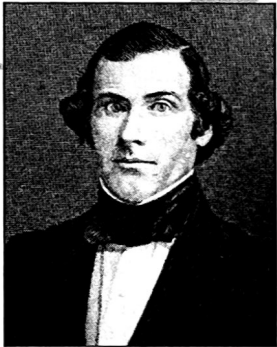


Confirming Witnesses of the First Vision

By Milton V. Backman, Jr.



Orson Pratt

In an article which appeared in the January 1985 issue of the *ENSIGN*, we discussed four written descriptions by the Prophet Joseph Smith of the vision he had in 1820 near Palmyra, New York, in which he was visited by the Father and the Son.¹ This article is an extension of that summary and considers accounts of the First Vision given by contemporaries of Joseph Smith, who, they said, related the information to them personally. These contemporary accounts are of interest because they harmonize with and include all the major concepts found in Joseph's written statements on the First Vision. As such, they provide a confirming testimony of one of the most remarkable visions in the history of mankind.

In 1834, one year following the organization of the Pontiac (Michigan) Branch, Joseph Smith and several witnesses to the Book of Mormon bore powerful affirmations to the branch members of their spiritual experiences. While summarizing the Prophet's testimony, Edward Stevenson, a convert who attended these meetings, reminisced, "The Prophet testified with great power concerning the visit of the Father and Son, and the conversation he had with them. Never before did I feel such power as was manifested on these occasions."²



Orson Hyde

Many others who were either close associates of Joseph Smith or who interviewed him also declared that the Prophet informed them of that sacred experience. These contemporaries bore witness that Joseph identified the personages who appeared to him and that he told them of the message he received from the Father and Son.

