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The Earliest Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision

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Abstract: The direct, primary historical sources pertaining to Joseph Smith's First Vision that are now known amount to ten accounts in thirteen documents—eight documents produced or reported in the first person by or from the Prophet himself, and five contemporary reports by others who heard him relate his experience and recorded what he said in the third person. The purpose of this essay is to identify and present these accounts and to consider the context in which each was created.



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Dean C. Jessee

The direct, primary historical sources pertaining to Joseph Smith's First Vision that are now known amount to ten accounts in thirteen documents—eight documents produced or reported in the first person by or from the Prophet himself,¹ and five contemporary reports by others who heard him relate his experience and recorded what he said in the third person. The purpose of this essay is to identify and present these accounts and to consider the context in which each was created.

First Vision Accounts in Context

From the beginning of his public ministry, Joseph Smith struggled to record the events of his life. The conditions in which he was raised did not facilitate a literary course; indigent circumstances, which required the labor of the entire Smith family to meet their daily needs, limited Joseph's schooling. He later wrote that he had been "deprived of the bennifit of an education suffice it to say I was nearly instructtid

1. The discussion in "First Vision Accounts," one of the Gospel Topics Essays, available on *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, <https://www.lds.org/topics/first-vision-accounts?lang=eng#1>, groups these eight first-person documents as four accounts because the content is so similar. Steven C. Harper, *Joseph Smith's First Vision: A Guide to the Historical Accounts* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012), 31–66, groups the first-person documents into five accounts.

in reading and writing and the ground <rules> of Arithmetic which const[it]uted my whole literary acquirements.”²

In light of Joseph’s background, it is not surprising that the boy Joseph did not record his experience that spring morning in 1820 after returning from the grove. Years later, still harboring misgivings about his ability to communicate with the pen, he yearned for deliverance from what he called “the little narrow prison . . . of paper pen and ink and a crooked broken scattered and imperfect language.”³ His writings contain occasional apologies for his lack of writing skill. Even had his literary preparations been ideal, the at-times-violent forces that dogged him continually were persistently present to disrupt his record-keeping ventures. Large gaps in his record coincide with periods of unrest and disorder in his life, and many important portions of his life’s story were either lost or never recorded.

Another factor that shaped the historiography of the First Vision grew out of the process of developing a plan for record keeping in the early years of the Church. Problems of defining the nature, scope, and format of a historical record limited the resultant archive, as did difficulties in finding and retaining capable clerical help to assist in the creation and care of the records. Following the 1830 revelation that initiated Joseph Smith’s record keeping,⁴ procedures for creating

2. “Letterbook 1,” 1, Joseph Smith Collection, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, available on Church Historian’s Press, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letterbook-1/7>; Karen Lynn Davidson and others, eds., *Histories: Volume 1, Joseph Smith Histories, 1832–1844*, vol. 1 of the Histories series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2012), 11.

3. Joseph Smith to William W. Phelps, November 27, 1832, copy in “Letterbook 1,” 4; Matthew C. Godfrey and others, eds., *Documents, Volume 2: July 1831–January 1833*, vol. 2 of the Documents series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, Richard Lyman Bushman, and Matthew J. Grow (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2013), 320.

4. The opening words of the revelation presented by Joseph Smith at the organization of the Church on April 6, 1830, were, “Behold there Shall <be> a Record ~~be~~ kept among you” (D&C 21:1). “Revelation Book 1,” Church History Library, available on Church Historian’s Press, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-book-1/12>; Robin Scott Jensen, Robert J. Woodford, and Steven C. Harper, eds., *Revelations and*

pertinent records were slow to develop. It took several years marked by false starts before a format was settled on and the enduring work began on Joseph Smith's history of the Church.⁵ As evidence of the challenges he faced, by October 29, 1839, when Joseph left Nauvoo for Washington, D.C., to present the Missouri grievances of his people before the federal government, only fifty-nine pages of his history had been written; and six days after his departure, his scribe, James Mulholland, died.⁶ After returning to Nauvoo in March 1840, Joseph lamented the passing of his "faithful scribe" and expressed disappointment that an adequate record of his Washington trip had not been kept: "I depended on Dr. Foster to keep my daily journal during this journey, but he has failed me."⁷ Robert B. Thompson, who was appointed General Church Clerk on October 3, 1840, continued writing the history where Mulholland left off. Nevertheless, only sixteen pages were added to the history before he too met an untimely death on August 27, 1841.⁸

By the time Willard Richards was appointed General Church Clerk and private secretary to the Prophet in December 1841, a mere 157 pages had been written of a history that would eventually number more than two thousand pages. This history, begun in 1838, would not be finished until 1856, twelve years after Joseph Smith's death.⁹ Shortly

Translations, Volume 1: Manuscript Revelation Books, vol. 1 of the Revelations and Translations series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2011), 22.

5. Now known as History, 1838–1856, with volumes A-1 through F-1.

6. "History, 1838–1856, Volume C-1 [2 November 1838–31 July 1842]," 1023, Church History Library, available on Church Historian's Press, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-Summary/history-1838-1856-volume-c-1-2-november-1838-31-july-1842/195>; Joseph Smith Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed., rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 4:46 (hereafter cited as *History of the Church*).

7. "History, 1838–1856, Volume C-1," 1023; *History of the Church*, 4:89.

8. "History, 1838–1856, Volume C-1," 1223; *History of the Church*, 4:89.

9. The manuscript of the History, 1838–1856, shows that the first fifty-nine pages were written by James Mulholland, that Robert B. Thompson wrote at least part of the next sixteen, and that William W. Phelps had written eighty-two pages before Willard Richards began writing. It was not until after Richards's

before his death, Joseph Smith summarized the problems that had beset his record keeping:

Since I have been engaged in laying the foundation of the Church of Jesus Christ <of Latter Day Saints> I have been prevented in various ways from continuing my Journal. and the History, in a manner satisfactory to myself, or in justice to the cause. Long imprisonments, vexatious and long continued Law Suits—The treachery of some of my Clerks; the death of others; and the poverty of myself and brethren from a continued plunder and driving, have prevented my handing down to posterity a connected memorandum of events, desirable to all lovers of truth.

He added, “I have continued to keep up a Journal in the best manner my circumstances would allow, and dictate for my history from time to time, as I have had opportunity, so that the labors and suffering of the first Elders and Saints of this last kingdom might not wholly be lost to the world.”¹⁰ The historical records of Joseph Smith’s life, including those pertaining to the First Vision, are best seen in this context.

appointment in December 1841 that any significant progress was made on writing the History. Part of volume A-1 of these histories is reproduced in Davidson and others, *Histories, Volume 1*, 187–463; all six parts of “History, 1838–1856,” are available on Church Historian’s Press, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/the-papers/histories/jspph3>. See also Dean C. Jessee, “The Writing of Joseph Smith’s History,” *BYU Studies* 11, no. 4 (1971): 439–73.

10. “History, 1838–1856, Volume C-1,” 1260; *History of the Church*, 4:470. Speaking to the newly appointed Twelve in February 1835, Joseph remarked, “If I now had in my possession, every decision which has been had, upon important items of doctrine and duties, which have been given since the commencement of this work, I would not part with it for any sum of money, but we have neglected to take minutes of such things, thinking, perhaps, that they would never benefit us afterward. . . . [A]nd now we cannot bear record to the church, and to the world, of the great and glorious manifestations which have been made to us, with that degree of power and authority, we otherwise could, if we now had these things to publish abroad.” “A Record of the Transactions of the Twelve Apostles . . .” 1–2, Church History Library, available on Church Historian’s Press, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/minute-book-1?p=90>; compare *History of the Church*, 2:198–99.

First Vision Accounts Produced by the Prophet

The Church records created during these turbulent years include eight documents in which Joseph Smith recorded details of his initial vision experience. Three of these, with minor differences, are duplications of a previous one.

1. JOSEPH SMITH HISTORY ACCOUNT (1832)

The first of these was a six-page autobiographical narrative intended to be a history of his life and “an account of the rise of the church of Christ,” but it was abruptly discontinued, evidently when a new plan for the history was conceived. It was written most probably between February and November 1832 on three leaves that were later cut from the ledger book that contained them.¹¹ This 1832 narrative contains the

11. “Letterbook 1,” 1; Davidson and others, *Histories, Volume 1*, 10.

