasted at his coming” (see Joseph Smith—History 1:36–39).

How much Joseph Smith understood is not clear, but over time he learned of Moroni’s meaning: God had chosen Joseph to restore the powerful priesthood ordinances in which solemn covenants could bind families to God and, by leading them to eternal lives, fulfill the plan of redemption that this earth was created to facilitate. Otherwise all the effort and energy put forth in creating this earth would be wasted at the Lord’s coming.<sup>24</sup>

That was heady stuff for a seventeen-year-old. And there was more. Moroni quoted from Isaiah chapter 11, which foretells that Christ will come in glory, might, and vengeance to separate the righteous from the wicked. But not before setting “his hand again the second time” and gathering “the outcasts of Israel” by setting up an “ensign for the nations,” a standard, or in other words, a church with a commission to preach the gospel to the whole world.<sup>25</sup>

Moroni continued by quoting Acts 3:22–23, prophesying that all who failed to hear the Lord’s warning voice and gather to his ensign would “be destroyed.” He then cited Joel 2:28–32: “I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions.” Moreover, cataclysms and terrible judgments would be visited upon all who failed to build Zion. In the end, Zion builders alone would be delivered. Moroni told Joseph “that the fullness of the gentiles was soon to come in,” meaning that the large-scale spread of the gospel to all nations loomed imminently in the future. Then, Joseph explains, “[Moroni] quoted many other passages of scripture and offered many explanations which cannot be mentioned here.”<sup>26</sup>

Now, standing midair in Joseph’s room, Moroni explained that Joseph could not have the plates or seer stones yet and warned that if he showed

them to others without permission once he received them, he would be destroyed. Joseph envisioned the hillside in which Moroni deposited the plates over a millennium earlier. Then the light gathered around the messenger and he ascended through a conduit “right up into heaven,” leaving Joseph in a dark, still room, “marvelling greatly at what had been told to me by this extraordinary messenger.”<sup>27</sup>

“I lay musing on the singularity of the scene,” Joseph remembered, “when in the midst of my meditation,” Moroni reappeared. He “again related the very same” message, then added more detail on the “great judgments which were coming upon the earth” before ascending again. “Sleep had fled from my eyes,” Joseph wrote, “and I lay overwhelmed in astonishment at what I had both seen and heard.”<sup>28</sup>

Then Moroni appeared a third time, relayed the same message, and cautioned Joseph “that Satan would try to tempt me (in consequence of the indigent circumstances of my father’s family) to get the plates for the purpose of getting rich, This he forbid me, saying that I must have no other object in view in getting the plates but to glorify God, and must not be influenced by any other motive but that of building his kingdom, otherwise I could not get them.”<sup>29</sup>

Joseph’s mother wrote later that Moroni added “a few words of caution and instruction: thus, that he must beware of covetousness; and he must not suppose the record is to be brought forth with the view of getting gain; for this was not the case; but that it was to bring forth light and intelligence, which had for a long time been lost to the world: and, that when he went to get the plates, he must be on his guard, or his mind would be filled with darkness.”<sup>30</sup>

As scholar Terryl Givens summarized Joseph’s situation, “He was neither to exhibit the plates to anyone nor to think of alleviating his family’s acute impoverishment by selling them” or by selling the book he could publish from them.<sup>31</sup> Seeking fame and fortune—two of the most potent temptations—was explicitly, absolutely forbidden by God’s messenger. Warned against the temptations he would face, Joseph had to choose whether or not he would follow God’s plan. In fact, during his mortal life, Moroni had written to a young Joseph, chosen to translate the sacred records and potentially covetous of the wealth embedded in a stack of precious metal: “The plates . . . are of no worth because of the commandment of the Lord. For he truly saith that no one shall have them to get gain; but the record thereof is of great worth; and whoso shall bring it to light, him will the Lord bless” (Mormon 8:14–16).