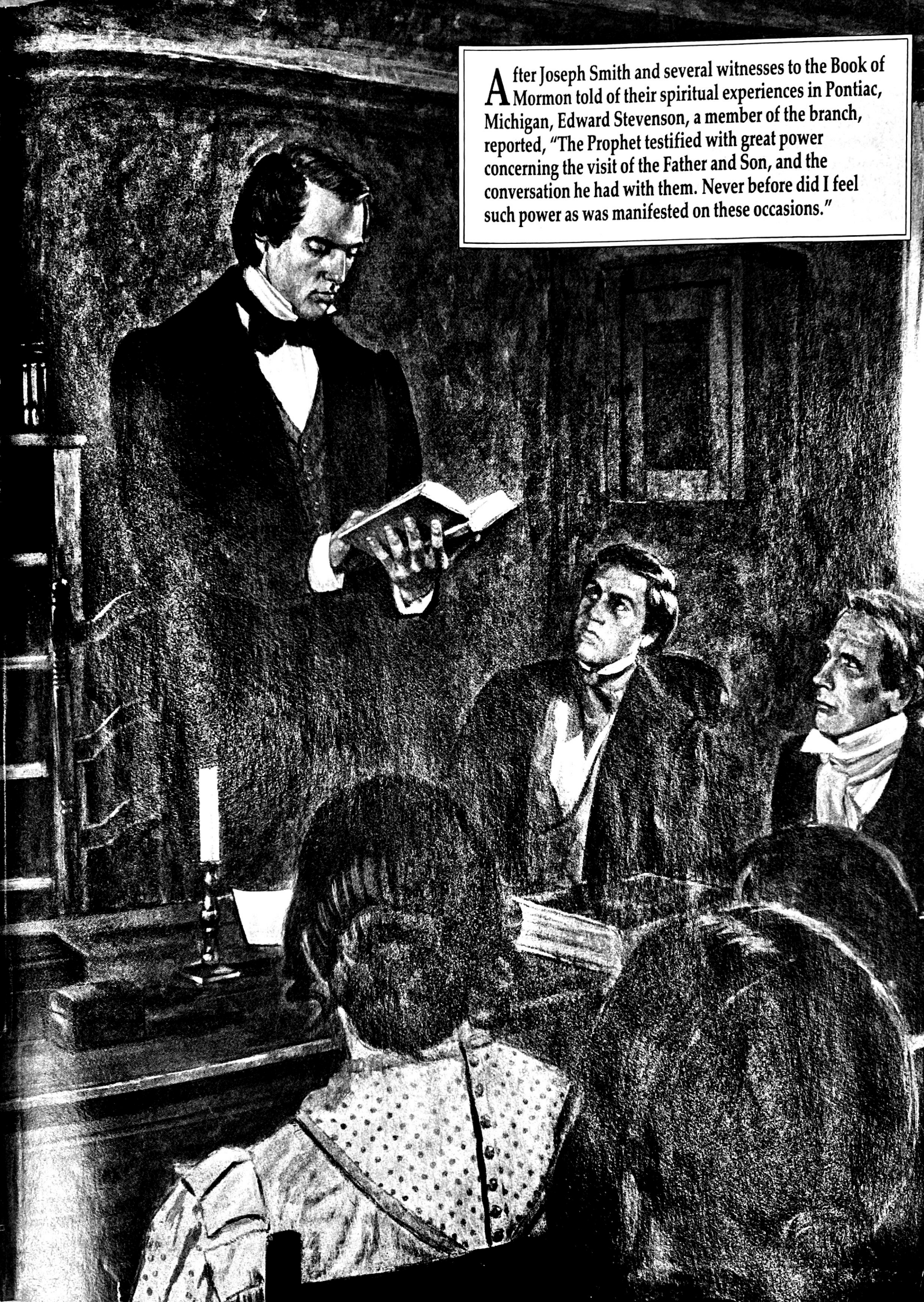
Orson Pratt's Accounts

An early convert who may have referred to that historical event more frequently in his sermons and writings than any other contemporary of Joseph Smith was Orson Pratt. Throughout the decade of the 1830s and during the winter of 1839–40, Orson Pratt was one of the Prophet's most attentive students. Shortly after his baptism in September 1830, the nineteen-year-old convert traveled over two hundred miles to meet the Prophet, who, in December of that year, ordained him an elder. When Joseph moved to Kirtland, Ohio, Orson Pratt followed. While there, he lived for nearly two months in the



John Taylor

After Joseph Smith and several witnesses to the Book of Mormon told of their spiritual experiences in Pontiac, Michigan, Edward Stevenson, a member of the branch, reported, "The Prophet testified with great power concerning the visit of the Father and Son, and the conversation he had with them. Never before did I feel such power as was manifested on these occasions."



Prophet's home and worked with him. He was one of the early members of the School of the Prophets and spent many hours in 1833 listening as the Prophet unfolded to the school the history and doctrines of the restored faith. In the early 1830s he traveled with Joseph to western Missouri and in 1835 was called to be an Apostle of the Lord.