Evidence for the 1832 date comes from handwriting identification and inspection of the ledger book that contained the severed pages. Davidson and others, *Histories, Volume 1*, 3. The handwriting reveals that the document was alternately penned by Joseph Smith and Frederick G. Williams, Joseph’s scribe and counselor in the First Presidency. Williams converted to the Church in fall 1830 and immediately left for Missouri. His handwriting in the beginning pages of the Kirtland Revelation Book shows that by February 1832 Williams was writing for Joseph Smith, after returning to Ohio. And according to his own statement, he was officially appointed on July 20 as the Prophet’s scribe. F. G. Williams, Statement, n.d., MS 782, Frederick G. Williams Papers, Church History Library, available on *Church History Library*, https://dcms.lds.org/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE5599432, image 18. From this it is evident that the writing of the History could have occurred as early as February 1832.

Nor is it likely that this history was written after November 27, 1832, since on that date the ledger book in which it was written was converted to a letterbook for recording important historical Church documents. The evidence for this is two-fold. First, although they were later cut from the volume, the three leaves containing this history match the cut edges still protruding from the binding of the ledger book. The terminal letters of words severed when the pages were removed also match. The cut page stubs immediately precede the November 27, 1832, letter entry, the first item in the letterbook. Second, the page numbering indicates this arrangement. The pages of the history were numbered one through six, and the November 27 letter begins on page 1a. Both the last page of the history and the pages of the letter were written by Frederick Williams. He would not have started numbering the pages containing the letter with “1a” had there not been a preceding page 1.

3
marvelous even in the likeness of him who created ^{them}
and when I considered upon these things my heart exclaim-
-ed well hath the wise man said ^{it is as} ^{that} the fool saith in
his heart there is no God my heart exclaimed all all
these bear testimony and bespeak an omnipotent
and omnipotent power a being who maketh clay and
deceiveth and bindeth all things in their courses who
filleth eternity who was and is and will be from all
eternity ^{to} eternity and when I considered all these things
and that ^{that} being saith such to worship him as wor-
-ship him in spirit and in truth therefore I cried unto
the Lord for mercy for there was none else to whom I could go
to obtain mercy and the Lord heard my cry in the wilderness
and while in ^{the} attitude of calling upon the Lord, a pillar of
fire light above the brightness of the sun at noon day
came down from above and rested upon me and I was filled
with the spirit of God and the ^{Lord} opened the heavens upon
me and I saw the Lord and he spake unto me saying
Joseph ^{thy} sins are forgiven thee go thy ^{way} ^{and} walk in my
statutes and keep my commandments behold I am the
Lord of glory I was crucified for the world that all them
who believe on my name may have eternal life ⁱⁿ the world
both in sin and at ^{thy} time and none doeth good in
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
those which ^{have} been spoken by the mouth of the prophets
to me of old behold and lo I come quickly as it was
written of me in the clouds ⁱⁿ the glory of my Father
and my soul was filled with love and for many days I
could rejoice with great joy and the Lord was with me
but could find none that would believe the heavenly
vision nevertheless I pondered these things in my heart
about that time very much and but after many days

Joseph Smith's first written account of the First Vision in his own handwriting in "Letterbook 1," p. 3. Courtesy Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.

earliest known account of Joseph's First Vision and the only account in his own handwriting. In the transcription that follows, the bold-faced type indicates the portions of the document written in the Prophet's handwriting. The remainder is in the handwriting of his secretary, Frederick G. Williams. Underlining is reproduced from the original document. Editorial marks include angle brackets < > to indicate above-the-line insertions. Strikeouts are shown as ~~written~~. Brackets [] indicate editorial comments.

A History of the life of Joseph Smith Jr. an account of his mar-
 vilous experience and of all the mighty acts which he doeth in
 the name of Jesus Ch[r]ist the son of the living God of whom he
 beareth record and also an account of the rise of the church of
 Christ in the eve of time according as the Lord brought forth and
 established by his hand <firstly> he receiving the testamony from
 on high secondly the ministering of Angels thirdly the reception
 of the holy Priesthood by the ministring of—Aangels to adminster
 the letter of the Law <Gospel—> <—the Law and Commandments
 as they were given unto him—> and in <the> ordinencs, forthly a
 confirmation and reception of the high Priesthood after the holy
 order of the son of the living God power and ordinance from on
 high to preach the Gospel in the administration and demonstration
 of the spirit the Kees of the Kingdom of God confere^d upon him
 and the continuation of the blessings of God to him &c—
 I was born in the town of Charon [Sharon] in the <State> of Vermont
 North America on the twenty third day of December AD 1805 of
 goodly Parents who spared no pains to instruct<ing> me in <the>
 christian religion[.] at the age of about ten years my Father Joseph
 Smith Seignior moved to Palmyra Ontario [now Wayne] County
 in the State of New York and being in indigent circumstances were
 obliged to labour hard for the support of a large Family having
 nine children and as it required their exertions of all that were able
 to render any assistance for the support of the Family therefore we
 were deprived of the bennifit of an education suffice it to say I was
 nearly instructid in reading and writing and the ground <rules>
 of Arithmatic which constuted my whole literary acquirements. At
 about the age of twelve years my mind become seriously imprest
 [p. 1] with regard to the all important concerns of for the wellfare
 of my immortal Soul which led me to searching the scriptures
 believeing as I was taught, that they contained the word of God
 thus applying myself to them and my intimate acquaintance with

those of different denominations led me to marvel exceedingly for I discovered that ~~<they did not adorn>~~ instead of adorning their profession by a holy walk and Godly conversation agreeable to what I found contained in that sacred depository this was a grief to my Soul thus from the age of twelve years to fifteen I pondered many things in my heart concerning the situation of the world of mankind the contentions and divisions the wickedness and abominations and the darkness which pervaded the ~~of the~~ minds of mankind my mind become exceedingly distressed for I become convicted of my sins and by searching the scriptures I found that ~~man~~ ~~<mankind>~~ did not come unto the Lord but that they had apostatised from the true and living faith and there was no society or denomination that built upon the gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the new testament and I felt to mourn for my own sins and for the sins of the world for I learned in the scriptures that God was the same yesterday to day and forever that he was no respecter to persons for he was God for I looked upon the sun the glorious luminary of the earth and also the moon rolling in their majesty through the heavens and also the stars shining in their courses and the earth also upon which I stood and the beast of the field and the fowls of heaven and the fish of the waters and also man walking forth upon the face of the earth in majesty and in the strength of beauty whose power and intelligence in governing the things which are so exceeding great and [p. 2] marvellous even in the likeness of him who created ~~him~~ ~~<them>~~ and when I considered upon these things my heart exclaimed well hath the wise man said ~~the~~ ~~<it is a>~~ fool ~~<that>~~ saith in his heart there is no God my heart exclaimed all all these bear testimony and bespeak an omnipotent and omnipresent power a being who maketh Laws and decreeth and bindeth all things in their bounds who filleth Eternity who was and is and will be from all Eternity to Eternity and when ~~<I>~~ considered all these things and that ~~<that>~~ being seeketh such to worship him as worship him in spirit and in truth therefore I cried unto the Lord for mercy for there was none else to whom I could go and ~~to~~ obtain mercy and the Lord heard my cry in the wilderness and while in ~~<the>~~ attitude of calling upon the Lord ~~<in the 16th year of my age>~~ a pillar of fire light above the brightness of the sun at noon day come down from above and rested upon me and I was filled with the spirit of god and the ~~<Lord>~~ opened the heavens upon me and 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 and at this time and none doeth good no not one they have turned asside from the gospel and keep not <my> commandments they draw near to me with their lips while their hearts are far from me and mine anger is kindling against the inhabitants of the earth to visit them acording to th[e]ir ungodliness and to bring to pass that which <hath> been spoken by the mouth of the prophets and Ap[o]stles behold and lo I come quickly as it [is] written of me in the cloud <clothed> in the glory of my Father and my soul was filled with love and for many days I could rejoice with great Joy and the Lord was with me but could find none that would believe the hevny vision nevertheless I pondered these things in my heart.¹²

