

ENSIGN

VOLUME 26 NUMBER 4

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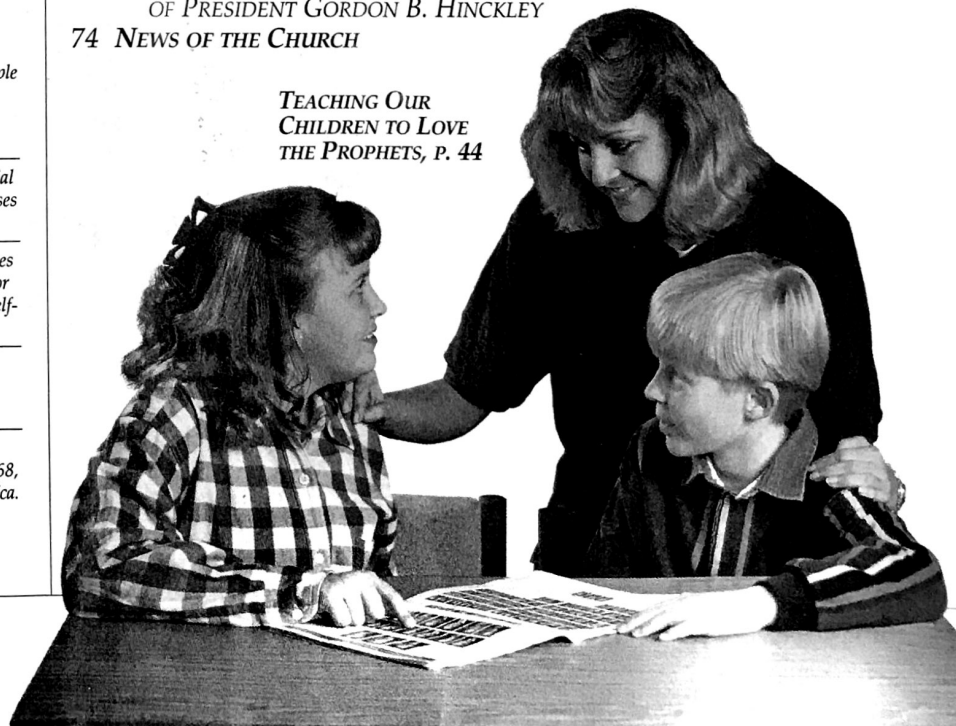
POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Salt Lake Distribution Center, Church Magazines, P.O. Box 26368, Salt Lake City, Utah 84126-0368, United States of America.

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JOSEPH SMITH'S

TESTIMONY

OF THE

FIRST VISION

BY RICHARD L. ANDERSON

The Prophet's accounts of his first vision offer us a picture that is rich in testimony and supported by history.

For Mormons the First Vision is foundational—God's declaration, unequivocal and utterly authoritative, of the results of the Great Apostasy and the need for a restoration.¹ This perception of a senior historian highlights the value of records from the Prophet Joseph Smith that describe his youthful search for religious truth, his prayer, and the stunning answer. His account of that sacred experience is not only *his* best-documented vision of Deity, but there are few spiritual experiences in world history that rival the First Vision in rich detail and full reporting.

Joseph Smith's testimony of seeing the Father and Son towers like the arching trees of that sacred setting. Yet, oddly, its abundance of detail also gives critics more chances to claim verbal or historical inconsistency.

Following are brief discussions of issues that have been raised about testimonies from the Prophet that he saw the Father and the Son. Satisfying spiritual and historical answers to these questions are found by looking closely at the Prophet's own words and other reliable sources pertaining to his youth.

Where is the most accessible record of the First Vision? In the Pearl of Great Price: Joseph Smith—History 1:1–26. It was copied from the history that Joseph Smith began on 27 April 1838 so that his generation and all afterward would know the facts of the founding of the restored Church (see JS—H 1:1–2).² A second draft exists in the handwriting of an 1839 scribe,

and this careful recollection was published in 1842 in the Church newspaper at Nauvoo.³ The Prophet's full history is still in print, but the section relating the First Vision⁴ is easily found in the Pearl of Great Price.

Can a record be accurate if made eighteen years after the fact? Of course, if the experience is profound. Famous people who write their life's history usually have no diary of their early years, and Joseph Smith was intellectually mature at age thirty-two when he remembered his prayer in the grove at fourteen. As a comparison, there was no narrative of Abraham Lincoln's youth when he became a serious candidate for United States president at age fifty. He then helped to produce campaign biographies that gave an overview of his teenage years on the frontier in Kentucky and Indiana.⁵ They reliably survey his daily life and education then, just as the Prophet responsibly recalls his early life and religious experiences in 1838.

How many First Vision reports were made while the Prophet was alive? It is better to ask how many *independent* accounts came from contact with the Prophet. Some vision narratives were republished and are really copies of an original record.

We now know of nine contemporary reports from the Prophet himself or from those who personally heard

Right: Stained-glass window from a Brigham City, Utah, meeting-house; text from Joseph Smith—History, Pearl of Great Price.



the light rested upon me I saw two
angels, whose brightness and
glory defied all description. One
stood near me, calling me by name,
saying, "Be not afraid; I am the
angel of the Lord."
The other stood by the door, saying,
"Come, follow me, and I will
show thee those things which
must shortly come to pass."
And as I looked to see who he
was, behold, a cloud encompassed
them, and they were gone from
sight: and I was left alone, and
said within myself, "I will write
the things which have appeared
unto me, that they may be
known unto them which read
this book."

him relate his first vision: (1) the Prophet's handwritten description in 1832, an attempt to start a manuscript history of the Church; (2) a Church secretary's brief 1835 journal entry of Joseph talking with a visitor who called himself Joshua, the Jewish minister; (3) the 1838 history discussed above, published in 1842 and now in the Pearl of Great Price; (4) Orson Pratt's publication, the first publicly disseminated, of the Prophet's vision in his *Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions*, issued in 1840 in Edinburgh, Scotland; (5) Orson Hyde's revision of Orson Pratt's pamphlet, published in 1842 for German readers and adding some insights that may have come from his contact with Joseph Smith; (6) the Wentworth Letter, created in response to editor John Wentworth's inquiry and published by Joseph Smith in 1842 in *Times and Seasons*; this account adapted parts of Orson Pratt's pamphlet; (7) Levi Richards's diary about Joseph Smith preaching in the summer of 1843 and repeating the Lord's first message to him that no church was His; (8) a newspaper interview in the fall of 1843; (9) Alexander Neibaur's 1844 journal entry of a conversation at the Prophet's house.⁶

What are the main problems of interpreting so many accounts? The first problem is the interpreter. One person perceives harmony and interconnections while another overstates differences. Think of how you retell a vivid event in your life—marriage, first day on the job, or an automobile accident. A record of all your comments would include short and long versions, along with many bits and pieces. Only by blending these glimpses can an outsider reconstruct what originally happened. The biggest trap is comparing description in one report with silence in another. By assuming that what is not said is not known, some come up with arbitrary theories of an evolution in the Prophet's story. Yet we often omit parts of an episode because of the chance of the moment, not having time to tell everything, or deliberately stressing only a part of the original event in a particular situation. This means that any First Vision account contains some fraction of the whole experience. Combining all reliable reports will recreate the basics of Joseph Smith's quest and conversation with the Father and Son.