When Moroni ascended again, Joseph “was again left to ponder on the strangeness of what [he] had just experienced” but was interrupted by a rooster announcing the break of dawn. Joseph arose and went to work as usual.<sup>32</sup>

## ATTEMPT TO TAKE THE PLATES

Joseph, Alvin, and their father began harvesting together, but Joseph seemed preoccupied. “Joseph,” Alvin told him, “we must keep to work or we shall not get our task done.” Joseph tried to get back to work, but when his father saw how weak he was, he sent Joseph home.<sup>33</sup> “I started with the intention of going to the house,” Joseph wrote, “but, in attempting to cross the fence out of the field where we were, my strength entirely failed me, and I fell helpless on the ground,” unconscious. As he woke, Joseph saw “the same messenger” whom he had seen the night before.<sup>34</sup>

According to Joseph’s mother, Moroni told Joseph the night before to tell his father what he had heard and seen, but Joseph had not.<sup>35</sup> “Why?” the angel asked him. “I was afraid my father would not believe me,” Joseph replied. Moroni then promised that Joseph’s father would believe every word.<sup>36</sup> “I obeyed,” Joseph wrote, tellingly. “I rehearsed the whole matter to him. He replied to me that it was of God, and told me to go and do as commanded by the messenger.”

Joseph reported to a hill, known simply to the Smiths as “a hill of considerable size.” There, near the top, on the west side, Joseph found the stone that concealed the box in which the plates were deposited. Joseph found a tree branch, jammed one end of it “under the edge of the stone, and with a little exertion raised it up.” He remembered, “I looked in and there indeed did I behold the plates, the Urim and Thumim and the Breastplate as stated by the messenger.”<sup>37</sup>

Here Joseph’s manuscript history is terse: “I made an attempt to take them out but was forbidden by the messenger.”<sup>38</sup> Oliver Cowdery wrote in 1835 that Joseph had experienced “the visions of heaven during the night, and also seeing and hearing in open day; but the mind of man is easily turned, if it is not held by the power of God through the prayer of faith,” and as Joseph walked to the hill, “two invisible powers were operating upon his mind . . . one urging the certainty of wealth and ease in this life, [which] had so powerfully wrought upon him” by the time he arrived that the angel’s instructions “had entirely gone from his recollection.” Oliver didn’t blame Joseph. “He was young, and his mind easily turned from correct principles,”



but also, Oliver acknowledged, he was teachable and ready “to be lead into the great work of God, and be qualified to perform it in due time.”<sup>39</sup>

According to Oliver, Joseph “had heard of the power, of enchantment, and a thousand like stories, which held the hidden treasures of the earth, and supposed that physical exertion and personal strength was only necessary to enable him to yet obtain the object of his wish.” Oliver had earlier stated, “On attempting to take possession of the records a shock was produced upon his system, by an invisible power, which deprived him in a measure, of his natural strength.”<sup>40</sup>

Agonizing that he was powerless to take the plates, Joseph cried out to the Lord, “Why can I not obtain them?” Moroni’s reply came: “You have not kept the commandments of the Lord which I gave unto you.” He explained to Joseph how succumbing to temptation could teach him of “the power of the advisory [*sic*],” commanded him to repent, and promised the Lord’s forgiveness if he would. Joseph remembered what he had been taught and began to pray, and the Spirit returned.<sup>41</sup>

Joseph was teachable, and Moroni said to Joseph, “Now I will show you the difference between light and darkness and the operation of a good Spirit and an evil one[.] an evil spirit will try to crowd your mind with every evil and wicked thing to keep every good thought and feeling out of your mind but you must keep your mind always staid upon God that no evil may come into your heart.”<sup>42</sup> According to Oliver Cowdery, Moroni showed Joseph a vision of “the prince of darkness, surrounded by his innumerable train of associates,” and taught that “all this is shown, the good and the evil, the holy and impure, the glory of God and the power of darkness, that you may know hereafter the two powers and never be influenced or overcome by that wicked one.”<sup>43</sup>

So Joseph returned home from the hill empty-handed but full of knowledge. He admitted in his 1832 autobiography, “I had been tempted of the advisory and saught the Plates to obtain riches and kept not the commandme[n]t that I should have an eye single to the Glory of God therefore I was chastened.”<sup>44</sup> According to Lucy, the angel told Joseph “that he could not take them from the place wherein they were deposited, until he had learned to keep the commandments of God,” clarifying that Joseph needed to become “not only willing, but able to do it.”<sup>45</sup>