2 AND 3. JOSEPH SMITH JOURNAL ACCOUNT
(NOVEMBER 9, 1835) AND HISTORY (1834–1836)

On November 27, 1832, Joseph began keeping a journal, a practice which he continued to the end of his life. Although the beginning pages were in his own handwriting, much of the journal was dictated to scribes and was eventually written entirely from their own observations. Extensive gaps in the journal must be bridged so far as possible, by reference to outside sources. Under the date of November 9, 1835, Joseph dictated to his clerk Warren Parrish the visit of a religious eccentric by the name of Robert Matthews, who claimed to be Joshua, a Jewish minister. During the ensuing conversation Joseph Smith related his early vision experience:

After I had made some remarks concerning the bible I commenced giving him a relation of the circumstances connected with the coming forth of the book of Mormon, as follows—being wrought up in my mind, respecting the subject of religion and looking ~~upon~~ <at> the different systems taught the children of men, I knew not who was right or who was wrong and concidering it of the first importance that I should be right, in matters that involved eternal consequences; being thus perplexed in mind I retired to the silent grove and bow[e]d down before the Lord, under a realising sense that he

12. "Letterbook 1," 1–3; Davidson and others, *Histories, Volume 1*, 10–13.

had said (if the bible be true) ask and you shall receive knock and it shall be opened seek and you shall find and again, if any man lack wisdom let him ask of God who giveth to all men libarally and upbra-deth not; information was what I most desired at this time, and with a fixed determination I to obtain it, I called upon the Lord for the first time, in the place above stated or in other words I made a fruitless attempt to pray, my tounge seemed to be swollen in my mouth, so that I could not utter, I heard a noise behind me like some person walking towards me, <I> strove again to pray, but could not, the noise of walking seemed to draw nearer, I sprung up on my feet, and [p. 23] and looked around, but saw no person or thing that was calculated to produce the noise of walking, I kneeled again my mouth was opened and my tounge liberated, and I called on the Lord in mighty prayer, a pillar of fire appeared above my head, it presently rested down upon my <me> head, and filled me with joy unspeakable, a person-age appeared in the midst, of this pillar of flame which was spread all around, and yet nothing consumed, another personage soon appeared like unto the first, he said unto me thy sins are forgiven thee, he testified unto me that Jesus Christ is the son of God; <and I saw many angels in this vision> I was about 14. years old when I received this first communication.¹³

This journal entry soon found its way into another historical document, Joseph Smith's History, 1834–1836. This particular effort to compile materials toward the publication of a history of the Church had commenced in October 1834 when Oliver Cowdery, the editor of the Church's magazine, the *Messenger and Advocate*, began publishing the history in Kirtland, Ohio. The work appeared serially, initially in the form of correspondence between Cowdery and William W. Phelps, and was anticipated to become "a full history of the rise of the church of the Latter Day Saints, and the most interesting parts of its progress, to the present time." It was announced at the outset by the

13. "Journal, 1835–1836," November 9, 1835, 23–24, Church History Library, available on Church Historian's Press, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-1835-1836/24>; Dean C. Jessee, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds., *Journals, Volume 1: 1832–1839*, vol. 1 of the Journals series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2008), 87–88.

editor that “our brother J. SMITH jr. has offered to assist us. Indeed, there are many items connected with the fore part of this subject that render his labor indispensable. With his labor and with authentic documents now in our possession, we hope to render this a pleasing and agreeable narrative.”¹⁴ In the series of eight letters that followed, Cowdery presented various historical events, beginning in the October 1834 issue with an account of the priesthood restoration, and concluding in the October 1835 issue with the visit of Joseph Smith to Harmony, Pennsylvania, shortly after receiving the Book of Mormon plates in 1827.

Toward the end of 1835, Frederick G. Williams and Warren Parrish, two of Joseph Smith's clerks, then copied the eight Cowdery-Phelps letters into a large record book that was designated to become a history of Joseph's life. Following the transcription of the eight published letters, the format of the anticipated history was changed when another clerk, Warren Cowdery, began copying Joseph Smith's journal into the record, commencing with the September 22, 1835, entry. Warren prefaced his addition with this statement: “Here the reader will observe, that the narrative assumes a different form. The subject of it becoming daily more and more noted, the writer deemed it proper to give a plain, simple, yet faithful narration of every important item in his every-day-occurrences.”¹⁵ There then follows 142 pages of Joseph Smith's journal entries covering the period from September 22, 1835, to January 18, 1836, when the record was abruptly discontinued, evidently as a different approach to organizing the history again became desirable. Except for a few grammatical alterations to the text, such as introductory sentences changed from first to third person, the entry included by Warren Cowdery for November 9, 1835, in which Joseph

14. O. Cowdery to W. W. Phelps, September 7, 1834 [Letter 1], printed in *Messenger and Advocate* 1 (October 1834): 13, available on “Mormon Publications: 19th and 20th Centuries,” *BYU Harold B. Lee Library Digital Collections*, <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/cdm/ref/collection/NCMP1820-1846/id/7012>.

15. “History, 1834–1836,” 105, Church History Library, available on Church Historian's Press, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1834-1836/109>; Davidson and others, *Histories, Volume 1*, 94.

related his 1820 Vision experience to Matthews, is a duplication of the Joseph Smith journal entry for the same date (document 2 above); and thus these two accounts are listed together.

The conversation soon turned upon the subject of Religion, and after the subject of this narrative [Joseph] had made some remarks concerning the bible, he commenced giving him [Matthews] a relation of the circumstances, connected with the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, which were nearly as follows. Being wrought up in my mind respecting the subject of Religion, and looking at the different systems taught the children of men, I knew not who was right or who was wrong, but considered it of the first importance to me that I should be ~~aright~~ right, in matters of so much moment, matter[s] involving eternal consequences. Being thus perplexed in mind I retired to the silent grove. and there bowed down before the Lord, under a realizing sense, (if the bible be true) ask and you shall receive, knock and it shall be opened, seek and you shall find, and again, if any man lack wisdom, let [him ask] of God who giveth to all men liberally & upbraideth not. Information was what I most desired, [p. 120] ~~with age. He had~~ at this time. and with a fixed determination to obtain it, I called on the Lord for the first time in the place above stated, or in other words, I made a fruitless attempt to pray My tongue seemed to be swoolen in my mouth, so that I could not utter. I heard a noise behind me like some one walking towards me: I strove again to pray, but could not; the noise of walking seemed to draw nearer; I sprang upon my feet and looked round, but saw no person, or thing that was calculated to produce the noise of walking. I kneeled again, my mouth was opened and my tongue loosed; I called on the Lord in mighty prayer. A pillar of fire appeared above my head; which presently rested down upon me, and filled me with unspeakable joy. A personage appeared in the midst of this pillar of flame, which was spread all around and yet nothing consumed. Another personage soon appeared like unto the first: he said unto me thy sins are forgiven thee. He testified also unto me that Jesus Christ is the son of God. I saw many angels in this vision. I was about 14 years old when I received this first communication.¹⁶

16. "History, 1834-1836," 120-22; Davidson and others, *Histories, Volume 1*, 115-16.

4 AND 5. JOSEPH SMITH JOURNAL ACCOUNT
(NOVEMBER 14, 1835) AND HISTORY (1834–1836)

On November 14, 1835, five days after the Robert Matthews visit, Joseph Smith related his vision to Erastus Holmes from Newberry, Clermont County, Ohio. Holmes had called “to make inquiry about the establishment of the church of Latter-day Saints and to be instructed more perfectly in our doctrine.” Joseph dictated a summary of his conversation with Holmes that his clerk Warren Parrish recorded in the Prophet’s journal.