Which of the nine contemporary accounts are of chief interest? Pay most attention to the well-prepared records that come directly from the Prophet. Handwriting expert Dean Jessee found that the 1832 manuscript history was penned by Joseph Smith, and the Prophet also produced and published his 1838 account (see JS-H 1:1–26) as the beginning of his full history. Though the 1842 Wentworth Letter is brief, it was also published under the name of Joseph Smith.⁷ This in turn shows Orson Pratt to be highly reliable, since the Wentworth Letter repeated much of the language of Pratt's *Interesting Account*. Orson Hyde's pamphlet is mainly of interest for details. The remaining four accounts are on-the-spot summaries of what the Prophet said

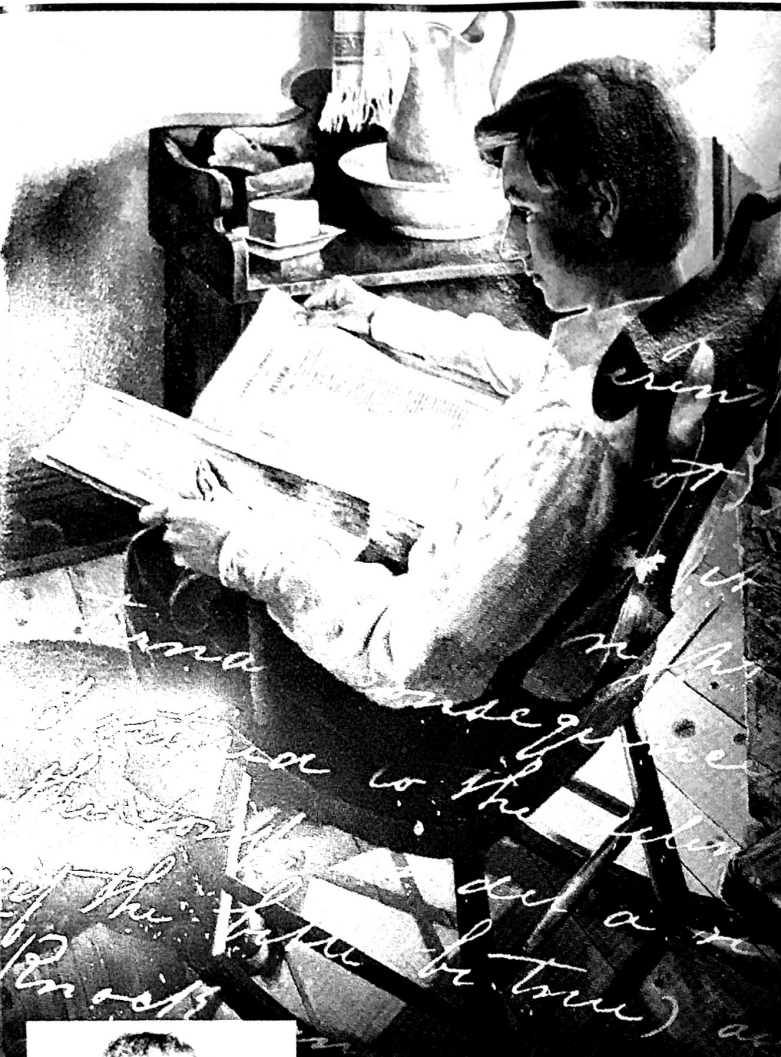
spontaneously. Like diaries in general, they add candid but very selective details. This category includes the Joshua interview that was recorded by Warren Parrish in the Prophet's journal.⁸

Did Orson Pratt retell the Prophet's story accurately? Converted in 1830 and married in 1836, Orson Pratt lived with or near the Prophet in Kirtland when not traveling as a missionary. Later Orson said he had "often heard [Joseph] relate" the First Vision.⁹ Orson apparently treated information about the First Vision as he treated the Prophet's recorded doctrinal revelations: "We committed some to memory; and a few we copied for the purpose of reference in our absence on missions; and also to read them to the saints for their edification."¹⁰ Without such care, Orson Pratt would not have dared to publish the First Vision in Scotland, which he did about a year and a half before the Prophet printed his first account. Yet Joseph Smith clearly endorsed Orson's tract, since it was advertised in three issues of the Church newspaper at Nauvoo as making available "those things in which every new enquirer is so deeply interested, and upon which he is so very anxious to obtain correct information."¹¹ When the Prophet published the Wentworth Letter the following year, he repeated much of Orson's narrative as correct, including the divine words in the Sacred Grove.

What was the Lord's message to Joseph as related in the Wentworth Letter and Orson Pratt's account, and why are those accounts important? In these two sources the words of the heavenly beings are basically the same, though Orson Pratt used the third person and Joseph Smith the first person: "They told me that all religious denominations were believing in incorrect doctrines, and that none of them was acknowledged of God as his church and kingdom. And I was expressly commanded to 'go not after them,' at the same time receiving a promise that the fulness of the gospel should at some future time be made known unto me."¹²

The Lord's displeasure with existing churches is the most prominent message in the First Vision sources. This message alone would have left Joseph dangling, but his Wentworth Letter stresses the Lord's solution—the promise that the youth would learn the fulness of the gospel. This could not come through earthly teachers, who the Lord had said were in darkness, so Joseph Smith was really told that further revelations would make known the truth that he sought. Would he be a new prophet called to reestablish God's work? That was how meticulous Orson Pratt understood the Lord's first message to Joseph: "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 foundation of the kingdom of God."¹³ This is supported by Joseph's personal histories of 1832 and 1838.

Orson Pratt said he had "often heard [Joseph] relate" the First Vision. The Prophet later validated Elder Pratt's published account of the vision by repeating much of it in *Times and Seasons* in 1842.



What was the Lord's message to Joseph in the Prophet's 1832 history? At age twenty-six the young leader penned this solemn declaration: "I saw the Lord, and he spake unto me saying, 'Joseph, my son, thy sins are forgiven thee. Go thy way, walk in my statutes, and keep my commandments. Behold, I am the Lord of glory. I was crucified for the world that all those who believe on my name may have eternal life. Behold, the world lieth in sin at this time, and none doeth good, no not one. They have turned aside from the gospel and keep not my commandments. They draw

near to me with their lips while their hearts are far from me, and mine anger is kindling against the inhabitants of the earth to visit them according to their ungodliness and to bring to pass that which hath been spoken by the mouth of the prophets and Apostles. Behold and lo, I come quickly, as it [is] written of me, in the cloud clothed in the glory of my Father."¹⁴

What did those words of Christ mean to young Joseph Smith? The above announcement by the Savior is part of Joseph Smith's 1832 story of his intense search for the truth, a search followed by the sacred message in the grove and the events of receiving and translating the Book of Mormon. In his brief preface, the Prophet said he would record his "marvelous experience," and he called the First Vision "the testimony from on high."¹⁵ Testimony of what? As just quoted, the Lord testified of the sins of the world, the nearness of his second coming, and his plan to "bring to pass that which hath been spoken by the mouth of the prophets and Apostles." Such a grand fulfillment includes the prophecies of miraculously gathering Israel that dominate the latter portion of the Old Testament. Young Joseph Smith certainly knew of these, since his 1832 history told how he had carefully studied biblical prophecies before his first vision. God shares specific plans with those called to help bring them about (see Amos 3:7), so the Lord's revelation of this first information about his latter-day program meant that Joseph Smith would play a key part. The Prophet's longer



Above: Elder Orson Pratt. Text at right is from a Church secretary's account of the Prophet's 1835 visit with a man called Joshua the Jewish minister.