In his later history, Joseph rendered the story more matter-of-factly and said simply that he learned on that first visit to the hill the following:

[T]he time for bringing them [the plates] forth had not yet arrived, neither would untill four years from that time; but he told me that I should come to that place precisely in one year from that time, and that he would there meet with me, and that I should continue to do so untill the time should come for obtaining the plates. Accordingly as I had been commanded I went at the end of each year, and at each time I found the same messenger there and received instruction and intelligence from him at each of our interviews respecting what the Lord was going to do, and how and in what manner his kingdom was to be conducted in the last days.<sup>46</sup>

Readers of this passage in Joseph's history often assume that he knew at the time that it would be four years before he received the plates, but he did not. All he knew was that the time was not yet, and that he should return in exactly one year and continue faithful until the unspecified time came. Joseph was not simply to pass time until he got the plates regardless of his behavior. He was to prepare himself by gaining experience in keeping the commandments of God and gaining strength to resist temptations; he was to prove himself faithful to the Lord's instructions and get the plates because of his obedience.

## A FOUR-YEAR PROBATION

Joseph's four-year probation was characterized not only by divine visitations and adversarial interferences but also by the vicissitudes of everyday family responsibilities as he sought to make ends meet at home and, later, with his bride, Emma Hale. Throughout these years, God, largely through the angel Moroni, mentored Joseph to fulfill his potential as the seer who would obtain and protect the buried golden plates, translate them through the gift of God, and ultimately shepherd the sacred writings into print.

Joseph farmed and helped his brother Alvin build a respectable middle-class frame home for their aging parents. After a day's work Joseph's family gathered, "all seated in a circle . . . listening in breathless anxiety to the religious teachings of a boy eighteen years of age." He urged them not to tell others, fearing rejection and even violence against him.<sup>47</sup> Covetous neighbors—treasure seekers—might get word and demand the treasure. The Smith family members were to keep confidential that which Moroni had revealed in order to prove themselves trustworthy of obtaining further knowledge. "If we are wise and prudent in that which [is] revealed to us," Joseph taught them, "God is able to make all things known to us." His father

agreed and promised that they would try to live worthily to be so trusted by God.<sup>48</sup>

But life was not without hardship. “On the 15 of Nov[ember 1823],” Lucy remembered, “Alvin was taken very sick.” The family doctor was summoned but unavailable. Another came instead and “administered to him[,] although the patient objected much against it[,] a heavy dose of Calomel.” Alvin soon recognized that he would not survive. He charged Hyrum to finish the frame home and take care of his parents in their old age. He spoke to each of his siblings in turn, telling Joseph, now nearly eighteen, “I am going to die now[.] The distress which I suffer and the sensations that I have tell me my time is very short[.] I want you to be a good boy & do everything that lays in your power to obtain the records[.] Be faithful in receiving instruction and in keeping every commandment that is given you.” After an affectionate farewell to two-year-old Lucy, Alvin died.<sup>49</sup>

By the following spring, 1824, family routines returned to normal. A new preacher in town taught the need for the different denominations to agree and “worship God with one mind and one heart.” Lucy Mack Smith “wished to join them, and [she] tried to persuade [her] husband to do so.” Joseph Sr. attended a few times, and the children—except Joseph—followed Lucy. Joseph assured his mother that he could take his Bible “and go out into the woods and learn more in two hours than you could if you were to go to meeting two years.” Joseph was growing confidently into his calling. He told his mother that it would not hurt her to join, but prophesied that though the leader of the church preached piously, within one year he would take the last cow of a widowed mother of eight to satisfy a debt. Lucy, who had long since perceived that her son had a gift, was even more impressed when the fellow fulfilled Joseph’s prophecy.<sup>50</sup>

Such religion could not satisfy Joseph. Though many came preaching various doctrines, he remained apart, waiting for more instruction by a messenger sent from the presence of God. According to Lucy, Moroni finally told Joseph he could obtain the plates on September 22, 1824, if he would keep them in his hands, take them straight home, and immediately secure them there in a trunk with a good lock and key. The whole family, most of all Joseph, anxiously anticipated that he would return home with them.<sup>51</sup>