I commenced and gave him a brief relation of my experience while in my [p. 36] 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, years old and also the the visitations that I received afterward, concerning the book of Mormon, and a short account of the rise and progress of the church.¹⁷

In a fashion similar to the inclusion of the November 9 journal entry explained above, the November 14 entry was also incorporated into the 1834–1836 History as follows:

He (Smith) commenced and gave him a brief relation of his experience while in his youthful days, say from the age of six years up to the time he received the first visitation of Angels which was when he was about 14 years old. He also gave him an account of the revelations he had afterward received concerning the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, and a succinct account of the rise and progress of the church up to this date.¹⁸

6. JOSEPH SMITH HISTORY ACCOUNT (1838)

In March 1838, Joseph Smith moved his family and the center of the Church from Kirtland, Ohio, to Far West, Missouri. Only a month later, on April 27, 1838, while engaged in establishing a new gathering place for the Latter-day Saints in Caldwell County, Missouri, he again began writing a history of the Church “from the earliest perion

17. “Journal, 1835–1836,” November 14, 1835, 36; Jessee, Ashurst-McGee, and Jensen, *Journals, Volume 1*, 100.

18. “History, 1834–1836,” 129; Davidson and others, *Histories, Volume 1*, 124.

[period] of its existance,”¹⁹ this time with the help of his counselor Sidney Rigdon and his secretary George W. Robinson.²⁰ Only a few pages of the history were written before the project was suspended, no doubt due to the conditions that forced the removal of the Latter-day Saints from the state later that year and resulted in the imprisonment of the Prophet. Not until June 1839, shortly after his arrival in Illinois from his six-month confinement in Missouri, and again only one month after moving his family into a small log house near Commerce (later Nauvoo), Illinois, to begin anew the process of community building, did Joseph Smith turn his attention back to writing the history. Dictating to James Mulholland,²¹ Joseph continued the work he had commenced the previous year²²—a work that some

19. “Journal, March–September 1838,” April 27, 1838, p. 34, Church History Library, available on Church Historian’s Press, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-march-september-1838/20>; Jessee, Ashurst-McGee, and Jensen, *Journals, Volume 1*, 260.

20. The original manuscript of this 1838 document is not extant—the text was incorporated into later surviving manuscripts. See discussion at Church Historian’s Press, “Joseph Smith’s Historical Enterprise,” *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/intro/series-introduction-for-the-histories-series?p=1>.

21. “History, 1838–1856, Volume C-1,” 954; see also *History of the Church*, 3:375.

22. When Joseph began dictating this history to James Mulholland on June 11, 1839, the Prophet’s large record book containing the above 1835 History (“History, 1834–1836”) account was turned over and re-titled as book “A-1” (the first book of the ensuing multivolume history). Though it was now 1839, dates in the opening pages of the narrative indicate that the Prophet was dictating from text that had been written in 1838. On p. 1, reference is made to the “eighth year since the organization of said Church.” Church Historian’s Press, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-june-1839-circa-1841-draft-2/1>; Davidson and others, *Histories, Volume 1*, 204. And on p. 8, “this day, being the Second day of May, One thousand Eight hundred and thirty eight.” “History, circa June 1839–circa 1841,” 8; Davidson and others, *Histories, Volume 1*, 238; *History of the Church*, 1:2, 18–19. Joseph Smith’s journal for April 27, 1838, in the hand of George W. Robinson, notes that he spent the day “writing a history of this Church from the earliest perion [period] of its existance up to this date.” “Journal, March–September 1838,” 34; Jessee, Ashurst-McGee, and Jensen, *Journals, Volume 1*, 260. During the first four days of May the journal adds that the “first Presidency [were engaged] in writing the history of the Church.” “Journal, March–September 1838,” April 27, 30, and May 1–4, 1838, pp. 34, 37–38; Jessee, Ashurst-McGee, and Jensen, *Journals, Volume 1*, 264;

sixty years later would be edited by the Church historian Brigham H. Roberts and published in six volumes as the *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Period I, History of Joseph Smith, the Prophet, by Himself*. Joseph's histories are now being published in the Histories series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*. Volume 1 of that series presents this 1838 version of the First Vision account.²³ The beginning pages of the 1838 history were in time canonized as scripture in the Pearl of Great Price and contain the best-known account of the First Vision.²⁴

Owing to the many reports which have been put in circulation by evil disposed and designing persons in relation to the rise and progress of the Church of <Jesus Christ of> Latter day Saints, all of which have been designed by the authors thereof to militate against its character as a church, and its progress in the world; I have been induced to write this history so as to disabuse the publick mind, and put all enquirers after truth into possession of the facts as they have

History of the Church, 3:25–26. The statement on p. 8 of the A-1 History confirms this was the narrative being written on May 2, 1838.

Further evidence that the beginning pages of “History, 1838–1856, Volume A-1” were copied in 1839 from the Prophet’s dictation beginning with the account written the previous year is that the first fifty-nine pages of the manuscript are in the handwriting of Mulholland, who did not begin writing for Joseph Smith until September 3, 1838; a short time later he discontinued writing during the Missouri imprisonment of the Prophet (October 1838–March 1839) and did not recommence until April 22, 1839. James Mulholland, Journal, Church History Library. Mulholland’s journal entry for June 11, 1839, notes that he was “writing &c for Church history.” In addition, the Prophet’s History for that date states, “I commenced dictating my history for my Clerk—James Mulholland to write,” and on June 12 and 13, Joseph’s History reads, “I continued to dictate my history.” “History, 1838–1856, Volume C-1,” 954; *History of the Church*, 3:375–76.

See also Church Historian’s Press, “Introduction to History Drafts, 1838–1842,” *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/intro/introduction-to-history-drafts-1838-1842?p=1>; and “Historical Introduction” to “History, 1838–1856, Volume A-1,” on Church Historian’s Press, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-a-1-23-december-1805-30-august-1834/1#historical-intro>.

23. Davidson and others, *Histories, Volume 1*, 204, 208–18.

24. Joseph Smith—History; *History of the Church*, 1:1–20, 32–33, 39–44.

transpired in relation both to myself and the Church as far as I have such facts in possession.

In this history I will present the various events in relation to this Church in truth and righteousness as they have transpired, or as they at present exist, being now the eighth year since the organization of said Church.

I was born in the year of our Lord One thousand Eight hundred and five, on the twenty third day of December, in the town of Sharon, Windsor County, State of Vermont. <Note A see page 131>²⁵ My father Joseph Smith Senior <see Note E [C] page 2, adenda. My Father>²⁶ left the State of Vermont and moved to Palmyra, Ontario, (now Wayne) County, in the State of New York when I was in my tenth year. <or thereabouts.>

In about four years after my father's arrival at Palmyra, he moved with his family into Manchester in the same County of Ontario. His family consisting of eleven souls, namely, My Father Joseph Smith, My Mother Lucy Smith whose name previous to her marriage was Mack, daughter of Solomon Mack [Sr.], my brothers Alvin (who <died Nov. 19th: 1823 in the 25 year of his age.> ~~is now dead~~) Hyrum, Myself, Samuel – Harrison, William, Don Carloss, and my Sisters Soph[r]onia, Cathrine [Katharine] and Lucy.

Sometime in the second year after our removal to Manchester, there was in the place where we lived an unusual excitement on the subject of religion. It commenced with the Methodist<s>, but soon became general among all the sects in that region of country, indeed the whole district of Country seemed affected by it and great [p. 1] multitudes united themselves to the different religious parties, which created no small stir and division among the people, Some crying, “Lo here” and some Lo there. Some were contending for the Methodist faith, Some for the Presbyterian, and some for the Baptist; for

25. The insertion “Note A see page 131,” added by Willard Richards in 1842 (see Davidson and others, *Histories, Volume 1*, 205n37), leads to the Prophet's account of his 1813 leg operation. Addenda note A, “History, 1838–1856, Volume A-1,” 131. See “Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845,” book 2, p. 11, available on Church Historian's Press, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1844-1845/27>; see also LeRoy S. Wirthlin, “Joseph Smith's Boyhood Operation: An 1813 Surgical Success,” *BYU Studies* 21, no. 2 (1981): 131–54.

26. This later insertion by Willard Richards points to birth dates and places of Joseph Smith's paternal ancestors (see Davidson and others, *Histories, Volume 1*, 205n38). Addenda note C, “History, 1838–1856, Volume A-1,” 2 [addenda].

notwithstanding the great love which the converts to these different faiths expressed at the time of their conversion, and the great Zeal manifested by the respective Clergy who were active in getting up and promoting this extraordinary scene of religious feeling in order to have every body converted as they were pleased to call it, let them join what sect they pleased[.] Yet when the Converts began to file off some to one party and some to another, it was seen that the seemingly good feelings of both the Priests and the Converts were ~~mere~~ ~~pretence~~ more pretended than real, for a scene of great confusion and bad feeling ensued; Priest contending against priest, and convert against convert so that all their good feelings one for another (if they ever had any) were entirely lost in a strife of words and a contest about opinions.

