

# RECORDING THE FIRST VISION: JOSEPH SMITH'S DECISION TO SHARE HIS VISIONARY EXPERIENCES



*By Robin Scott Jensen*

In recent years, *Saints: Volume 1*, the Joseph Smith Papers, *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith*, and other Church publications have made extraordinary amounts of information about Joseph Smith's history and teachings easily accessible. The response by Latter-day Saints has been impressive. Millions of members have used these resources to be inspired and informed. Appropriately, our interest is usually in what Joseph Smith said or did—that is, we focus on the *content* of the historical records.

Investigating the *context* of historical records—that is, when, why, how, and by whom they were created—can often help us understand the content better. For example, if you are reading a statement from Joseph Smith, it can make a significant difference whether he wrote the document himself, spoke to the Saints with a clerk capturing his words, or asked a scribe to compose a letter. Looking at context also helps us appreciate the time, effort, and expense that went into creating these documents. The records from which we learn Joseph's history did not simply spring into existence. Someone had to decide that something was worth documenting, and—in a time when paper, ink, and pens were not as affordable as they are now—had to buy the materials and write down the words; and other people had to value, preserve, and pass down those

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records. Given these factors and Joseph's poverty, culture, and education level, it is remarkable how many records were created.

Consider the story of the First Vision. For members of the Church, the details of what happened when God and Jesus Christ appeared to Joseph on that spring day in 1820 are familiar. Such detail comes to us because Joseph relayed the experience both verbally and in writing. Yet he didn't record an account of the vision on paper until 1832, twelve years after the event.<sup>1</sup> Why?

Joseph seemed to be averse at first to even speaking of the First Vision and his other heavenly manifestations. This may have been because soon after he experienced the vision, he shared it with a minister who rejected it.<sup>2</sup> Because of this rejection, at least according to one scholar, Joseph did not even tell his immediate family about the First Vision.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, George A. Smith, Joseph's cousin, recalled a letter his family received from the young prophet while he was translating the Book of Mormon. According to George A.'s recollection, Joseph called his cousin's family to repentance and denounced the religions of the day but said nothing of his heavenly visions.<sup>4</sup>

Joseph was reluctant to share the First Vision and the visitations of the angel Moroni with the larger public as well. The preface to the first edition of the Book of Mormon—a perfect forum for Joseph to explain the divine context surrounding the discovery and translation of the book—makes no mention of Moroni's visits.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps taking cues from their son, Joseph's parents mirrored his reticence. When Oliver Cowdery boarded with Joseph Smith Sr. and Lucy Mack Smith in late 1828 (at a time when Joseph and Emma were living in Pennsylvania), he showed an interest in the stories then circulating about Joseph and the golden plates. Lucy and her husband refused to tell Cowdery anything “for a long time” until he finally gained their trust.<sup>6</sup>

Joseph's reluctance to share his heavenly visitations with others seems to be a major reason why he did not give an account in writing for so long. The reason did not have to do with literacy; the Smiths were a literate—though not literary—family. As farmers, they made business records, such as statements indicating their debts and what money was owed

to them.<sup>7</sup> They also kept in touch with extended family through correspondence.<sup>8</sup> As his network of believers grew, Joseph also wrote letters to offer words of encouragement, oversee logistics of printing the Book of Mormon, and convey his belief in the restored gospel.<sup>9</sup> But he evidently did not produce any records capturing his innermost thoughts, such as a journal.

Perhaps Joseph did not produce such personal records in the 1820s simply because he felt no inclination to express himself on paper; perhaps agricultural life was work enough. We don't have, after all, a flood of diaries from agrarian workers in nineteenth-century New York. Joseph also may have felt that language was an imperfect medium—comparing it to a “little narrow prison”—in which to share or understand sacred events.<sup>10</sup>

Yet as Joseph progressed in his calling as a prophet, he learned about the importance of written records. As he began translating the Book of Mormon in 1827 and 1828, he must have recognized the role records played in transmitting God's word to His children. Indeed, that record depicted a civilization that had lost its belief in God because it did not have written scripture.<sup>11</sup> Martin Harris's loss of the pages of the initial translation taught Joseph the necessity of better preserving records. As he recommenced translating the Book of Mormon in 1829, Joseph captured the sacred revelations he received from God more systematically (he had only written down one revelation in 1828). Committing those commandments to paper, rather than just expressing them verbally, likely helped him recognize the greater permanence of the written record.

The recorded commandments quickly became essential to early believers. As Joseph recorded—on paper—broad doctrinal revelations or divine answers to questions from his friends and family, he captured God's words so that readers could remember and follow the directives. As early believers in the Book of Mormon read from these revelations, as well as from the Book of Mormon, they became increasingly comfortable with the idea of seeing principles of their growing faith in writing. For Joseph, the importance of recording God's instructions was reiterated in April 1830, when the Lord commanded him to keep a record on the same day the Church was established.<sup>12</sup>

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Although Joseph was learning the importance of recording the words of God, he still did not produce writings conveying his own experiences or feelings. The Prophet's earliest documents show a man committed to capturing the newly revealed gospel in writing but not as enthusiastic about transmitting his own thoughts on paper. Nowhere do we have Joseph's early comments on the revelations or other latter-day scripture. The prophet and translator set God's words to paper before his own.