He went to the hill on the appointed day, pried up the stone that covered the plates, and looked down on them. He reached down and lifted the plates from their stone box when, according to his mother, “the thought flashed across his mind that there might be something more in the box,” something he could profit from after all. Excited, Joseph laid the plates down to cover

the box, planning to come back later for the rest. When he turned back to pick up the plates, they were gone, “but where he knew not nor did he know by what means it had been taken away.” Alarmed, Joseph knelt and prayed. The angel appeared “and told him that he had not done as he was commanded,” that he was still tempted “to secure some imaginary treasure,” that he was still too easily overcome by the powers of darkness, not yet vigilant enough, not yet motivated solely by the glory of God.<sup>52</sup>

After the rebuke, Moroni allowed Joseph to raise the stone again and see that the plates were safe in their stone box. Joseph reached for them again but was hurled back. The angel left, and Joseph rose and returned to the house, weeping, disappointed, and fearing that his family would no longer believe him.<sup>53</sup>

Joseph was no sooner in the door than his father asked whether he had obtained the plates. “No, Father,” he said. “I could not get them.”

“Did you see them?” his father asked.

“Yes,” replied Joseph, “I saw them, but could not take them.”

“I would have taken them,” his father said earnestly, “if I had been in your place.”

Subdued, Joseph said, “You do not know what you say. I could not get them, for the angel of the Lord would not let me.”<sup>54</sup>

Joseph then related the whole story, causing his parents to fear that he may never qualify to get the plates. “We therefore,” Lucy remembered, “doubled our diligence in prayer and supplication to God, in order that he might be more fully instructed in his duty, and be preserved from all the wiles and machinations of him ‘who lieth in wait to deceive.’”<sup>55</sup> Though it was emotionally painful, Joseph’s 1824 attempt to obtain the plates was yet another learning opportunity that helped train him into a steward of the Book of Mormon plates, and into a seer who could translate the sacred writings inscribed on them.

There are no detailed records of what happened the next September, in 1825. There is evidence, however, that the temptation for Joseph to use his gift for material gain intensified rather than diminished. With Alvin’s death, the burden of finishing the frame home and meeting the annual mortgage payment fell increasingly to Hyrum and, when he married, to Joseph. They scoured the countryside for odd jobs. In October of 1825, Josiah Stowell, a farmer from southeastern New York, enticed Joseph and his father to come work for him. Stowell had, according to Joseph, “heard something of a silver mine having been opened by Spaniards in Harmony, Susquahanah County, State of Pennsylvania, and had previous to my hiring with him been digging



*Joseph Smith Receiving the Plates*, by Kenneth Riley. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

in order if possible to discover the mine.”<sup>56</sup> Stowell had also heard of Joseph’s gift. He had learned, as Lucy put it, “that he was in possession of certain means, by which he could discern things, that could not be seen by the natural eye.” Stowell “offered high wages” for such skill, appealing to the struggling Smith family.<sup>57</sup>

Now Joseph had a dilemma: Should he sell his reputation as a seer for fourteen dollars a month to help his family make the mortgage payment on the farm they had worked awfully hard to improve? It seemed like a harmless decision, and Joseph decided to follow Stowell to Susquehanna

County. But in the winter of 1826, Stowell's nephew, Peter Bridgeman, filed a complaint against Joseph with a justice of the peace in South Bainbridge, New York. Joseph was evidently arrested and tried for disorderly conduct that probably stemmed from using his stone to search for buried treasure. One account of the trial reports that the Smiths were "mortified that the wonderful power which God had so miraculously given . . . should be used only in search of filthy lucre."<sup>58</sup>

The digging stopped after a month, and Joseph Sr. returned home while Joseph Jr. stayed to work for the Knight family of Colesville, New York. According to Joseph Knight Jr., Joseph told the Knights "that he had seen a vision, that a personage had appeared to him and told him where there was a book of ancient date buried." They believed and encouraged Joseph.<sup>59</sup>