I was at this time in my fifteenth year. My Fathers family was <ere> proselyted to the Presbyterian faith and four of them joined that Church, Namely, My Mother Lucy, My Brothers Hyrum, Samuel Harrison, and my Sister Soph[r]onia.

During this time of great excitement my mind was called up to serious reflection and great uneasiness, but though my feelings were deep and often pungent, still I kept myself aloof from all these parties though I attended their several meetings <as often> as occasion would permit. But in process of time my mind became somewhat partial to the Methodist sect, and I felt some desire to be united with them, but so great was the confusion and strife amongst the different denominations that it was impossible for a person young as I was and so unacquainted with men and things to come to any certain conclusion who was right and who was wrong.

My mind at different times was greatly excited for the cry and tumult were so great and incessant. The Presbyterians were most decided against the Baptists and Methodists, and used all their powers of either reason or sophistry to prove their errors, or at least to make the people think they were in error. On the other hand the Baptists and Methodists in their turn were equally Zealous in endeavoring to establish their own tenets and disprove all others.

In the midst of this war of words, and tumult of opinions, I often said to myself, what is to be done? Who of all these parties are right? Or are they all wrong together? and if any one of them be right which is it? And how shall I know it?

While I was laboring under the extreme difficulties caused by the contests of these parties of religionists, I was one day reading the Epistle of James, First Chapter and fifth verse which reads, "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.[”] Never did any passage of scripture come with more power to the heart of man that this did at this time to mine. It seemed to enter with great force into every feeling of my heart. I reflected on it again and again, knowing that if any person needed wisdom from God, I did, for how to act I did not know and unless I could get more wisdom than I then had would never know, for the teachers of religion of the different sects understood the same [p. 2] passage of Scripture so differently as <to> destroy all confidence in settling the question by an appeal to the Bible. At length I came to the conclusion that I must either remain in darkness and confusion or else I must do as James directs, that is, Ask of God. I at last came to the determination to ask of God, concluding that if he gave wisdom to them that lacked wisdom, and would give liberally and not upbraid, I might venture. So in accordance with this my determination to ask of God, I retired to the woods to make the attempt. It was on the morning of a beautiful clear day early in the spring of Eightteen hundred and twenty. It was the first time in my life that I had <made> such an attempt, for amidst all <my> anxieties I had never as yet made the attempt to pray vocally.

After I had retired into the place where I had previously designed to go, having looked 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 <siezed> upon by some power which entirely overcame me and <had> such astonishing influence over me as to bind my tongue so that I could not speak. Thick darkness gathered around me and it seemed to me for a time as if I were doomed to sudden destruction. But exerting all my powers to call upon God to deliver me out of the power of this enemy which had siezed upon me, and at the very moment when I was ready to sink into despair and abandon myself to destruction, not to an imaginary ruin but to the power of some actual being from the unseen world who had such a marvelous power as I had never before felt in any being. Just at this moment of great alarm I saw a pillar <of> light exactly over my head above the brightness of the sun, which descended ~~gracefully~~ gradually untill it fell upon me. It no sooner appeared than I found myself delivered from the enemy which held me bound. When the light rested upon me I saw two personages (whose brightness and glory defy all description) standing above me in the air. One of <them> spake unto me calling me by name and said (pointing to the other) “This is my beloved Son, Hear him.”

My object in going to enquire of the Lord was to know which of all the sects was right, that I might know which to join. No sooner therefore did I get possession of myself so as to be able to speak, than I asked the personages who stood above me in the light, which of all the sects was right, (for at this time it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong) and which I should join. I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong, and the Personage who addressed me said that all their Creeds were an abomination in his sight, that those professors were all corrupt, that “they draw near to me ~~to~~ with their lips but their hearts are far from me, They teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of Godliness but they deny the power thereof.” He again forbade me to join with any of them and many other thing[s] did he say unto me which I cannot write at this time. When I came to myself again I found myself lying on <my> back looking up into Heaven. <B See Note P 132>²⁷ Some few days after I had this vision I happened to be in company with one of the Methodist Preachers who was very active in the before mentioned religious excitement and conversing with him on the subject of religion I took occasion to give him an account of the vision which I had had.

I was greatly surprised at his behaviour, he treated my communication not only lightly but with great contempt, saying it was all of the Devil, that there was no such thing as visions or revelations in these days, that all such things had ceased with the [p. 3] apostles and that there never would be any more of them.

I soon found however that my telling the story had excited a great deal of prejudice against me among professors of religion and was the cause of great persecution which continued to increase and though

27. This insertion is in the handwriting of Willard Richards and references “History, 1838–1856, Volume A-1,” 123–33. “When the light had departed I had no strength, but soon recovering in some degree I went home. And as I leaned up to the fire piece Mother enquired what the matter was. I replied never mind all is well—I am well enough—off. I then told my mother that I have learned for myself that Presbyterianism is not true.—It seems as though the adversary was aware at a very early period of my life that I was destined to prove a disturbere & [p. 132] annoyer of his kingdom, or else why should the powers of Darkness combine against me. why the oppression & persecution that arose against me, almost in my infancy?” According to Richards’s diary, this note was written on December 2, 1842, which explains why it does not appear in the history in the *Times and Seasons* that began publication in March of that year. Willard Richards, Diary, December 2, 1842, Joseph Smith’s office papers 1835–1844, Church History Library.

I was an obscure boy only between fourteen and fifteen years of age <or thereabouts,> and my circumstances in life such as to make a boy of no consequence in the world, yet men of high standing would take notice sufficiently to excite the public mind against me and create a hot persecution, and this was common <among> all the sects: all united to persecute me. It has often caused me ~~m~~ serious reflection both then and since, how very strange it was that an obscure boy of a little over fourteen years of age and one too who was doomed to the necessity of obtaining a scanty maintainance by his daily labor should be thought a character of sufficient importance to attract the attention of the great ones of the most popular sects of the day so as to create in them a spirit of the bitterest persecution and reviling. But strange or not, so it was, and was often cause of great sorrow to myself. However it was nevertheless a fact, that I had had a Vision. I have thought since that I felt much like ~~as~~ Paul did when he made his defence before King Agrippa and related the account of the vision he had when ~~the~~ saw a light and heard a voice, but still there were but few who believed him, some said he was dishonest, others said he was mad, and he was ridiculed and reviled, But all this did not destroy the reality of his vision. He had seen a vision he knew he had, and <all> the persecution under Heaven could not make it otherwise, and though they should persecute him unto death Yet he knew and would know to his latest breath that he had both seen a light and heard a voice speaking unto him and all the world could not make him think or believe otherwise. So it was with me, I had actually seen a light and in the midst of that light I saw two personages, and they did in reality speak <un>to me, or one of them did, And though I was hated and persecuted for saying that I had seen a vision, Yet it was true and while they were persecuting me reviling me and speaking all manner of evil against me falsely for so saying, I was led to say in my heart, why persecute <me> for telling the truth? I have actually seen a vision, “and who am I that I can withstand God” Or why does the world think to make me deny what I have actually seen, for I had seen a vision, I knew it, and I knew that God knew it, and I could not deny it, neither dare I do it, at least I knew that by so doing <I> would offend God and come under condemnation.

I had now got my mind satisfied so far as the sectarian world was concerned, that it was not my duty to join with any of them, but continue as I was untill further directed, ~~for~~ I had found the testimony of James to be true.²⁸

28. “History, 1838–1856, Volume A-1,” 1–4; Davidson and others, *Histories, Volume 1*, 204–18.

7 AND 8. JOSEPH SMITH ACCOUNT FOR
 BARSTOW HISTORY (1842) AND
 FOR RUPP HISTORY (1843)

In 1842, John Wentworth, the twenty-six-year-old editor of the Chicago *Democrat*, requested from Joseph Smith a “sketch of the rise, progress, persecution and faith of the Latter-day Saints” for a friend of his, George Barstow, who was writing a history of New Hampshire. Joseph Smith responded to his request and even included a short account of his First Vision with the response. The historical sketch supplied to Wentworth was apparently not used by Barstow, but it was published in the March 1, 1842, issue of the Nauvoo paper *Times and Seasons* and became the first published account of the Vision in the United States.