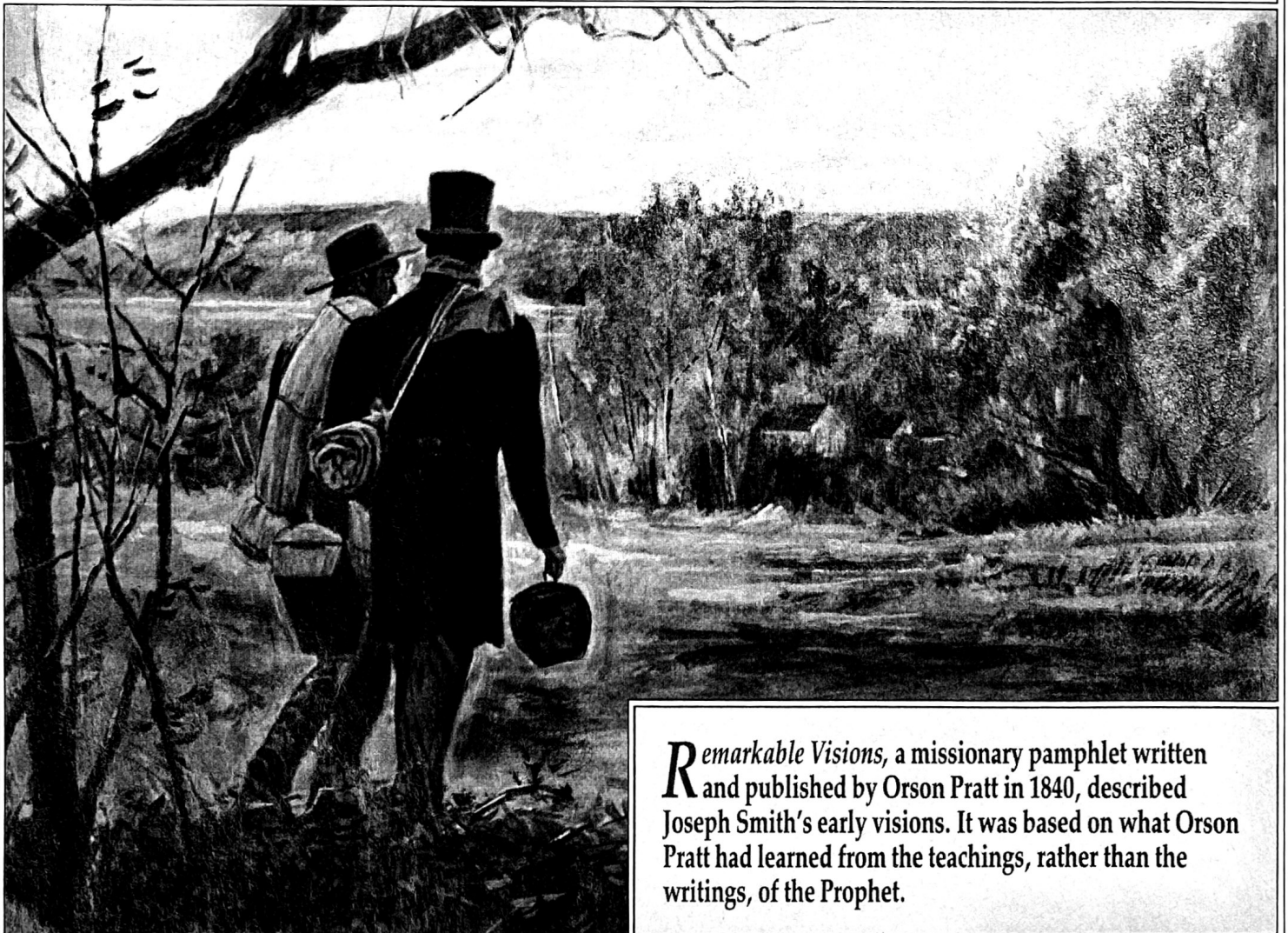
Orson Pratt's contact with Joseph Smith continued in 1839 and early 1840. During the late spring and early summer of 1839, Orson lived adjacent to the Mississippi River not far from the residence of Joseph Smith. Later that year he served a brief mission with the Prophet in Philadelphia before traveling on to Edinburgh, Scotland, where he preached about nine months, "raised up a Church of over 200 Saints . . . [and] published a pamphlet now entitled *REMARKABLE VISIONS*."³

This missionary pamphlet was published in the fall of 1840 and contained the first account of the First Vision to appear in print.⁴ It included a description of Joseph Smith's early visions, from his initial theophany near Palmyra to the early appearances of Moroni and his experience with the three witnesses to the Book of Mormon. Elder Pratt reprinted the work twice in 1841 and again in 1842 (called the third American edition). In the American editions, it was enlarged to include an account of the restoration of the priesthood.

A comparison of the pamphlet with Joseph Smith's historical writings reveals that most major concepts included in the Prophet's histories (especially the 1838 account) were included in Elder Pratt's work. Since there are no direct quotations in the Pratt pamphlet, and since the literary style is very different from Joseph's pre-1840 writings, Orson Pratt undoubtedly based his history on what he had learned from the teachings rather than the writings of Joseph.

In a sermon delivered in 1859 in which he discussed the First Vision, Elder Pratt said, "I will give you a brief history as it came from his own mouth. I have often heard him relate it."⁵ Consequently, by publishing this pamphlet, Orson Pratt not only gave to the world an excellent summary of Joseph Smith's early visions but also bore witness to their authenticity.

The following selection, with original spelling and punctuation retained, is from the 1840 edition of "Remarkable Visions." Concepts similar to statements included in Joseph Smith's writings are reproduced in italics, and after each statement (in parentheses) is the approximate date when Joseph Smith first recorded that information himself. The relatively few differences in the accounts are probably due either to literary embellishments or to details related to Orson that were never recorded by Joseph.⁶



Remarkable Visions, a missionary pamphlet written and published by Orson Pratt in 1840, described Joseph Smith's early visions. It was based on what Orson Pratt had learned from the teachings, rather than the writings, of the Prophet.