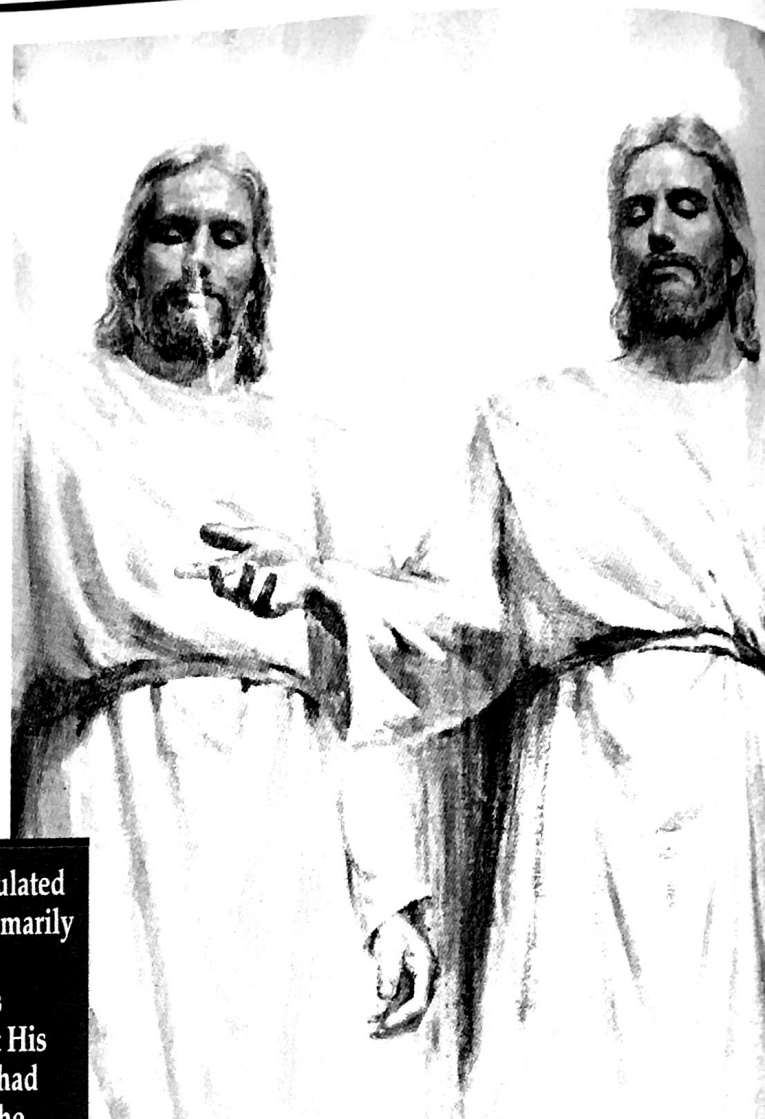
history also says this some distance after the account of the vision itself; he records that it was now his "duty" to wait "until further directed" (JS-H 1:26). In the light of the divine rejection of existing churches, further knowledge would have to come from God to make the true Church available once again.

What do the vision accounts say about young Joseph Smith's faith? Together they expand shallow concepts of how long the youth sought religious truth, how many scriptures he studied, and the depth of his commitment. There was no answer without a search, which appears in some form in each vision account. And God gave no quick response, for in 1832 the Prophet wrote: "Thus from the age of twelve years to fifteen I pondered many things in my heart concerning the situation of the world of mankind," including its religious contention.¹⁶ This 1832 autobiography opens the soul of one who studied people and the forests and the night sky. He relates that the marvels of creation led him to trust the Creator. Whereas this wondrous being was poorly represented by religionists, Joseph turned to the Bible, which unlocked answers. Searching the scriptures, the Prophet found these assurances that he

would not be left alone: one who seeks will find (see Matt. 7:7); the God who answers prayers is the same yesterday and today (see Heb. 13:8); and anyone may approach him, since he is no respecter of persons (see Acts 10:34). In his 1832 autobiography, Joseph paraphrases Christ's challenge that the Father "seeketh" those willing to "worship him in spirit and in truth" (compare John 4:23-24).¹⁷ Seven of the nine contemporary accounts name James 1:5 as decisive, encouraging any who "lack wisdom" to "ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally." Yet only after extended investigation did Joseph open this verse, and he profoundly believed: "I reflected on it again and again" (JS-H 1:12). Faith led him to the grove, and he called upon that faith when Satan sought to overcome him as he knelt to pray. The Prophet later told a visitor that an evil force broke into his first attempts to pray vocally, and he "kneeled again" and "called on the Lord in mighty prayer."¹⁸ This was the spiritual struggle of "exerting all my powers to call upon God to deliver me out of the power of this enemy which had seized upon me," and "at the very moment" when he could do no more, the heavens opened (JS-H 1:16)—the reward of long perseverance and unswerving trust in God.

Why did Joseph Smith describe only one divine being in the 1832 record? The Prophet

The Prophet circulated his histories primarily to make known his calling and Christ's announcement that His church and gospel had disappeared from the earth. Text below is from Joseph Smith's handwritten 1832 history.



*...in in hope
 ...for mercy for
 in mercy and the Lord
 while in attitude of cutting
 light above the bright-ness
 down from above and rested
 the Spirit of God and the
 the Lord and the
 I saw
 my son
 Thy King are for
 and keep my commandments
 I was crucified
 may*

writes poignantly about seeking God and adds: "And the Lord opened the heavens upon me, and I saw the Lord." Then follow the words of the Savior quoted earlier. Possibly the term *Lord* referred to the Father in the first instance, while afterward referring to the Son, who declared his atonement for the sins of all.¹⁹ This is the most personalized of all the vision accounts, and Joseph Smith is preoccupied with Christ's assurance, evidently only hinting at the presence of the Father. Yet in the Prophet's 1838 public history, the Father introduced the Son and told Joseph to "Hear Him!" (JS-H 1:17). Joseph's 1832 account verifies that the answer came from Christ himself; this account concentrates on the Savior's words as the response to Joseph's prayer. From the beginning, the resurrected Savior directed the reestablishment of his own church.

Why did Joseph Smith stress forgiveness in 1832 but not in later publications? Joseph prepared his later histories for general distribution, and he stressed God's message to the world—that no existing church was fully accepted by Him (see JS-H 1:19). Yet he added that he was told "many other things . . . which I cannot write at this time" (v. 20). One of these was Christ's assurance that his sins were forgiven. Many have speculated on the reason for partial information in the full history. The simplest explanation is that personal details were more appropriate in his first, private record. Yet the Prophet did not censor Orson Pratt, who wrote in 1840 that the youth was told "that his sins were forgiven."²⁰ In fact, this aspect of the glorious event was recorded in the Doctrine and Covenants as a manifestation prior to that of Moroni (1823) that assured "this first elder that he had received a remission of his sins" (D&C 20:5). But the Prophet circulated his histories primarily to make known his calling and Christ's announcement that His church and gospel had disappeared from the earth (see JS-H 1:19).

