

Hard Questions in Church History

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Questions to Consider:

- What is history?
- What is a witness?
- What is a testimony?
- What is a trusted source?

Family History of Joseph Smith

Grandparents and Parents of Joseph Smith

Asael Smith (1744-1830) and Mary Duty (1743-1836)

Joseph Smith, Sr (1771-1840)

Solomon Mack (1735-1820) and Lydia Gates (1735-1818)

Lucy Mack (1775-1856)

Children of Joseph and Lucy Mack Smith

Unnamed	
Alvin	1799-1824
Hyrum	1800-1844
Sophronia	1803-1876
Joseph	1805-1844
Samuel	1808-1844
Ephraim	1810
William	1811-1893
Katharine	1812-1892
Don Carlos	1816-1841
Lucy	1821-1882

Children of Joseph and Emma Hale Smith

Alvin	1828
Louisa+Thadius Twins	1831
Julia+Joseph Murdock Twins	1831-1880 1831-1832
Joseph III	1832-1914
Fredrick	1836-1862
Alexander	1838-1909
Don Carlos	1840-41
Son	1842
David Hyrum	1844-1904

The Smith and Mack Extended Family Background

The Prophet Joseph Smith, Jr.'s extended family had a large impact on his ideas and values. Even though both sides of his family relocated regularly, the extended families remained geographically clustered together. The prominent familial impact was even more powerful because the families often lived in isolated wilderness environments where family associations were their major social contact.

Unlike the transient nature of Joseph Smith's immediate family, his ancestors lived in the same settled Puritan community. For four generations, the Puritans in Smith's paternal line lived as farmers in Topsfield, about twenty miles north of Boston, Massachusetts. Joseph's maternal ancestors lived in Lyme, Connecticut for the two previous generations. Large families did not always have land available for each of their children—this was the case with both of Joseph Smith's grandfathers. They independently joined the Yankee migration north along the Connecticut River Valley in search of arable land.

Both of Joseph's grandfathers also served their country in the military and supported the revolutionary cause of liberty throughout their lives. Joseph remembered that a "love of liberty was diffused into my soul by my grandfathers while they dandled me on their knees" (Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, 5.498). Both grandfathers also passed strong religious beliefs to their posterity.

Mack and Gates Families

In contrast, Joseph's maternal grandmother Lydia Gates (1735-1818) was the oldest daughter of Deacon Daniel Gates of the Congregational Church. He formalized his religious convictions in his will:

I would . . . commit my soul into the hands of God, who gave it, hoping and believing that I shall obtain remission of all my sins through the alone merits of Jesus Christ, my only Savior, and that for his sake I shall be admitted into life eternal (*ibid.*, 33).

Lydia followed his footsteps into the congregation and was the main source of religious and academic instruction for her eight children. She raised her children nearly single-handedly in Congregational Puritanism.

Her husband Solomon Mack (1735-1820) served in the French and Indian War and then purchased a farm near his family in Lyme, Connecticut before their marriage. He did not stay there long, though, and moved Lydia to different rural towns in New Hampshire while fathering eight children. After several financial disappointments and physical injuries, he—at age forty-nine—became a seafaring man and was gone for years at a time sailing the eastern seaboard as far as New Brunswick, Canada. He was often an absentee father. He wrote of his wife Lydia,

As our children were deprived of schools, she assumed the charge of their education, and performed the duties of an instructress as none, save a mother, is capable of. Precepts accompanied with examples such as hers, were calculated to make impressions on the minds of the young, never to be forgotten. (*ibid.*, 34).

Solomon did not find religious answers until late in his life. In 1810 at the age of seventy-five, Solomon was converted to Christ. He recorded: "God did appear for me and took me out of the horrible pit and mirey [*sic*] clay, and set my feet on the rock of Jesus Christ" (Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, 16). In 1811, Solomon published his testimony as a missionary pamphlet and devoted the rest of his life to sharing the "Good News." The final lines in Solomon's pamphlet express his commitment to serving the Lord:

The remainder of my days, I mean to spend in my father's service though a poor cripple . . . I have a love to all rich and poor, kings and nobles, black and white, come all to Jesus my friends, come to Jesus and he will in no wise cast you off; oh! Come, come, how sweet is the love to

Jesus—how beautiful is the love of God. This invitation is from my heart (Bushman, *Beginnings*, 67).

The sincerity of Solomon’s writing communicated his “love of God.” This was the man that the Prophet Joseph knew in his childhood.

Smith Family

Asael Smith (1744-1830) left his Puritan-Congregationalists roots for the more egalitarian and rational thought of Universalism. Asael and his oldest two sons, Jesse and Joseph Sr., helped organize a Universalist society in Tunbridge, Vermont. The doctrine of Universalism reacted against the Calvinistic-Reformed roots of New England by preaching a universal atonement and salvation for all. This democratic theology flourished in Vermont where the population lacked an aristocracy and was known for their heretics (i.e. Ethan Allen, Thomas Paine, John H. Noyes).