I was born in the town of Sharon Windsor co., Vermont, on the 23d of December, A.D. 1805. When ten years old my parents removed to Palmyra New York, where we resided about four years, and from thence we removed to the town of Manchester.

My father was a farmer and taught me the art of husbandry. When about fourteen years of age I began to reflect upon the importance of being prepared for a future state, and upon enquiring the plan of salvation I found that there was a great clash in religious sentiment; if I went to one society they referred me to one plan, and another to another; each one pointing to his own particular creed as the summum bonum of perfection: considering that all could not be right, and that God could not be the author of so much confusion I determined to investigate the subject more fully, believing that if God had a church it would not be split up into factions, and that if he taught one society to worship one way, and administer in one set of ordinances, he would not teach another principles which were diametrically opposed. Believing the word of God I had confidence in the declaration of James; “If any man lack wisdom let him ask of God who giveth to all men liberally and upbraideth not and it shall be given him,” I retired to a secret place in a grove and began to call upon the Lord, while fervently engaged in supplication my mind was taken away from the objects with which I was surrounded, and I was enraptured in a heavenly vision and saw two glorious personages who exactly resembled each other in features, and likeness, surrounded with a brilliant light which eclipsed the sun at noon-day. 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.²⁹

In 1843, Israel Daniel Rupp, a Pennsylvania historian, planned to publish a work containing the history and doctrine of religious organizations in the United States as written by representatives of each church. In July 1843, Rupp requested from Joseph Smith a chapter on the Mormons. The book containing the Prophet’s response was published the following year under the title *An Original History of the Religious Denominations at Present Existing in the United States*. The portion of the chapter dealing with the First Vision was essentially a reprint of the statement sent to John Wentworth the previous year with very slight changes.

When about fourteen years of age I began to reflect upon the importance of being prepared for a future state, and upon inquiring the plan of salvation I found that there was a great clash in religious sentiment; if I went to one society they referred me to one plan, and another to another; each one pointing to his own particular creed as the summum bonum of perfection: considering that all could not be right, and that God could not be the author of so much confusion I determined to investigate the subject more fully, believing that if God had a Church it would not be split up into factions, and that if he taught one society to worship one way, and administer in one set of ordinances, he would not teach another principles which were diametrically opposed. Believing the word of God I had confidence in the declaration of James; ‘If any man lack wisdom let him ask of God who giveth <to all men> liberally and upbraideth not and it shall be given him,’ I retired to a secret place in a grove and began to call upon the Lord; while fervently engaged in supplication my mind was taken away from the objects with which I was surrounded, and I was enwrapped in a heavenly vision and saw two glorious personages who exactly resembled each other in features and likeness, surrounded with a brilliant light which eclipsed the sun at noon

29. Joseph Smith, “Church History,” *Times and Seasons* 3 (March 1, 1842): 706–7, available on Church Historian’s Press, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/church-history-1-march-1842/1>; Davidson and others, *Histories, Volume 1*, 492–94. Appended to this account was the statement of belief later canonized as the Articles of Faith.

day. 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.³⁰

Contemporaneous First Vision Accounts by Others

In addition to the eight accounts of Joseph Smith's Vision directly formulated by him, five others were written by witnesses who heard him relate the experience and reported what he said during his lifetime.

1. ORSON PRATT REPORT (1840)

As one of the members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles who assisted in introducing Mormonism in the British Isles in 1840–41, Orson Pratt arrived in Edinburgh, Scotland, in May 1840. To arouse interest in his message, Pratt published in September 1840 a pamphlet titled *A[n] Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions, and of the Late Discovery of Ancient American Records* in which he drew from his personal acquaintance with Joseph Smith for details of the Prophet's First Vision. The significance of the Pratt pamphlet is that it was the first time an account of the Vision had been published. The Pratt pamphlet shows some evidence that it was used by the Prophet to formulate the letter he sent to John Wentworth in 1842.

When somewhere about fourteen or fifteen years old, he [Joseph Smith] began seriously to reflect upon the necessity of being prepared for a future state of existence: but how, or in what way, to prepare himself, was a question, as yet, undetermined in his own mind: he perceived that it was a question of infinite importance, and that the salvation of his soul depended upon a correct understanding of the same.

30. “History, 1838–1856, Volume E-1,” 1715, Church History Library, available on Church Historian's Press, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-e-1-1-july-1843-30-april-1844/87>; Joseph Smith, “Latter Day Saints,” in *An Original History of the Religious Denominations at Present Existing in the United States*, comp. I. Daniel Rupp (Philadelphia: James Y. Humphreys, 1844), 404–10, available on Church Historian's Press, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/latter-day-saints-1844/1>.

He saw, that if he understood not the [p. 3] way, it would be impossible to walk in it, except by chance; and the thought of resting his hopes of eternal life upon chance, or uncertainties, was more than he could endure. 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;” while, at the same time, the doctrines of each were, in many respects, in direct opposition to one another. 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; 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? Until he could become satisfied, in relation to this question, he could not rest contented. To trust to the decisions of fallible man, and build his hopes upon the same, without any certainty, and knowledge, of his own, would not satisfy the anxious desires that pervaded his breast. To decide, without any positive and definite evidence, on which he could rely, upon a subject involving the future welfare of his soul, was revolting to his feelings. The only alternative, that seemed to be left him, was to read the Scriptures, and endeavour to follow their directions. He, accordingly, commenced perusing the sacred pages of the Bible, with sincerity, believing the things that he read. His mind soon caught hold of 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. From this promise he learned, that it was the privilege of all men to ask God for wisdom, with the sure and certain expectation of receiving, liberally; without being upbraided for so doing. This was cheering information to him: tidings that gave him great joy. It was like a light shining forth in a dark place, to guide him to the path in which he should walk. 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 [p. 4] 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, and began to call upon the Lord. 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; and he was enabled to pray, in fervency of the spirit, and in faith. 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; and he was enwrapped in a heavenly vision, and saw two glorious personages, who exactly resembled each other in their features or likeness. He was informed, that his sins were forgiven. 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; and, consequently, that none of them was acknowledged of God, as his church and kingdom. And he was expressly commanded, to go not after them; and he received a promise that the true doctrine—the fullness of the gospel, should, at some future time, be made known to him; after which the vision withdrew, leaving his mind in a state of calmness and peace, indescribable.³¹

2. 1842 ORSON HYDE REPORT (1842)

At the 1840 April conference in Nauvoo, Elder Orson Hyde spoke of a prophecy calling him to “a great work” among the Jews, a work that would prepare the way for the gathering of that people. He felt the time had come to fulfill that prophecy by visiting the Jews of Europe and the

31. O. Pratt, *A[n] Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions, and The Late Discovery of Ancient American Records* (Edinburgh: Ballantyne and Hughes, 1840), 3–5, available on Church Historian's Press, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/appendix-orson-pratt-an-interesting-account-of-several-remarkable-visions-1840/3>.

Holy Land, whereupon the conference authorized him to proceed on his mission. After arriving in London, he wrote, with Joseph Smith's sanction, a treatise on the faith, doctrine, and history of the Church. Continuing this journey, he stopped in Germany where he studied German, then proceeded on to the Middle East, where he dedicated the Holy Land for the return of the Jews. Returning to Germany in 1842, he translated his book into German and published it in Frankfurt before returning to the United States. Written "in something the manner" of Orson Pratt's 1840 pamphlet, Hyde's work was titled *Ein Ruf aus der Wüste* and was the first time an account of the First Vision was published in a foreign language.³²

When he had reached his fifteenth year, he began to think seriously about the importance of preparing for a future [existence]; but it was very difficult for him to decide how he should go about such an important undertaking. He recognized clearly that it would be impossible for him to walk the proper path without being acquainted with it beforehand; and to base his hopes for eternal life on chance or blind uncertainty would have been more than he had ever been inclined to do.