Did others in Joseph Smith's period claim to have experienced similar visions? All visions are not made in heaven, though that does not need discussion here. Books downgrading Joseph Smith tend to equate the First Vision with private revelations of forgiveness that are sometimes recorded in nineteenth-century memoirs. Many of these are night dreams or daytime prayers followed by the qualification "I thought I saw." They generally report personal acceptance by Christ, somewhat like Sidney Rigdon's assurance that he was inspired as a Christian minister to prepare people for the fulness of the gospel (see D&C 35:4). Yet of the purportedly similar experiences that have been listed from Joseph Smith's culture, none reach the combination of daylight directness and global message that Joseph Smith relates. He does speak as "one having authority" (Matt. 7:29).

Do Joseph Smith and his mother describe the same revivals? They do not. The answer takes us back to the original notes from interviews with Lucy Mack Smith after the Martyrdom. The scribes, Howard and Martha Jane Coray, prepared a printer's manuscript of her story of Joseph's life. They blended Joseph's mother's incomplete recollections with Joseph's report of the First

Vision and coming of Moroni from the history published at Nauvoo in 1842. A person reading any printing of Lucy's history will see that the Corays simply paraphrased Joseph's account of the revivals prior to his initial prayer in the forest. In fact, the comments added by the Prophet in Nauvoo appear in the Pearl of Great Price and suggest that the youth did not immediately tell his mother much about the overwhelming answer to his prayer (see JS-H 1:20). So her interview notes move from clearing land and building the farm cabin to Joseph's sharing his visions of Moroni with the family. Next she narrates the tragic death of Alvin, which local records verify at the end of 1823. Right after this, Mother Smith describes her solace in a revival that affected the whole community. Contemporary newspapers completely support Lucy Smith's history here, recording a community revival around Palmyra, New York, that centered in late 1824 and early 1825. Reports about religion often specify "towns," which are not population centers but rectangular districts with dimensions of six miles or more, though a populated village sometimes duplicates the name of its surrounding town. In 1825 the following write-up concerned areas just north and west of the Smith farm: "In Palmyra and Macedon, including Methodist, Presbyterian and Baptist Churches, more than 400 have already testified that the Lord is good."²¹

But in his 1838 history, Joseph gave a different setting for his initial experiences: "There was in the place where we lived an unusual excitement on the subject of religion" (JS-H 1:5). The Prophet is specific on the time of his vision as "early in the spring of eighteen hundred and twenty" (v. 14). Some discredit the 1820 visitation by claiming that Joseph was unreliable in memory, loosely recalling the 1824–1825 revivals that are so easily documented. However, when Lucy Smith then tried to involve him in the religious meetings of that time, his period of investigating churches was already over. "He refused from the first to attend the meeting with us. He would say . . . it will do you no hurt to join them but you will not stay with them long, for you are mistaken in them."²²

Were there local revivals in the early spring of 1820? This is a loaded question because it narrows geography as well as the Prophet's own time limits. His 1832 record says his religious investigations began "at about the age of twelve years," describing his scriptural searching and "intimate acquaintance with those of different denominations" up to the time of the First Vision. In this period he "pondered" the surrounding "contentions and divisions," which certainly included public disputations.²³ He turned twelve on 23 December 1817, and that year a major revival was reported in Palmyra, with 150 people displaying "the triumphs of grace."²⁴ So



Scribes added Joseph's reports to Lucy Smith's story.

religious awakenings in the vicinity reached scores in 1817 and hundreds in 1824, as indicated above. These dates show major religious interest on either side of 1820, and local society undoubtedly did not fall into spiritual stupor in the intervening years. We must be fair in interpreting Joseph Smith's experience—the "great multitudes" uniting with different churches belonged to stage two of his description (see JS-H 1:5). Stage one was more modest and "commenced with the Methodists" (v. 5) before expanding to broader territory. Joseph gave this Methodist fervor an early time frame: the Smiths had moved to their farm home, on the boundary of Wayne and Ontario Counties, and conversion fever was already intense while he was in his "fifteenth year" (v. 7).²⁵ This year began as he turned fourteen at the end of December 1819. However, it is critical to note that Joseph Smith equates his "fifteenth year" with the middle of the "extraordinary scene of religious feeling" (v. 6), not its beginning (see v. 10). So the historian should be concerned with religious activity throughout 1819 as well as in early 1820.

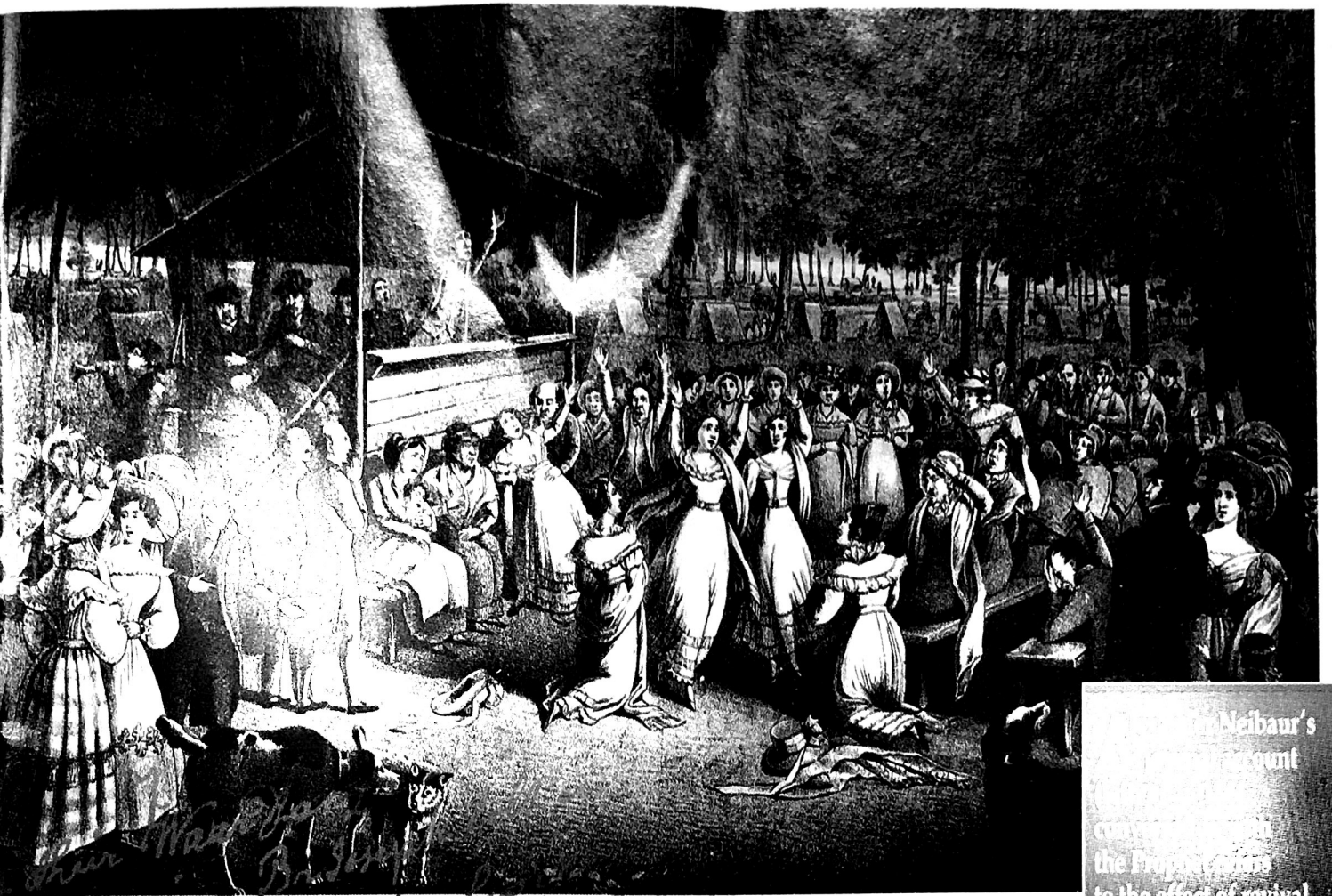
What Methodist activity was found in the Smith area about 1819? Methodist preachers were the most aggressive frontier missionaries, relying heavily on the camp meeting. Scores and hundreds would gather in New York woods as circuit preachers often joined forces for days of exhorting, hymn singing, and group praying. Such meetings were so common that they were rarely noticed in the press, though one camp meeting reached the Palmyra newspaper in the spring of 1820 because of the report of a death.²⁶ These wilderness persuasions were associated with the Prophet in a reliable recollection. A Palmyra printer who knew young Joseph Smith said the boy caught "a spark of Methodism in the camp meeting, away down in the woods on the Vienna road."²⁷ The Prophet says of this period that he attended various "meetings as often as occasion would permit," that "in process of time" he favored Methodism, "and I felt some desire to be united with them" (JS-H 1:8). Such feelings could have been influenced by the Methodist "excitement" in the area in 1819—the annual meeting of the Genesee Conference, which gathered more than a hundred circuit preachers from New York west of the Hudson valley and from the adjacent section of Lower Canada. That year, the assembly was at the village of Vienna (now Phelps), a dozen miles from the Smith farm. The conference format is clear from vivid recollections of annual conferences just before and after 1819. The time and place of these weeklong sessions were designated the year before. Crowds assembled at the open Sunday services.²⁸ Seasoned ministers known for fiery and emotional preaching were at the Vienna conference, though their memoirs from 1819 only note the unusual—administrative issues and expulsions for transgression. But one telling comment is added: "Aside from these sad cases, all my recollections of the session are pleasant."²⁹ Full records are absent, but the pattern is clear. Soul-winning speakers would have poured out their convictions on July 4 to Sabbath