"Mr Joseph Smith, jun., who made the following important discovery, was born in the town of Sharon, Windsor county, Vermont, on the 23d of December, a.d. 1805. When ten years old, his parents with their family, moved to Palmyra, New York (1838); in the vicinity of which he resided for about eleven years, the latter part in the town of Manchester. Cultivating the earth for a livelihood was his occupation, in which he employed the most of his time. His advantages, for acquiring literary knowledge, were exceedingly small; hence, his education was limited to a slight acquaintance with two or three of the common branches of learning. He could read without much difficulty, and write a very imperfect hand; and had a very limited understanding of the ground rules of arithmetic (1832)⁷. These were his highest and only attainments; while the rest of those branches, so universally taught in the common schools throughout the United States, were entirely unknown to him.

Background of the First Vision

"When somewhere about fourteen or fifteen years old, he began seriously to reflect upon the necessity of being prepared for a future state of existence. . . . 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 (1832). . . . If he went to the religious denominations to seek information, each one pointed to its particular tenets, saying—"This is the way, walk ye in it?" (1838) . . . It, also, occurred to his mind, that God was not the author of but one doctrine, and therefore could not acknowledge but one denomination as his church (1842); and that such denomination must be a people who believe, and teach, that one doctrine (whatever it may be,) and build upon the same. He then reflected upon the immense number of doctrines, now, in the world, which had given rise to many hundreds of different denominations. *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?* (1838) . . . He, accordingly, commenced perusing the sacred pages of the Bible, with sincerity, believing the things that he read. His mind soon caught hold the following passage:—"If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him."—James i.5 (1838) . . . It was like a light shining forth in a dark place. . . . He, now, saw that if he inquired of God, there was, not only, a possibility, but a probability; yea, more, a certainty, that he should obtain a knowledge, which, of all the doctrines, was the doctrine of Christ; and, which, of all the churches, was the church of Christ. *He, therefore, retired to a secret place, in a grove but a short distance from his father's house and knelt down (1838), and began to call upon the Lord (1832, 1838). At first he was severely tempted by the powers of darkness, which endeavoured to overcome him; but he continued to seek for deliverance, until darkness gave way from his mind.* (1838) . . . And, while thus pouring out his soul,

anxiously desiring an answer from God, he, at length, saw a very bright and glorious light in the heavens above; which, at first, seemed to be at a considerable distance. . . . He continued praying, while the light appeared to be gradually descending towards him; and, as it drew nearer, it increased in brightness, and magnitude, 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; but, perceiving that it did not produce that effect, he was encouraged with the hopes of being able to endure its presence. It continued descending, slowly, until it rested upon the earth, and he was enveloped in the midst of it. 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;

The 1820 Vision

"And he was enraptured in a heavenly vision, and saw two glorious personages (1838, 1842) who exactly resembled each other in their features or likeness (1842). He was informed, that his sins were forgiven (1832). He was also informed upon the subjects, which had for some time previously agitated his mind, viz.—that all the religious denominations were believing in incorrect doctrines (1832, 1838, 1842); and, consequently that none of them was acknowledge of God, as his church and kingdom (1832). And he was expressly commanded, to go not after them (1838); and he received a promise that the true doctrine—the fulness of the gospel, should, at some future time, be made known to him (1842); after which, the vision withdrew, leaving his mind in a state of calmness and peace, indescribable (1832)."

On subsequent occasions he declared that it was the Father and the Son who spoke to Joseph during his First Vision. While serving as editor of the *Millennial Star*, Orson Pratt wrote an article entitled "Are the Father and Son Two Distinct Persons?" In this work, Elder Pratt included scriptural evidences and events from Church history to support his belief in the separate nature of these members of the Godhead. While using Church history as a tool to teach doctrine, Elder Pratt declared that Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon saw Christ "on the right hand of God" in February 1832 (D&C 76) and that Joseph Smith saw "both the Father and Son" during his First Vision.⁸

In sermons delivered after he migrated to the Great Basin, Elder Pratt informed others of sacred experiences related to him by the Prophet. In an 1859 sermon, Orson Pratt declared Joseph Smith told him that when he was between fourteen and fifteen years of age "he beheld a vision . . . [and] saw two glorious personages; and one, pointing to the other, said, 'Behold my beloved son! hear ye him.' Then he was instructed and informed in regard to many things

pertaining to his own welfare, and commanded not to unite himself to any of these churches. He was also informed that at some future time the fulness of the Gospel should be made manifest to him, and he should be an instrument in the hands of God of laying the foundations of the kingdom of God."⁹

Orson Hyde's Testimony

Another close friend of Joseph Smith who published a pamphlet describing the First Vision before the Prophet published his historical writings was Orson Hyde. Throughout most of the 1830s, Elder Hyde lived in Kirtland near the Prophet's home, and following his baptism on 30 October 1831, he was called to be a missionary. His first two companions were Joseph's brothers, Hyrum and Samuel.