While digging for Stowell, Joseph boarded with the family of Isaac Hale in Harmony, where he met their tall, dark-haired daughter, Emma. Encouraged by his parents, Josiah Stowell, and the Knights, Joseph courted Emma and sought her hand. On January 18, 1827, Emma Hale married Joseph Smith in South Bainbridge, New York, in a simple ceremony by a justice of the peace. Emma and Joseph then went directly to Manchester, where they lived with Joseph's parents.<sup>60</sup>

But just as Lucy finished getting the new house ready for their arrival, and while she was thanking the Lord for the "prospect of a quiet and comfortable old age," their contractor came to the door to tell her that he had agreed with the mortgage agent to purchase the home and farm. Friends circulated a petition, protesting the sale. Finally the Smiths persuaded Lemuel Durfee to buy the place and let them continue there. "We were now renters," Lucy remembered, deeply discouraged. Once more their fortunes had failed.<sup>61</sup>

"Soon after this," Lucy wrote, Joseph went to town on an errand for his father. Lucy remembered that "he did not return home until the night was considerably advanced," and she worried because she was "aware that God intended him for a good and important work; consequently we expected that the powers of darkness would strive against him more than any other."<sup>62</sup>

"Joseph, why have you stayed so late," his father asked when he finally arrived. "Father," he answered after a while, "I have had the severest chastisement that I ever had in my life." Joseph's father wished to know who presumed to find fault with his son. "Father," Joseph said, "it was the angel of the Lord. He says I have been negligent that the time has now come when the record should be brought forth and that I must be up and doing that I must set myself about the things which God has commanded me to do

but Father give yourself no uneasiness as to this reprimand for I know what course I am to pursue, and all will be well.”<sup>63</sup>

That summer Emma wrote home, seeking permission to retrieve her clothes, cows, and furniture. Her father agreed, and Joseph set out with a neighbor for Harmony, Pennsylvania. Through tears Isaac Hale accused Joseph of stealing his daughter, pleaded with him to bring her back, and promised to help Joseph get a start in farming. Evidently Joseph wept too and promised to stop using his gift for money and to move to Harmony with Emma. But even as Joseph rolled along in the wagon toward his parents’ home, he knew it would be hard for him. “They will all oppose,” he said to a neighbor. “They want me to look in the stone for them to dig [for] money.” The neighbor testified that “in fact it was as he predicted. They urged him, day after day, to resume his old practice of looking in the stone. He seemed much perplexed as to the course he should pursue.”<sup>64</sup> In that dilemma, Joseph received an ultimatum from Moroni. According to Joseph Knight, during Joseph’s September 1826 meeting with the angel, he learned that “if he would Do right according to the will of God he mite obtain [the plates] the 22nt Day of September Next and if not he never would have them.”<sup>65</sup>

As the time drew near, Joseph Knight and Josiah Stowell made an ostensible business trip upstate in order to be in Manchester on September 22, 1827. At about midnight, Joseph Smith asked his mother if she had a chest with a lock and key. Suspecting his purposes, she fretted that she had nothing of the sort. Joseph assured her all would be well, but Lucy remained sleepless through the night, remembering what she called the “first failure” to return with the plates. Emma appeared in her riding dress and bonnet, and she and Joseph left in Joseph Knight’s wagon. That night Moroni entrusted the plates to Joseph, now age twenty-one.<sup>66</sup> Joseph was still prone to mistakes and some sins even after his probationary period, but clearly he gained the Lord’s trust and Moroni’s confidence. He had faced difficult temptations, overcoming many and repenting when he fell to others. “He had learned to keep the commandments of God” and had become “not only willing, but able” to be the keeper of the sacred record.<sup>67</sup>

The next morning Lucy made breakfast. When Joseph Sr. requested his son’s company, Lucy excused Joseph, who had not yet returned home. Lucy also calmed Joseph Knight when he thought his wagon had been stolen. When Joseph Smith arrived, he assured his mother that all was well but could not resist the chance to prolong the anxiety others felt. After eating breakfast, he called Knight aside, “set his foot on the Bed and his head in his hand and says, ‘Well I am Dissopinted.’ ‘Well,’ says I [Knight], I am sorry.’