In 1832 Joseph began to document the Church and his own life in a different way. That year Joseph started five record-keeping projects: a revelation book, a history, a journal, a letterbook, and a minute book.<sup>13</sup> Ironically, he left no written statements of why he began keeping more extensive records—we only know of the change because of the records themselves. Each of these records filled a distinct need for the growing Church. Joseph would need a revelation book, letterbook, and minute book to document the Church's activities and provide a central repository for official communications. Keeping a journal would allow him to document and reflect on his activities. A history permitted Joseph to interpret the meaning of his visionary experiences.

This 1832 history came more than 12 years after the First Vision occurred, but that vision was one of the first things he recorded during this explosion of administrative and personal records. The history, probably written in the summer of 1832, noted Joseph's birth and family circumstances and then "quickly moved to the events that marked the beginning of his career as a prophet," including his First Vision and the beginnings of the translation of the Book of Mormon.<sup>14</sup> It bears Joseph's handwriting and that of his clerk Frederick G. Williams. The autobiographical content, however, makes clear that Joseph was the sole author.

Even though the history is only six pages, it offered a significant addition to the extant writings of Joseph. By the time he ceased work on the history, he had *doubled* the amount of surviving personal records produced up to that point. In other words, the entire known documentary record of Joseph Smith before summer 1832—excluding the Book of Mormon, his revelations, and other sacred translations—is only a few hundred words longer than the essay you are currently reading.<sup>15</sup>

After years of documenting God’s words to him, Joseph now recorded his own words about the vision in his 1832 history. As Joseph came to rely more and more upon the written record for God’s word, he slowly recognized that his own voice mattered to himself and his followers. The First Vision quickly became a foundational event for Joseph in his retelling of his early history. As he increasingly expressed himself in writing, he gained more experience in writing about his visionary experience. The 1832 history paved the way for additional histories he created in subsequent years to document his amazing life. The prophet and seer did not just *experience* marvelous events—he *recorded* them on paper so they could be shared, kept, and treasured. His words have become part of our sacred history.



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#### Notes

1. See Doctrine and Covenants 20:5 for a brief mention of the First Vision without any detail attached to the event. (Articles and Covenants, ca. Apr. 1830, in *JSP*; D1:121 [D&C 20:5].)
2. Joseph Smith, History, 1838–56, vol. A-1 (“Draft 2”), 3, in *JSP*; H1:216.
3. Steven C. Harper, *First Vision: Memory and Mormon Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 11. When Moroni appeared to Joseph in 1823, he commanded Joseph to tell his father about the angel’s appearance. This may suggest that Joseph had been reluctant to share his religious experiences with his family. (Joseph Smith, History, 1838–56, vol. A-1 [“Draft 2”], 7, in *JSP*; H1:232.)
4. History of George A. Smith, ca. 1857–75, p. 2, CHL.
5. Preface to Book of Mormon, ca. Aug. 1829, in *JSP*; D1:92–94.
6. “Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845,” bk. 7, p. [12], josephsmithpapers.org.
7. See, for example, “List of Services, between circa 12 January and 6 February 1819,” josephsmithpapers.org.
8. See Lucy Mack Smith to Solomon Mack, Jan. 6, 1831, CHL; and History of George A. Smith, ca. 1857–75, p. 2, CHL.
9. See, for example, Letter to Oliver Cowdery, Oct. 22, 1829, in *JSP*; D1:94–97; and Letter to Newel Knight and the Church in Colesville, Aug. 28, 1830, in *JSP*; D1:172–77.
10. Joseph Smith to William W. Phelps, Nov. 27, 1832, in *JSP*; D2:320.
11. See Omni 1:17.
12. Revelation, Apr. 6, 1830, in *JSP*; D1:129 [D&C 21:1].
13. Journal, 1832–34, in *JSP*; J1:3–51; “Letterbook 1,” josephsmithpapers.org; Revelation Book 2, in *JSP*; MRB:407–665; “Minute Book 1,” josephsmithpapers.org; History, ca. Summer 1832, in *JSP*; H1:3–22. Joseph had already started a book in which his revelations were recorded around spring 1831, but this book was carried to Missouri in late

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1831 so that the revelations could be published. Thus, he needed a second manuscript book in Ohio for his revelations. (See Source Note and Historical Introduction for Revelation Book 1, in *JSP*; MRB:3–7.)

14. Historical Introduction to History, ca. Summer 1832, in *JSP*; H1:4–5.
15. This quantification, derived from online transcriptions available at [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org), is based on the word count of the following documents: Preface to Book of Mormon, circa August 1829; a letter to Oliver Cowdery, October 22, 1829; a letter to Martin Harris, February 22, 1831; a letter to Hyrum Smith, March 3–4, 1831 (excluding a letter from Oliver Cowdery that Joseph copied into this letter to Hyrum); a note Joseph wrote in a record book on March 8, 1832; and a letter he wrote to Emma Smith, June 6, 1832. It does not include the letters Joseph cowrote with John Whitmer in the latter half of 1830. The total word count (including canceled words) of these documents is approximately 2,050. The word count of the 1832 history is approximately 2,060.