In 1833 he was invited by the Prophet to be one of the teachers in the School of the Prophets. Because of his faith and ability, he was also called in 1835 to be one of the original members of the Council of Twelve Apostles. His association with the Prophet was enhanced when he had several opportunities during the 1830s to travel with the Prophet.

After gathering with other Saints in Nauvoo, Elder Hyde was called on a mission to Palestine, where he dedicated the Holy Land for the gathering of the Jews. While Elder Hyde was returning home in August 1842, he published a missionary pamphlet in Frankfurt, Germany, entitled, *A Cry From the Wilderness, A Voice From the Dust of the Earth*.¹⁰ Although a principle source for this work was Orson Pratt's *Remarkable Visions*, the Hyde tract also includes an introduction and forward not found in the earlier work and contains more detailed explanations.

In his *Cry from the Wilderness*, Elder Hyde described Joseph's search for truth, his introduction to James's admonition on prayer, his prayer in the woods near his father's house, the presence of the adversary, and the appearance of light following the darkness. While describing Joseph's vision, Elder Hyde wrote that Joseph saw two glorious personages who resembled each other in stature and likeness. They informed him that he should not join any religious party, for they had all erred concerning doctrine, and that none of them was considered by God to be his church and kingdom. He was directed to wait until a later date when the true doctrine of Christ and the fulness of the gospel would be revealed to him. After the vision closed, Elder Hyde concluded, Joseph's soul was filled with peace and calmness.

Other Descriptions of the First Vision

Latter-day Saints were not the only contemporaries who described the First Vision as related to them by Joseph Smith. A nonmember editor of the *Pittsburg Gazette* interviewed the Prophet in Nauvoo,

then published an article on him. The editor discussed the reformation that preceded the First Vision, the young boy's quest to know which church to join, and Joseph's compliance with James's admonition on prayer. Then he described the First Vision as related by Joseph Smith:

"I saw a light," he quoted Joseph Smith as saying, "and then a glorious personage in the light, and then another personage, and the first personage said to the second, Behold my beloved Son, hear him.—I then addressed this second person, saying, O Lord, what Church shall I join? He replied, 'don't join any of them, they are all corrupt.'"¹¹

Alexander Neibaur, a convert who gathered with the Saints in Nauvoo, described in his journal what Joseph told him during a dinner conversation. Brother Neibaur wrote that the Prophet said he had been "struck" by a passage on prayer in the Bible and so went into the woods to pray. After his tongue cleaved temporarily to the roof of his mouth, he saw a fire which gradually drew nearer to him. He "saw a personage in the fire, light complexion, blue eyes. . . . [Another] person came to the side of the first. Mr. Smith then asked, must I join the Methodist Church. No, they are not my People, [they] have gone astray. There is none that doeth good, not one, but this is my Beloved Son harken ye him."¹²

President John Taylor was another contemporary "intimately acquainted" with Joseph who described the First Vision as it was related to him by the Prophet. "I have travelled with him [Joseph Smith]," he wrote. "I have been with him in private and in public; I have associated with him in councils of all kinds; I have listened hundreds of times to his public teachings, and his advice to his friends and associates of a more private nature. I have been at his house and seen his deportment in his family. . . . I was with him . . . when he died, when he was murdered in Carthage. . . . I testify before God, angels, and men that he was a good, honourable, virtuous man . . . that his private and public character was unimpeachable—and that he lived and died as a man of God."¹³

Recalling that which Joseph told him, Elder Taylor said: "I can tell you what he told me about it. He said that he was very ignorant of the ways, designs and purposes of God, and knew nothing about them; he was a youth unacquainted with religious matters or the systems and theories of the day. He went to the Lord, having read James' statement. . . . He believed that statement and went to the Lord and asked him, and the Lord revealed himself to him together with his Son Jesus, and, pointing to the latter, said: 'This is my beloved Son, hear him.' He then asked in regard to the various religions with which he was surrounded. He enquired which of them was right, for he wanted to know the right way and to walk in it. He was told that none of them was right, that they had all departed from the right way."¹⁴

Elder Taylor not only declared that he personally



After interviewing Joseph Smith in Nauvoo, a nonmember editor of the *Pittsburg Gazette* published an article which discussed the First Vision and the events leading up to it.

learned from Joseph Smith the basic truths unfolded during the First Vision, but proclaimed that Joseph Smith's 1838 history discussing events preceding the organization of the Church was accurate.