‘Well,’ says he [Joseph], ‘I am grateley Dissopinted: it is ten times Better then I expected.’”<sup>68</sup> Joseph had finally obtained the plates, and with them, ostensibly, some relief from the struggle.

## CONCLUSION

Joseph Smith’s teenage journey from 1823 to 1827, from a gifted teenager to the Lord’s chosen seer, was marked by the trials of helping provide for his struggling family, as well as the temptations and subsequent reproof and repentance rooted in the Lord’s efforts to train him to bring forth his word and in the adversary’s attempt to upset that trajectory. Joseph learned humility, penitence, and persistence from his temptations and trials. Moroni chastened him several times, and he responded by striving to repent and improve and become what God knew he could be. Joseph was faced with intense financial pressure within his families—both the family he grew up in and his own new union with Emma—which created a natural desire to provide in the best possible way. Yet he learned to control his passions and desires and to not set his heart on riches.

Joseph’s teenage years show him struggling, choosing, and becoming what he was called to be, all in the context of his assignment to bring forth the Book of Mormon. There is no need to avoid or apologize for Joseph’s confessed foibles. A nurturing God fashioned them into learning experiences that helped Joseph see “the difference between light and darkness and the operation of a good Spirit and an evil one.”<sup>69</sup>

As the summer of 1827 ended, Joseph Smith, still far from perfect, had nevertheless qualified himself to obtain the sacred plates. In short, Joseph had four *years* to “choose . . . this *day*” whom he would serve (see Joshua 24:15; emphasis added). He had faced dilemmas, been sorely tempted, been rebuked by an angel, and now, at last, reached a turning point in his life as the Lord’s seer. Elder Dallin H. Oaks described this process. He said that “no prophet is free from human frailty, especially before he is called to devote his life to the Lord’s work. Line upon line, young Joseph Smith expanded his faith and understanding and his spiritual gifts matured, until he stood with power and stature as the Prophet of the Restoration.”<sup>70</sup>

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Steven C. Harper, “The Probation of a Teenage Seer: Joseph Smith’s Early Experiences with Moroni,” in *The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon: A Marvelous Work and a Wonder*, ed. Dennis L. Largey, Andrew H. Hedges, John Hilton III, and Kerry Hull (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015), 23–42.

## NOTES

1. In *The Joseph Smith Papers, Histories*, 1:220–21 (hereafter *JSP*, H1); original spelling and punctuation preserved in all *JSP* references.
2. *JSP*, H1:221n55.
3. William W. Phelps, “Praise to the Man,” *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 27.
4. *JSP*, H1:13–14.
5. Alan Taylor, “The Early Republic’s Supernatural Economy: Treasure Seeking in the American Northeast, 1780–1830,” *American Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 7.
6. See “Appendix 1: Agreement of Josiah Stowell and Others, 1 November 1825,” in *JSP, Documents*, 1:345–52. For additional evaluation of the agreement, see Larry C. Porter, “A Study of the Origins of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the States of New York and Pennsylvania, 1816–1831” (PhD diss., Brigham Young University, 1971), 48–49.
7. For example, in 1831 a Palmyra newspaper reported, “The MANIA of money digging soon began rapidly to diffuse itself through many parts of this country; men and women without distinction of age or sex became marvellous wise in the occult sciences, many dreamed, and others saw visions disclosing to them deep in the bowels of the earth, rich and shining treasures, and to facilitate those *mighty* mining operations . . . divers devices and implements were invented, and although the SPIRIT was always able to retain his precious charge, these discomfited as well as deluded beings would on a succeeding night return to their toil, not in the least doubting that success would eventually attend their labors.” *Reflector* (Palmyra, NY), February 1, 1831.
8. Taylor, “Supernatural Economy,” 8. More evidence for and analysis of this idea are in Mark Ashurst-McGee, “A Pathway to Prophethood: Joseph Smith Junior as Rodsman, Village Seer, and Judeo-Christian Prophet” (master’s thesis, Utah State University, 2000).
9. Taylor, “Supernatural Economy,” 10.
10. The best study of this subject is Cornelius Van Dam, *The Urim and Thummim: A Means of Revelation in Ancient Israel* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 216.
11. See Genesis 30; Exodus 7, 14. For more on the gift of Aaron in latter-day scriptures, see Dennis L. Largey, ed., *Doctrine and Covenants Reference Companion* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 2012), s.v. “Gift of Aaron.”
12. See Peter French, *John Dee: The World of an Elizabethan Magus* (London: Routledge, 1984).
13. All of the evidence for this claim is presented and analyzed carefully in Ashurst-McGee, “Pathway to Prophethood.” The largest collection of documents relative to Joseph Smith’s treasure seeking includes several controversial statements by neighbors and some acquaintances of the Smith family who believed that Joseph’s ability to discern involved a stone or stones. Many of these statements were gathered in