He discovered the world of religion working under a flood of errors which by virtue of their contradictory opinions and principles laid the foundation for the rise of such different sects and denominations whose feelings toward each other all too often were poisoned by hate, contention, resentment and anger. He felt that there was only one truth and that those who understood it correctly, all understood it in the same way. Nature had endowed him with a keen critical intellect and so he looked through the lens of reason and common sense and with pity and contempt upon those systems of religion, which were so opposed to each other and yet were all obviously based on the scriptures. [p. 14]

After he had sufficiently convinced himself to his own satisfaction that darkness covered the earth and gross darkness [covered]

32. "Letterbook 2," 201–6, Church History Library, available on Church Historian's Press, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letterbook-2/207>; Orson Hyde and John E. Page to Joseph Smith, May 1, 1840, in "Letterbook 2," 144–45; Joseph Smith to Orson Hyde and John E. Page, May 14, 1840, in "Letterbook 2," 146–47; Orson Hyde to Joseph Smith, June 15, 1841, *Times and Seasons* 2 (October 1, 1841): 551–55. See also *History of the Church*, 4:105–6, 123–24, 129, 386.

the nations, the hope of ever finding a sect or denomination that was in possession of unadulterated truth left him.

Consequently he began in an attitude of faith his own investigation of the word of God [feeling that it was] the best way to arrive at a knowledge of the truth. He had not proceeded very far in this laudable endeavor when his eyes fell upon the following verse of St. James [1:5]: "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." He considered this scripture an authorization for him to solemnly call upon his creator to present his needs before him with the certain expectation of some success. And so he began to pour out to the Lord with fervent determination the earnest desires of his soul. On one occasion, he went to a small grove of trees near his father's home and knelt down before God in solemn prayer. The adversary then made several strenuous efforts to cool his ardent soul. He filled his mind with doubts [p. 15] and brought to mind all manner of inappropriate images to prevent him from obtaining the object of his endeavors; but the overflowing mercy of God came to buoy him up and gave new impetus to his failing strength. However, the dark cloud soon parted and light and peace filled his frightened heart. Once again he called upon the Lord with faith and fervency of spirit.

At this sacred moment, the natural world around him was excluded from his view, so that he would be open to the presentation of heavenly and spiritual things. Two glorious heavenly personages stood before him, resembling each other exactly in features and stature. They told him that his prayers had been answered and that the Lord had decided to grant him a special blessing. He was also told that he should not join any of the religious sects or denominations, because all of them erred in doctrine and none was recognized by God as his church and kingdom. He was further commanded, to wait patiently until some future time, when the true doctrine of Christ and the complete truth of the gospel would be revealed to him. The vision closed and peace and calm filled his mind. [p. 16]³³

33. Orson Hyde, *Ein Ruf aus der Wüste, eine Stimme aus dem Schoose der Erde* (A Cry from the Wilderness, a Voice from the Dust of the Earth) (Frankfurt: n.p., 1842), 14–16, available on Church Historian's Press, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/orson-hyde-ein-ruf-aus-der-wste-1842-extract/1>, English translation: <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/orson-hyde-ein-ruf-aus-der-wste-a-cry-out-of-the-wilderness-1842-extract-english-translation/1>. The text here is a literal translation from the

3. LEVI RICHARDS REPORT (1843)

A native of Massachusetts, Levi Richards was the older brother of Willard Richards, Church historian and Joseph Smith's secretary, and a cousin of Brigham Young. Levi was a skilled Thompsonian physician. Shortly after his conversion to Mormonism in 1835, he moved to Kirtland, Ohio. He was present during the difficulties that beset the Church in Ohio and Missouri and assisted in the evacuation of the Saints when they were forced out of Missouri in 1838–39. After resettling with the Church at Nauvoo, Illinois, he continued his medical practice, served as surgeon general of the Nauvoo Legion, and was elected a member of the city council. On Sunday June 11, 1843, after Joseph Smith had spoken to the Saints gathered near the temple, he announced that George J. Adams would lecture that evening on the Book of Mormon. Levi Richards attended the lecture and reported the following:

at 6 AM. heard Eld. G[eorg]e J ~~Adam~~ Adams upon the book of Mormon proved from the 24,th 28th & 29 of Isaiah that the everlasting covenant ~~set~~ which was set upon by Christ & the apostles had been broken [p. [15]]—Pres. J. Smith bore testimony to the same—saying that when he was a youth he began to think about these ~~these~~ things but could not find out which of all the sects were right—he went into the grove & enquired of the Lord which of all the sects were right—re [he] received for answer that none of them were right, that they were all wrong, & that the Everlasting covenan[n]t was broken—he said he understood the fulness of the Gospel from beginning to end—& could Teach it & also the order of the priesthood in all its ramifications=Earth & hell had opposed him & tried to destroy him—but they had not done it = & they <never would.> [p. [16]]³⁴

German by Marvin H. Folsom, professor emeritus of German, Brigham Young University.

34. Levi Richards, Journal, June 11, 1843, 15–16, Church History Library, available on Church Historian's Press, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/levi-richards-journal-11-june-1843-extract/1>.

4. DAVID NYE WHITE REPORT (1843)

A visitor to Nauvoo who heard Joseph Smith speak of his Vision was David Nye White, the senior editor of the *Pittsburgh Weekly Gazette*. On August 28, 1843, while traveling through the western frontier of America, White stopped in Illinois to visit the Prophet. Two days later he wrote his perceptions of the “far-famed kingdom of the ‘Latter-day Saints,’” which were published in the September 15 issue of the *Gazette*. Included in the article was his report of what the Prophet told him about his 1820 Vision. Joseph said,

The Lord does reveal himself to me. I know it. He revealed himself to me first when I was about fourteen years old, a mere boy. I will tell you about it. There was a reformation among the different religious denominations in the neighborhood where I lived, and I became serious, and was desirous to know what Church to join. While thinking of this matter, I opened the [New] Testament promiscuously on these words, in James, “Ask of the Lord who giveth to all men liberally and upbraideth not.” I just determined I’d ask him. I immediately went out into the woods where my father had a clearing, and went to the stump where I had stuck my axe when I had quit work, and I kneeled down, and prayed, saying, “O Lord, what Church shall I join.” Directly I saw a light, 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.” The vision then vanished, and when I come to myself, I was sprawling on my back; and it was sometime before my strength returned. When I went home and told the people that I had a revelation, and that all the churches were corrupt, they persecuted me, and they have persecuted me ever since. They thought to put me down, but they hav’nt succeeded, and they can’t do it.³⁵

35. David Nye White, “The Prairies, Nauvoo, Joe Smith, the Temple, the Mormons, &c.,” *Pittsburgh Weekly Gazette*, September 15, 1843, 3, photocopy at Church History Library, available on Church Historian’s Press, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/interview-21-august-1843-extract/1>.

5. ALEXANDER NEIBAUR REPORT (1844)

Another Latter-day Saint who heard Joseph Smith relate his First Vision experience and recorded what he heard was Alexander Neibaur, a convert originally from Germany. After studying dentistry in his native land, Neibaur moved to England, where he set up his practice in Preston. When Latter-day Saint missionaries arrived in England in 1837, Neibaur was among the first converts to the Church. Four years later he and his family migrated to Nauvoo, Illinois, where he continued his dental practice, and as a linguist taught German and Hebrew to Joseph Smith. On May 24, 1844, Neibaur, still struggling to master the English language, recorded in his diary what the Prophet had said that day while Neibaur visited in Joseph's home.