gatherings typically too large for any building. Joseph Smith said he had an "intimate acquaintance with those of different denominations" long before 1819,³⁰ and in his Methodist circles he would have learned of the chance to attend a rare event. Very likely, he observed the impact of the 1819 Genesee Conference meetings on individuals of his area.

Were there "general" conversions in the Palmyra area before the 1820 vision? Joseph said the "unusual excitement . . . commenced with the Methodists, but soon became general among all the sects in that region of country" (JS-H 1:5). Here he writes of spreading enthusiasm but gives no numbers. The worst historical approach here is to shrink the Prophet's statements to the population center of Palmyra, since his term *region* covers far more than one village. And as just discussed, valid research must include 1819, when Joseph was active in investigation before the vision early in 1820. Printed statistics of the Methodist church exist for circuits, which consisted of perhaps two dozen local churches or preaching stations. The Smiths were in the Ontario Circuit, which listed 700 members in mid-1818 but dropped slightly to 677 in mid-1819, a total that would include new converts but also subtract losses for deaths, disciplinary action, and removals. However, the adjoining Methodist circuits just to the south (Candaigua) and southeast (Seneca) surged ahead of counterparts in their overall district. They grew by a third, together adding 400 new members from mid-1818 to mid-1819.³¹

Baptist growth can be pinpointed. The Smith farm was on the north side of the town of Farmington, a territory some six by twelve miles that was later bisected to create the town of Manchester. Farmington Baptists immersed twenty-two new members in the church year ending September 1819, an increase of about 20 percent.³² Their meetinghouse at Manchester village was four miles away, whereas Palmyra Baptists were closer to the Smiths. Joseph says he was conscious of the proselyting of major sects, and he probably knew families in his area that met with the Farmington church.

Full records are missing for the two Presbyterian congregations in the Smith area. However, Milton V. Backman, a careful scholar on the religious groups surrounding the Smiths, located minutes of the Geneva Presbytery, the district assembly that included both Palmyra congregations. These failed to report to the presbytery in the semiannual meeting in February 1820, but specifics came from several congregations twenty-five miles or less from the Smith farm. Immediately east was the church at Phelps, listing ten new members. Just north of Phelps, Lyons listed fourteen. Just south of Phelps, the Presbyterians in the village of Geneva reported eighty-two members added as a result of "a very considerable refreshing" that came "during the spring and summer past." Adjacent to Phelps on the east, the first church of the town of Junius specified twenty-seven additions as part of "a work of grace" that "has lately commenced." A committee of church



Joseph Neibaur's account of the Prophet's conversion to the effect of revival meetings on young Joseph. Circuit-riding preachers relied on such meetings in the early 1800s.

Mr Bonnie
 had a Revival Meeting
 Religion, he wanted to get Religion
 wanted to feel & tho' should like the Rest
 would feel nothing, opened his Bible
 page that struck him was if anyone
 lack wisdom let him ask of God
 liberality & upbraiding
 Wood to pray: kneels
 as close cleave to his
 word, felt easier after
 as heaven came near
 age in the fire light

representatives wrote about further revival prospects while noting a marked growth in the area from 1819 to their early 1820 meeting.³³ The

Smiths lived on the western edge of this area of significant Presbyterian renewal.

Did 1819–1820 church conversions include “multitudes” in the Smith area? The Prophet mentions large numbers only when he broadens his survey far beyond his neighborhood and general vicinity. After describing the zeal of “the sects in that region of country,” he adds: “Indeed, the whole district of country seemed affected by it” (JS-H 1:5). Only after this sentence are there “great multitudes” joining “different religious parties.” These are part of

an expanding panorama; Joseph’s report indicates that what was happening to many over a broad sector was also happening where he lived. Publications from that time period describe several spectacular revivals in upstate New York during 1819 and 1820,



and perhaps Joseph verbally glanced at this broad picture. However, we can verify the Prophet's impressions through reports from the denominational districts that included the family farm. The reporting year for these districts ended just before each annual conference.

Some forty-five congregations in the area were linked in the Ontario Baptist Association, which covered a vertical rectangle of New York about sixty by forty miles, with Palmyra somewhat north of center. Records of the September 1819 Baptist conference reported 310 baptized during the year, averaging 7 more members for each typical congregation of about 60. As already noted, 22 of these baptisms were in the Farmington flock, which met just south of the Smiths, yet the Palmyra church, just north of the Smiths, reported only 5 baptisms. This discrepancy shows the fallacy of singling out one town when Joseph Smith pictures "excitement" in "that region" and "the whole district of country" (JS-H 1:5). The Ontario Baptist Association had about 13 percent growth through baptisms in both 1818 and 1819, with larger increases in several churches about twenty miles away from Joseph, who could easily have learned about these events from contact with neighbors of that denomination. In 1819 Baptists organized a third congregation in the adjoining town of Phelps, where there were 28 baptisms.