- 1833 by a man named Doctor Philastus Hurlbut, an excommunicated Latter-day Saint who was antagonistic to Joseph Smith and the Church. The statements he gathered were published by another critic, Eber D. Howe, in *Mormonism Unveiled* (Painesville, OH: E. D. Howe, 1834), one of the earliest books critical of the Church. Scholarly analysts of the statements have made strong arguments for and against their reliability. For example, Richard L. Anderson argued against the reliability of the statements in “Joseph Smith’s New York Reputation Reappraised,” *BYU Studies* 10, no. 3 (Spring 1970): 283–314. Rodger I. Anderson argued for the general reliability of the statements in *Joseph Smith’s New York Reputation Reexamined* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990). Marvin S. Hill evaluated the strengths and weaknesses of these arguments in his review of Rodger I. Anderson’s book in *BYU Studies* 30, no. 4 (Fall 1990): 70–74.
14. See editorial, November 1837, Far West, Missouri, *Elders’ Journal* 1 (November 1837): 27–29; editorial, July 1838, Far West, Missouri, *Elders’ Journal* 1 (July 1838): 42–44; and testimony reportedly given by Joseph Smith before justice of the peace Albert Neely in March 1826, according to William D. Purple, “Joseph Smith, The Originator of Mormonism,” *Chenango Union* (Norwich, NY) 30, no. 33 (May 2, 1877).
  15. See testimony reportedly given by Joseph Smith, according to Purple, “Joseph Smith, The Originator of Mormonism”: “He [Joseph Smith] said when he was a lad, he heard of a neighboring girl some three miles from him, who could look into a glass and see anything however hidden from others; that he was seized with a strong desire to see her and her glass; that after much effort he induced his parents to let him visit her. He did so, and was permitted to look in the glass, which was placed in a hat to exclude the light. He was greatly surprised to see but one thing, which was a small stone, a great way off. It soon became luminous, and dazzled his eyes, and after a short time it became as intense as the mid-day sun. . . . This singular circumstance occupied his mind for some years, when he left his father’s house, and with his youthful zeal traveled west in search of this luminous stone. . . . After traveling some one hundred and fifty miles he found himself at the mouth of the creek. He did not have the glass with him, but he knew its exact location. He borrowed an old ax and a hoe, and repaired to the tree. With some labor and exertion he found the stone, carried it to the creek, washed and wiped it dry, sat down on the bank, placed it in his hat, and discovered that time, place and distance were annihilated; that all intervening obstacles were removed, and that he possessed one of the attributes of Deity, an All-Seeing-Eye. He arose with a thankful heart, carried his tools to their owner, turned his feet towards the rising sun, and sought with weary limbs his long deserted home.”
  16. See Willard Chase’s statement in Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 240–48.
  17. Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1845, MS 2049, handwriting of Howard Coray and Martha Jane Knowlton Coray, [95], Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City (hereafter CHL).
  18. Dean C. Jessee, ed., “Joseph Knight’s Recollection of Early Mormon History,” *BYU Studies* 17, no. 1 (1976): 29–58 (pdf version, [byustudies.byu.edu](http://byustudies.byu.edu)).
  19. “History of Brigham Young,” *Deseret News*, March 10, 1858, 3. For more about Joseph Smith’s use of seer stones, see chapter 4 in the present volume.
  20. *JSP, Journal*, 1:88–89 (hereafter *JSP*, J1).
  21. *JSP*, H1:220–30.
  22. *JSP*, J1:88–89.