Br Joseph tolt us the first call he had a Revival Meeting his Mother & Br & Sister got Religion, he wanted to get Religion too wanted to feel & shō shout like the Rest but could feel nothing, opened his Bible f the first Passage that struck him was if any man lack Wisdom let him ask of God who giveth to all Men liberallity & upbraided not went into the Wood to pray knelt himself down his tongue was closet cleavet to his roof—could utter not a word, felt easier after a while = saw a fire towards heaven came near & nearer saw a personage in the fire light complexion blue eyes a piece of white cloth drawn over his shoulders his right arm bear after a w[h]ile a other person came to the side of the first Mr Smith then asked must I join the Methodist Church = No = they are not my People th, all have gone astray there is none that doeth good no not one, but this is my Beloved son harken ye him, the fire drew nigher Rested upon the tree enveloped him [*illegible*] comforted Indeavoured to arise but felt uncomen feeble = got into the house told the Methodist priest, [~~who~~] said this was not a age for God to Reveal himself in Vision Revelation has ceased with the New Testament.³⁶

Other Likely Contemporaneous First Vision Accounts

Should the foregoing historical sources pertaining to Joseph Smith's First Vision seem sparse in some respects, those gaps are primarily

36. Alexander Neibaur, Journal, May 24, 1844, Church History Library, available on Church Historian's Press, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/alexander-neibaur-journal-24-may-1844-extract/1>.

the result of inadequate record keeping of his many conversations and discourses on the subject or related topics. If record keeping in the harsh literary environment of the early years of the Church had commenced at the level of efficiency that it later achieved, no doubt other contemporary reports of the Vision would be available. This conclusion is strongly suggested by occasions when Joseph is known to have talked about the experience, but no official report was made.

For example, William Phelps, writing to his wife, Sally, in Missouri in June 1835, noted that “President Smith preached last Sabbath, and I gave him the text: ‘This is my belovd Son; hear ye him!’ He preached one of the greatest sermons I ever heard—it was about 3½ hours long—and unfolded more mysteries than I can write at this time.”³⁷

A year later, in November 1836, Parley P. Pratt informed the Saints in Canada that one of the most interesting meetings he ever attended had been held recently in the Kirtland Temple:

One week before word was publicly given that Br. J. Smith Jr. would give a relation of the coming forth of the records and also of the rise of the church and of his experience. Accordingly a vast course assembled at an early hour. Every seat was crowded and 4 or 5 hundred People stood up in the Aisles. Br. S[mith] gave the history of these things relating many Particulars of the manner of his first visions &c. the Spirit and Powr of God was upon him in Bearing testimony insomuch that many if not most of the congregation were in tears—as for my self I can say that all the reasonings in uncertainty and all the conclusions drawn from the writings of others . . . however great in themselves dwindle into insignificance when compared with the living testimony when your Eyes see and your Ears hear from the living oracles of God.³⁸

37. William W. Phelps to Sally Phelps, June 2, 1835, 4, Church History Library, available on Church Historian's Press, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letters-to-john-burk-sally-phelps-and-almira-scobey-1-2-june-1835/4>.

38. Parley P. Pratt to the Elders and Brethren of the Church of Latter-day Saints in Canada, November 27, 1836, 1–2, Church History Library, available on *Church History Library*, https://dcms.lds.org/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE2363084.

Aside from the Pratt letter, there are no known additional reports of this discourse, which gave many details of Joseph's first visions; the date on which it was given coincides with a large gap in the Prophet's journal.

Subsequent Recollections of First Vision Accounts

After the death of Joseph Smith, other witnesses wrote of occasions on which they had heard him speak about his First Vision. For example, on the "special request of a few particular friends," Mary Isabella Hales Horne recalled the time when she had heard Joseph "relate his first vision when the Father and Son appeared to him; also his receiving the gold plates from the Angel Moroni. . . . While he was relating the circumstances the Prophet's countenance lightened up, and so wonderful a power accompanied his words that everybody who heard them felt his influence and power."³⁹

Similarly, Joseph Curtis recalled a visit of Joseph Smith to Pontiac, Michigan, in spring 1835. In a meeting there, the Prophet "stated the reason" for the doctrines he taught:

As a revival of some of the sec[t]s was going on some of his fathers family joined in with the revival himself being quite young[.] he feeling an anxiety to be religious his mind some what troubled this scriptures came to his mind which sayes if a man lack wisdom let him ask of god who giveth liberally and upbradeth not[.] believeing it he went with a determinati[on] to obtain to enquire of the lord himself after some struggle the Lord minifested to him that the different sects were rong also that the Lord had a great work for him to do.⁴⁰

The devoted record keeper Edward Stevenson, while also living in Pontiac, heard Joseph speak to the branch of the Church there:

39. "General Relief Society Conference," *Woman's Exponent* 39 (June 1910): 6, available on "Mormon Publications: 19th and 20th Centuries," *BYU Harold B. Lee Library Digital Collections*, <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/cdm/ref/collection/WomansExp/id/22980>.

40. Joseph Curtis, *Reminiscences and Diary*, 5, Church History Library, available on *Church History Library*, https://dcms.lds.org/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE1215485.

A great stir was made in this settlement at so distinguished visitors, the meetings held were crowded to see and hear the testimonies given which were very powerful I will here relate my own experience on the occasion of a meeting in our old log school house. The Prophet stood at a table for the pulpit where he began relating his vision and before he got through he was in the midst of the congregation with uplifted hand. I do believe that there was not one person present who did at the time being or who was not convicted of the truth of his vision, of an Angle [angel] to him his countenance seemed to me to assume a heavenly whiteness and his voice was so piercing [piercing] and forcible for my part it so impressed me as to become indelibly imprinted on my mind.⁴¹

A secondhand report of Joseph Smith relating his Vision, remembered many years later, comes from the pen of the diligent southern Utah diarist Charles Walker. In 1893 he attended a testimony meeting one Sunday at which one of the local elders, John Alger, said that when he was a small boy he heard Joseph Smith “relate his vision of seeing the Father and the Son, That God touched his eyes with his finger and said, ‘Joseph this is my beloved Son hear him.’ As soon as the Lord had touched his eyes with his finger he immediately saw the Savior.” At the close of the meeting Walker and others questioned the speaker:

He told us at the bottom of the meeting house steps that he was in the House of Father Smith in Kirtland when Joseph made this declaration, and that Joseph while speaking of it put his finger to his right eye, suiting the action with the words so as to illustrate and at the same time impress the occurrence on the minds of those unto whom He was speaking.⁴²

41. Edward Stevenson, Autobiography, typescript, 7–8, MS 1054, Church History Library, available on *Church History Library*, https://dcms.lds.org/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE8589149. See also Edward Stevenson, *Reminiscences of Joseph the Prophet and the Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: By the author, 1893), 4–5; and Edward Stevenson, “The Home of My Boyhood,” *Juvenile Instructor* 29 (July 15, 1894): 444, available on *Internet Archive*, <https://archive.org/stream/juvenileinstruct2914geor#page/444/mode/2up>.

42. Charles Walker, Diary, February 2, 1893, published as A. Karl Larsen and Katharine Miles Larsen, eds., *Diary of Charles Lowell Walker* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1980), 755–56.

Conclusion

The primary historical sources of Joseph Smith's First Vision are best understood in the broad record-keeping setting in which they were created. In 1830 a revelation commanded that records be kept in the Church, and the Prophet entered upon the stage of record keeping without the benefit of a well-defined tradition of doing so. He first farmed out the task to others, but when he saw their effort did not adequately chronicle his personal experience, he belatedly commenced his autobiography. For years he struggled with a format for his personal history, as indicated by the haphazard nature of his earliest attempts to create a record of his life. Another factor that had an impact upon the historical record was the inability of those who heard Joseph speak to make a verbatim report of what he said.

Furthermore, public knowledge of his religious claims and intentions had been the source of much of the persecution against him and his people, and this fact also affected the writing and dissemination of his history. A little more than a year before his death he told the Saints, "The History is going out by little & little in the papers & cutting its way. so that when it is completed it will not raise a persecution again[s]t us."⁴³ The extraordinary opposition and hardships he faced in his role as religious reformer, and the problems associated with the development of a historical record had a significant impact upon the timing and nature of the records he produced. This context is the lens through which the collection of records of Joseph Smith's First Vision is best seen and appreciated.

43. Willard Richards report of Joseph Smith discourse, in Joseph Smith, "President Joseph Smith's Journal," book 2, April 19, 1843, Joseph Smith Collection, Church History Library, available on Church Historian's Press, "Journal, December 1842–June 1844; Book 2, 10 March 1843–14 July 1843," *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-december-1842-june-1844-book-2-10-march-1843-14-july-1843/172>; Andrew H. Hedges, Alex D. Smith, and Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Journals, Volume 2: December 1841–April 1843*, vol. 2 of the Journals series in *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2011), 369; *History of the Church*, 5:367.

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