And the same year, three Pittsford-Penfield congregations on the Palmyra side of Rochester reported that 45 new members were immersed.³⁴ (While these numbers might not seem large by comparison with the size of church congregations today, they represented significant trends of conversion in rural villages of the time.)

Young

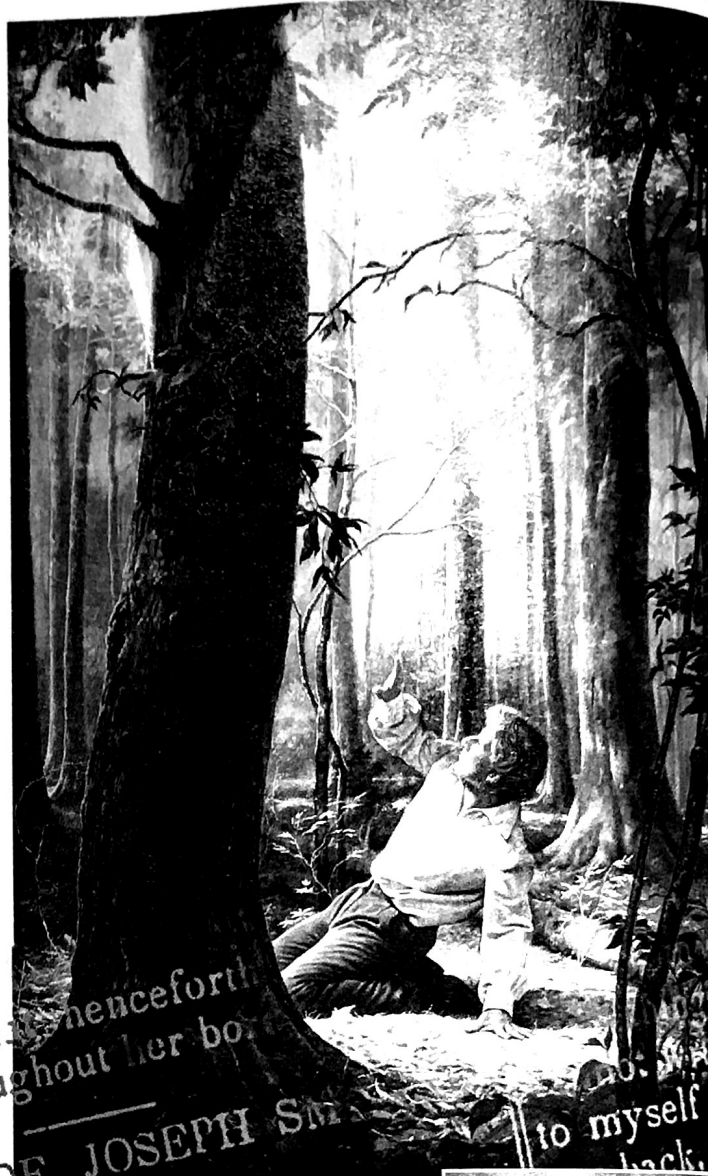
Joseph Smith regularly heard Methodist preachers from the Ontario Circuit, one of six segments of the Genesee District, which was a subdivision of the Genesee Conference that covered most of upstate New York and adjoining Lower Canada. That district was split and preaching circuits rearranged in 1820, making specific comparisons with earlier years impossible. But between mid-1818 and mid-1819, the Genesee District reported an addition of 1,187 members, while the other five districts in the conference each added only half that number or fewer. This was an impressive 23 percent increase for the Genesee District, whereas the New York-Canada conference to which it belonged grew by only 14 percent. Methodism was always expanding in these years, but in 1818 the reported addition for the Genesee District was only 350, an 8 percent buildup, so something remarkable had to

Persecution that developed when Joseph spoke of his vision was only verbal but surely would have gone further if he had broadcast the fact that he, a mere boy, had seen the Father and the Son.

passed by, and the conference for
have peace throughout her borders.

HISTORY OF JOSEPH SMITH (Continued.)

"After I had retired into the place where I had previously designed to have gathered around me and finding myself alone, I kneeled down and began to offer up the desires of my heart to God. I had scarcely done so when immediately I was seized upon by some powerful and astonishing influence over me as to my tongue so that I could not speak. A darkness gathered around me and I was left to sudden destruction. But exerting all my power to call upon God to deliver me out of the power of this enemy which had seized upon me, and at the very moment when I was ready to sink into despair, I myself to destruction, the power



Elder Orson Hyde, above, wrote of the First Vision in German. Text at left is from the account of the First Vision published in Times and Seasons in 1842.

be happening in this Methodist section to triple its growth during 1819. It stretched about a hundred miles west from Seneca Lake through Joseph Smith's area and on to Buffalo. The increase of more than a thousand here in the first half of 1819 supports Joseph's report that "great multitudes" joined "religious parties" throughout "the whole district of country" (JS-H 1:5). Thus the Prophet correctly says that he was in the midst of an intense religious outreach during 1819 and early 1820.³⁵

The young seeker was also aware of Presbyterian activities because four of his family attended that denomination (see JS-H 1:7). As mentioned, Palmyra's two Presbyterian churches belonged to the Presbytery of Geneva, which mainly covered the four adjoining counties of Wayne, Ontario, Seneca, and Yates, another vertical rectangle about sixty by forty miles.³⁶ In May 1820, the Presbytery of Geneva's report for the past year indicated 1,788 members, an increase of 271, a figure somewhat above the other presbyteries belonging to the larger synod. During 1818, the Geneva presbytery had increased by only 11 percent, but in the calendar year 1819, its membership rose by 18 percent, an average of twelve new members for each of the twenty-three churches in that district.³⁷ Increases in four congregations near the Smith farm were discussed earlier. The report commented on their growth in connection with that of the larger region: "During the past year more have been received into the communion of the churches than perhaps in any former year."³⁸

Some continue to claim that Joseph Smith's descriptions of revival activity in his area before the First Vision cannot be trusted. However, he names the three major churches, and they grew vigorously in his general region in the year before he went into the grove to pray. In May 1820 the Presbyterian General Assembly thanked God for a year of "almost unprecedented mercy," noting revival-type growth in more than seventy Presbyterian churches in the nation. Half the presbyteries singled out because of "special seasons of refreshing" were in upstate New York, including "Geneva, in the Presbytery of Geneva." The assembly's "Narrative of the State of Religion" included renewals in western New York and commented on the national pattern: "The blessing has fallen on persons of all ages and of all conditions; nor has it been confined to those of any one religious denomination."³⁹

Why didn't Joseph Smith make his account of the First Vision public at once? Why did the Savior tell the Apostles not to speak of the vision of Moses and Elijah until after the Resurrection (see Matt. 17:9)? The reasons may be similar. Joseph soon tried to share his experience with one of the revivalist preachers, but this brought scorn instead of belief (see JS-H 1:21). The persecution that developed was only verbal (see v. 22) but surely would have gone further if he had broadcast that he, a mere boy, had seen the Father and the Son. Simply confiding the experience was perilous enough. He says that rejection persisted "because I continued to affirm that I

had seen a vision" (JS-H 1:27). Years later the Aaronic Priesthood was restored, and again the Prophet was "forced to keep secret the circumstances . . . owing to a spirit of persecution which . . . manifested itself" (JS-H 1:74). Similar caution was used before the revelations were first edited for publication in 1833. In that year mob action in Jackson County destroyed the printing office in Independence and thus blocked full publication of the revelations until the Kirtland edition of the Doctrine and Covenants in 1835. It was not until after the Missouri evacuations and his confinement in Liberty Jail were past that the Prophet's history went into print, preceded by the Wentworth Letter. After these testimonies supporting the reality of his original visions had circulated for a year, Joseph Smith expressed his relief to the Twelve: "The History is going out by little and little, in the papers, and cutting its way; so that, when it is completed, it will not raise a persecution against us."⁴⁰

How many times did the First Vision appear in print during the Prophet's life? The spread of the Prophet's testimony of that vision is impressive. Accounts were typeset at least thirteen times before the Martyrdom, several times at Joseph Smith's initiative.