In October 1880, during the Church's Fiftieth Semi-annual General Conference, members of the Church sustained Elder Taylor as prophet, seer, and revelator. Following this sustaining, President George Q. Cannon, First Counselor in the First Presidency, acting under the direction of President Taylor, presented to the assembly a new edition of the Doctrine and Covenants and the Pearl of Great Price, which contained Joseph Smith's 1838 account of the First Vision. He proposed that those present accept the books and their contents "as from God, and binding upon us as a people and as a Church." Then President Joseph F. Smith, Second Counselor in the First Presidency, moved that the membership accept the books as containing "revelations from God to the Church." By unanimous vote, leaders and members agreed that the First Vision and other material in the Pearl of Great Price and the Doctrine and Covenants was inspired of God.¹⁵

By this sustaining action, the First Presidency, the twelve Apostles (most of whom had been personally acquainted with Joseph Smith), and other Church members testified that the portion of Joseph Smith's 1838 history that described his 1820 vision was a reliable description of an actual historical event.

From 1830 to the present, General Authorities and other Latter-day Saints throughout the world have borne firm testimony of the authenticity of Joseph Smith's teachings and writings regarding the First Vision. President Spencer W. Kimball, for example, has declared that "Nothing short of this total vision to Joseph could have served the purpose to clear away the mists of the centuries. Merely an impression, a hidden voice, a dream could [not] have dispelled the old vagaries and misconceptions.

"The God of all these worlds and the Son of God, the Redeemer, our Savior, in person attended this boy. He saw the living God. He saw the living Christ.

"Of all the great events of the century, none compared with the first vision of Joseph Smith."¹⁶ □

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NOTES

1. Accounts were written in 1832, 1835, 1838, and 1842. The Prophet did not publish his 1832 account of the experience, and it remained as a draft only. The 1835 account was recorded in his Kirtland diary, but the Prophet did not include it in his published *History of the Church*. The 1838 account was part of a history which Joseph Smith initiated in the spring of 1838 and completed sometime before November 1839. This history was originally published in *The Times and Seasons* in 1842 and was included in the 1878 edition of the Pearl of Great Price which was accepted by the Church as scripture in 1880. The 1842 account, known as the Wentworth Letter, was the last prepared by the Prophet. It was published in March 1842 shortly before his 1838 history commenced publication in serial form.

2. Joseph Grant Stevenson, "The Life of Edward Stevenson," (M.A. thesis, Brigham Young University, 1955), pp. 19-20; Edward Stevenson, *Reminiscences of Joseph, the Prophet, and the Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City, 1893), p. 4.

3. "History of Orson Pratt," *Millennial Star*, 11 Feb. 1865, p. 88.

4. A reference to the publication of this missionary pamphlet "by Orson Pratt" appeared in Joseph Smith's history under the date December 1840 with the following notation: "Edinburgh, September." *History of the Church*, 4:254.

5. *Journal of Discourses*, 7:220.

6. Joseph Smith's accounts of the First Vision have been published in the Appendix of Milton V. Backman, Jr., *Joseph Smith's First Vision* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980).

7. Joseph Smith wrote in his 1832 history that because of poverty, he was forced to labor hard to help support his family and he and his brothers and sisters were deprived of the benefits of an education. "Suffice it to say," he added, "I was merely instructed in reading writing and the ground rules of Arithmetic which constituted my whole literary acquirements." (In *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, comp. Dean C. Jessee, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1984, p. 4.)

8. *Millennial Star*, 15 Sept. 1849, pp. 281-84; 15 Oct. 1849, pp. 309-12.

9. *Journal of Discourses*, 7:220-21.

10. There are different translations of the title and contents of the Hyde pamphlet. A copy of this publication is in the Church Historical Department.

11. *New York Spectator*, 23 Sept. 1843.

12. Journal of Alexander Neibaur, 24 May 1844, LDS Church Historical Department.

13. *Three Nights' Public Discussion* (Liverpool: John Taylor, 1850), pp. 23-24.

14. *Journal of Discourses*, 21:161.

15. *Millennial Star*, 15 Nov. 1880, pp. 723-24.

16. Spencer W. Kimball, *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, ed. Edward L. Kimball (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), pp. 428, 430.