23. See *JSP*, H1:13–14.
24. See *JSP*, H1:220–30.
25. See Isaiah 11; and *JSP*, H1:220–30.
26. *JSP*, H1:224.
27. *JSP*, H1:226.
28. *JSP*, H1:220–30.
29. *JSP*, H1:230.
30. Lucy Mack Smith, *History*, 1845, p. [82]. See *JSP*, H1:69, 74–75.
31. Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 13. See *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate*, April 1835, 157.
32. *JSP*, H1:230–31.
33. Lucy Mack Smith, *History*, 1844–1845, handwriting of Martha Jane Knowlton Coray and Howard Coray, book 3, p. [11], CHL.
34. *JSP*, H1:230–32.
35. See Lucy Mack Smith, *History*, 1845, p. [82].
36. Lucy Mack Smith, *History*, 1845, p. [83].
37. *JSP*, H1:232.
38. *JSP*, H1:232.
39. *JSP*, H1:82; see also p. 76.
40. *JSP*, H1:82–83.
41. *JSP*, H1:14; see also pp. 82–83.
42. Lucy Mack Smith, *History*, 1844–1845, book 3, pp. [11–12].
43. *JSP*, H1:83; compare Moses 1.
44. *JSP*, H1:14.
45. Lucy Mack Smith, *History*, 1845, p. [85].
46. *JSP*, H1:232–34.
47. Lucy Mack Smith, *History*, 1844–1845, book 4, p. [1].
48. Lucy Mack Smith, *History*, 1844–1845, book 4, p. [1].
49. Lucy Mack Smith, *History*, 1844–1845, book 4, pp. [3–5].
50. Lucy Mack Smith, *History*, 1844–1845, book 4, pp. [7–8].
51. See Lucy Mack Smith, *History*, 1844–1845, book 4, p. [2].
52. Lucy Mack Smith, *History*, 1844–1845, book 4, p. [2].
53. See Lucy Mack Smith, *History*, 1845, p. [89]; and Lucy Mack Smith, *History*, 1844–1845, book 4, p. [3].
54. Lucy Mack Smith, *History* 1845, p. [89]; see Lucy Mack Smith, *History*, 1844–1845, book 4, p. [3].
55. Lucy Mack Smith, *History* 1845, p. [89]; see Lucy Mack Smith, *History*, 1844–1845, book 4, p. [3].
56. *JSP*, H1:234.
57. Lucy Mack Smith, *History*, 1845, p. [95].
58. Purple, “Joseph Smith, the Originator of Mormonism.” There are five different contradictory accounts of Joseph’s appearance before the justice of the peace, published anywhere from five to fifty-seven years after the event. Only the one cited above claims to be the record of an eyewitness, a fellow named William Purple, who wrote that he kept the records for the justice of the peace. This account includes quite a bit of testimony reportedly from Joseph and claims that he was discharged, meaning released without being cleared or condemned.

59. Joseph Knight Jr., as quoted in Larry C. Porter, "The Colesville Branch and the Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies* 10, no. 3 (Spring 1970): 369.
60. See *JSP*, H1:236–37.
61. See Lucy Mack Smith, *History*, 1845, p. [98]; and Lucy Mack Smith, *History*, 1844–1845, book 4, p. [11].
62. Lucy Mack Smith, *History*, 1844–1845, book 5, pp. [4–5].
63. Lucy Mack Smith, *History*, 1844–1845, book 5, p. [5].
64. Peter Ingersoll Statement, December 2, 1833, in Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 232–37, 248–49.
65. Jesse, "Joseph Knight's Recollection," *BYU Studies* 17, no. 1 (Fall 1976): 33.
66. Lucy Mack Smith, *History*, 1844–1845, book 5, p. [6].
67. Lucy Mack Smith, *History*, 1845, p. [85].
68. Jesse, "Joseph Knight's Recollection," 33.
69. Lucy Mack Smith, *History*, 1844–1845, book 3, pp. [11–12].
70. Dallin H. Oaks, "Recent Events Involving Church History and Forged Documents," *Ensign*, October 1987.