Orson Pratt probably had permission when he published his *Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions* in 1840, during the mission of the Twelve to England. This publication circulated in Scotland and then was listed for sale in several issues of the *Millennial Star* during 1841. Elder Pratt also generated three New York printings in 1841 and 1842, and the work was advertised in Nauvoo in late 1841. Soon the Prophet turned Orson Pratt's account into the more concise Wentworth Letter, which the Nauvoo Saints first read in *Times and Seasons*, 1 March 1842. Two weeks later, *Times and Seasons* carried the first segment of the detailed "History of Joseph Smith," up to his decision to pray, and in the next issue recounted the appearance of the Father and Son. The installments of the "History of Joseph Smith" were reprinted for British Saints in the *Latter Day Saints' Millennial Star*, the account of the First Vision appearing in June 1842. That fall Orson Hyde made the story of this first divine appearance to Joseph Smith available in German by rewriting Orson Pratt's pamphlet. A year later Joseph gave an interview to a visiting editor who ran the story of the First Vision in the *Pittsburgh Gazette*. The First Vision part of the article was reprinted 23 September 1843 by the *New York Spectator*. Also in 1843, Elder Noah Packard republished the full Wentworth Letter in Medina, Ohio, as part of his missionary tract, *Detector: In Which Millerism Is Exposed*.⁴¹ John E. Page, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, did the same in New York City in February 1844, issuing a small collection of letters with Lucien R. Foster by which they allowed Joseph Smith to give "his own testimony concerning the work in which he is engaged."⁴² Then, two months before the Martyrdom, the Prophet received a request for background information from Daniel Rupp, an important Pennsylvania historian who was preparing a book on religious denominations in the United



States. Joseph sent an updated version of the Wentworth Letter, retaining the First Vision account but adding comments on the growth and success of the

Church.⁴³ Readership of these printed accounts of the First Vision must be measured in tens of thousands.

Did the Prophet use the First Vision to teach doctrine? Yes, but the term *First Vision* is only suggested in surviving records from Joseph Smith.⁴⁴ He taught from firsthand knowledge gained in many visions. He had seen the Father and Son in the forest and in the vision of the three degrees of glory (see D&C 76:20–24), and these recorded experiences were available in Church publications in the 1840s. Joseph also saw the Father and Son during the spiritual endowment in the Kirtland Temple (see D&C 137:3), and on other occasions. In an 1843 sermon, the Prophet, preaching on the separate persons of the Godhead, appealed to common knowledge among Latter-day Saints of what he had looked upon: “Any person that has seen the heavens opened knows that there is three personages in the heavens holding the keys of power.”⁴⁵ In the April 1844 conference, he again drew on audience awareness that he had spoken personally to the Father and the Son. Joseph Smith’s rhetorical questions were meant to stress that he had received direct, visual knowledge of the kind of being God is. In the scribe’s running notes, the Prophet asked if any man or woman had seen God, heard him, or communed with him. He then proceeded to explain about God: “If you were to see him today, you would see him in all the person, image, very form of man.”⁴⁶

Besides using such statements to teach the true, personal nature of the Father and the Son, Joseph Smith used the First Vision to stress the importance of revelation, of having a prophet in contact with God. This was his preface in telling his story to a newspaper editor: “The Lord does reveal himself to me. I know it. He revealed himself first to me when I was about fourteen years old, a mere boy.”⁴⁷

The Prophet also used Christ’s words in the vision to emphasize the complete apostasy and need of a restoration. Explaining these topics from the stand at the Nauvoo Temple, he reviewed his confusion “when he was a youth,” followed by his prayer in the grove about which church was right, and the Savior’s answer “that they were all wrong, and that the Everlasting Covenant was broken.”⁴⁸ His published history and the Wentworth summary both teach from the First Vision in the sense that they emphasize the message of the Father and Son telling him that the true Church was lost and that his quest must continue in faith until God gave him further instruction on the subject. Thus the Prophet’s printed histories basically start with a sermon on the need

of a restoration, taking the First Vision as the text.

As already noted, when Pennsylvania historian Daniel Rupp asked Joseph Smith for an overview of Latter-day Saint history and doctrine, the Prophet responded by reissuing the Wentworth Letter unrevised as it related to the beginnings of the Church. He obviously felt it properly conveyed Christ’s words, including the “promise that the fulness of the gospel should at some future time be made known unto me.” And in sending this sketch of his earliest visions, the Prophet began with an added sentence declaring their divine authority: “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, was founded upon direct revelation, as the true church of God has ever been, according to the scriptures.”⁴⁹

What is the best confirmation of the First Vision?

The background that Joseph Smith gives for his religious quest fits very well into the known conditions of his family life and area. Yet, believing in his first vision requires a further personal step to be taken in faith. In appearing to Thomas, who doubted ten Apostles’ testimony of the Resurrection, the Lord left this challenge to everyone who investigates divine visions and true prophets: “Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed” (John 20:29).

Arthur Henry King, who later became a professor of English at Brigham Young University, had studied and taught world literature in England and Scandinavia for many years before he investigated Latter-day Saint history and doctrine. The Prophet’s account of the First Vision “deeply impressed” him with its unstudied, straightforward language: “He is not trying to make me cry or feel ecstatic. That struck me, and that began to build my testimony, for I could see that this man was telling the truth.”⁵⁰ The Spirit bears witness to the truth of Joseph Smith’s words: “For I had seen a vision; I knew it, and I knew that God knew it, and I could not deny it, neither dared I do it; at least I knew that by so doing I would offend God, and come under condemnation” (JS–H 1:25). □

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Gospel topics: Church history, First Vision, Joseph Smith, revelation
NOTES

1. Davis Bitton, *Historical Dictionary of Mormonism* (Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1994), p. 86. Quotations in this article are verbally exact but in some instances have been conservatively edited for normalization of punctuation or spelling.

2. For the first 1838 record of writing “a history of this Church from the earliest period of its existence,” see Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1992), 2:233, 237.

3. *Times and Seasons*, 15 Mar. 1842, pp. 726–28; 1 Apr. 1842, pp. 748–49. For background on the 1839 drafts of the history, see *Papers of Joseph Smith* 1:230–31, 265–67. In this article, the account is called the 1838 history because the First Vision portion was produced then, though some writers call it the 1839 history because that is the year of its earliest known manuscript.



4. *History of the Church*, 1:1–8.

5. See Paul M. Angle and Earl Schenck Miers, *The Living Lincoln* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1955), pp. 305–7, 334–41.

6. For Levi Richards's report of the 1843 speech, see Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Religious Studies Center, 1980), p. 215. Text and full historical introductions of the remaining eight reports are found in *Papers of Joseph Smith* 1:1, 125–27, 265–67, 387–91, 405–9, 430, 444, 461. These eight accounts are also found in Milton R. Backman, *Joseph Smith's First Vision*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), pp. 155–77.

7. *Times and Seasons*, 1 Mar. 1842, pp. 706–10; reproduced in *History of the Church*, 4:535–41.

8. For the original form of the 1835 Joshua interview, see *Papers of Joseph Smith* 2:68–69.

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

10. *The Seer*, Mar. 1854, p. 228.

11. *Times and Seasons*, 2 Aug. 1841, p. 502; 16 Aug. 1841, p. 518; 1 Sept. 1841, p. 534.

12. *Times and Seasons*, 1 Mar. 1842, p. 707; reproduced in *History of the Church*, 4:536 and *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:430.

13. *Journal of Discourses*, 7:221.

14. *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:6–7.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 5. Perhaps there is only approximation in the unfinished 1832 manuscript, since it seems to say the event happened when Joseph had turned fifteen, or in his sixteenth year. Joseph gave a date for the vision only in his history composed for publication. There, early 1820 is consistent with turning fourteen and being in his fifteenth year (JS-H 1:7, 14, 22–23). His birthday, on December 23, may be part of the problem, since in a quick calculation from 1805, Joseph would seem to have been fifteen during 1820. Yet he remained fourteen until the end of that year.

17. Joseph notes in the 1835 Joshua conversation that he was impressed with the message of Matthew 7:7—"ask and you shall receive," as he renders it (*Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:125), and his whole search is summarized in the 1832 history (see *ibid.*, 1:5–6).

18. *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:127.

19. *Ibid.*, 1:6.

20. *Ibid.*, 1:391.

21. *Wayne Sentinel* (Palmyra, New York), 2 Mar. 1825.

22. Lucy Smith, preliminary manuscript of her history of Joseph Smith; these first dictation notes were editorially reworded in published editions.

23. *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:5.

24. Joshua Bradley, *Accounts of Religious Revivals in Many Parts of the United States from 1815 to 1818* (Albany, New York: G. J. Loomis, 1819), p. 223.

25. Joseph links the beginning of religious excitement to "the second year after our removal to Manchester" (JS-H 1:5). Indirect evidence for that time can mislead, however, since the Prophet specifically dates revival activity prior to early 1820.

26. On 28 June 1820, the *Palmyra Register* reported a death from overexertion after the victim bought liquor at "the Camp-ground"; a clarification on 5 July 1820 explained that intoxicants were available nearby but not "within the enclosure of their place of worship."

27. O. Turner, *History of the Pioneer Settlement of Phelps and Gorham's Purchase* (Rochester, New York: William Alling, 1852), p. 214. For background on Turner as a responsible editor, see Richard L. Anderson, "Circumstantial Confirmation of the First Vision through Reminiscences," *BYU Studies* 9 (Spring 1969): 376–79.

28. For descriptions of annual conferences and Sunday services near 1819, see "Circumstantial Confirmation," pp. 380–81.

29. George Peck, *The Life and Times of Rev. George Peck, D.D.* (New York: Nelson and Phillips, 1874), pp. 104–5.

30. *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:5.

31. Compare *Minutes Taken at the Several Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church . . . for the Year 1818* (New York: J. Soule and T. Mason, 1818), pp. 30–31, with *Minutes Taken at the Several Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church . . . for the Year 1819* (New York: J. Soule and T. Mason, 1819), pp. 36–37. Publication was at midyear, announcing coming conferences for August.

32. Farmington membership was eighty-seven in the *Minutes of the*

Ontario Baptist Association for 1818 (Canandaigua: J. A. Stevens, 1818), September 23 session; baptisms indicated are from the *Minutes of the Ontario Baptist Association* for the year 1819 (n.d., n.p.), September 22 session, which gives new total membership as 108. BYU Professor Milton V. Backman, Jr., studied regional Quaker records for Farmington and reported consistent additions, peaking in 1817 and then again in 1819. See *Joseph Smith's First Vision*, pp. 83–84.

33. "Records of the Presbytery of Geneva," Book C, pp. 37–38 (Feb. 1–4, 1820).

34. Statistics here come from the 1818 and 1819 reports (see note 32). Comparisons also involve figures from the 1817 conference at Palmyra, reported in the *Minutes of the Ontario Baptist Association* (Canandaigua: Messenger Office, 1817). Base figures from 1817 are adjusted to account for the transfer of a dozen congregations to adjoining associations that year.

35. Statistics here come from the 1818 and 1819 reports (see note 31). Comparisons also involve the *Minutes of the Several Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: Joshua Soule and Thomas Mason, 1817), pp. 29–30.

36. Individual churches are listed in *Extracts from the Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in . . . A.D. 1819* (Philadelphia: Thomas and William Bradford, 1819), pp. 205–7.

37. Statistics come from annual summaries from 1818 to 1820 in the *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church . . . A.D. 1789 to A.D. 1820 Inclusive* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, [1847]), pp. 696, 718–19, 742–43. Minutes of the local and regional associations show that the General Assembly received membership reports for the prior calendar year.

38. "Records of the Presbytery of Geneva," pp. 37–38; also in Backman, *Joseph Smith's First Vision*, pp. 92–93.

39. *Extracts from the Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church . . . A.D. 1820* (Philadelphia: Thomas and William Bradford, 1820), pp. 321–22.

40. *History of the Church*, 5:367.

41. Publication information on basic accounts appears in the opening notes above. For the editions of Pratt's pamphlet and Packard's publication, see Chad J. Flake, *A Mormon Bibliography, 1830–1930* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1978), entries 6041, 6501–6504. For help on rare pamphlets, I am indebted to BYU professor Peter Crawley, an expert on early Latter-day Saint publications.

42. *Correspondence between Joseph Smith the Prophet and Col. John Wentworth* (New York: John E. Page and L. R. Foster, 1844), preface by the publishers, February 1844.

43. What the Prophet sent Rupp is republished in *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:448–58.

44. Use of the term *First Vision* was inevitable as soon as multiple visions of the Prophet were publicized. On 14 November 1835, his journal speaks of his giving an investigator "a brief relation of my experience while in my juvenile years, say from 6 years old up to the time I received the first visitation of Angels, which was when I was about 14" (*Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2:79). Five days earlier (9 November 1835), the journal recorded an account of Joseph's seeing the Father, Son, and angels at age 14—so the term *first visitation* clearly refers to the First Vision.

45. Wilford Woodruff Journal, 11 June 1843, quoted in *Words of Joseph Smith*, p. 214.

46. *Words of Joseph Smith*, p. 356–57.

47. *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:444.

48. Levi Richards Diary, 11 June 1843, quoted in *Words of Joseph Smith*, p. 215.

49. "Latter Day Saints, by Joseph Smith, Nauvoo, Illinois," in I. Daniel Rupp, *HE PASA EKKLESIA: An Original History of the Religious Denominations at Present Existing in the United States* (Philadelphia: J. Y. Humphreys, 1844), pp. 404; also in *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:448. Joseph Smith added references to Amos 3:7 and Acts 1:2 on the need of direct revelation from God in carrying on his work.

50. Arthur Henry King, *The Abundance of the Heart* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1986), pp. 200, 201.



THE FIRST VISION, BY BRUCE BENNETT