Asael’s beliefs are found in his letters: “Put your whole trust solely [in Him. He neve]r did nor never will forsake any that trusted in him” (Anderson, *Smith's Heritage*, 120). In another letter, he counseled his posterity to humbly acknowledge their need for a Savior:

And now my dear children, let me pour out my heart to you and speak first to you of immortality in your souls. Trifle not in this point: the soul is immortal. . . . Do all to God in a serious manner. When you think of him, speak of him, pray to him, or in any way make your addresses to his great majesty, be in good earnest. Trifle not with his name nor with his attributes, nor call him to witness to anything but is absolute truth . . .

I would wish you to search the Scriptures and consult sound reason and see if they (which I take to be two witnesses that stand by the God of the whole earth) are not sufficient to evince to you that religion is a necessary theme. Then I would wish you to study the nature of religion, and see whether it consists in outward formalities, or in the hidden man of the heart. . . .

If you find that you stand in need of a Savior, Christ saith: “Look unto me and be ye saved all ye ends of the earth.” Then look to Him, and if you find from scripture and sound reason that Christ hath come into the world to save sinners, then examine [yourselves] (Anderson, *Smith's Heritage*, 124-5).

Asael concluded with counsel to follow “scripture and sound reason.”

Joseph Smith, Sr. and Lucy Mack’s Family

The social and religious background of the Lucy and Joseph Smith, Sr. family had a significant impact on the direction of their son Joseph’s questions and answers. His father led religious “services” with his family reading scriptures, singing hymns and kneeling in prayer morning and night (Bushman, *Beginnings*, 37). Lucy Mack Smith recalled, “Whilst we worked with our hands we endeavored to remember the service of & the welfare of our souls” (“Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845,” p. 10, bk. 3, josephsmithpapers.org).

“Mother Smith,” as she was called, was “a model of domestic spirituality, a model drawn directly from her New England culture about proper behavior for pious women” (Anderson, *Lucy's Book*, 17). Her fifth son, William Smith, recalled that his mother “made use of every means which her parental love

could suggest, to get us engaged in seeking for our soul's salvation" (Bushman, *Beginnings*, 39). For young Joseph, worshipping God included inward and outward devotions as well as gifts of the Spirit.

Lucy Mack Smith's Gifts of Healing, Prophecy, and Visions

In the fall of 1802, Lucy focused her faith to be healed. After the birth of Hyrum, she contracted "consumption" (probably tuberculosis). After six months, her doctors and husband did not think she would live, so she sought what she felt was the only resource she had left—God's healing hand:

I looked to the lord and begged and plead with the Lord that he would spare my life that I might bring up my children and comfort the heart of my husband, thus I lay all night my <mind> at one ~~moment~~ <Time> slowly raising gradually borne away to Heaven above all hight [*sic*] then reverting back again to my babes and my Companion at my side and <I> covenanted with God if he would let me live I would endeavor to get that religion that would enable me to serve him right whether it was in the Bible or where ever it might be found even if it was to be obtained from heaven by prayer and Faith At last a voice spoke to me and said seek and ye shall find knock and it shall be opened unto you let your heart be comforted ye believe in God beleive [*sic*] also in me ("Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845," p. 3-4, bk. 2, *josephsmithpapers.org*).

After her prayer, Lucy immediately began to recover.

Just shy of a decade later, she experienced another miraculous faith healing. When her oldest daughter, Sophronia, was about eight years old, the child became deathly ill with typhoid fever. After ninety days of battling the illness, the Smiths' physician gave up hope. When Sophronia stopped breathing and her eyes "set," Lucy recorded that she and her husband "we clasped our hands together [*sic*] and fell upon our knees by the bed side and poured our grief and suplications [*sic*] into ~~the~~ His ears who hath numbered the hair upon our heads then think if not strange if he heard us— he did hear us and I felt assured that he would answer our prayers" ("Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845," p. [10], bk. 2, *josephsmithpapers.org*). Despite the negative comments from onlookers, Lucy scooped up the lifeless Sophronia in her arms and, filled with faith, paced the floor until Sophronia breathed again. Sophronia returned to full health and lived a long life. Lucy's life was punctuated with divine healings.

The gifts of the Spirit were not only read from biblical pages and spoken of in the home where Joseph Jr. grew up, but also practiced. In addition to the gift of healing, Lucy also received the gift of prophecy through a dream that she received while courting Joseph Sr. The inspiration moved her to marry him.

Joseph Smith Sr.'s Divinely Inspired Dreams

Lucy Mack Smith wrote of Joseph Smith, Sr. having seven visions or divinely inspired dreams. She recorded them over three decades later, which leaves room to question the accuracy of the details. She remembered that the first came the month after William's birth in 1811. What follows is an exact transcription of her journal:

I seemed to be traveling in an open barren field i looked to the east to the west to the north and to the south I could see nothing but dead fallen timber not one or leaf not a tree not a spear of grass could be seen in any direction no sound of any anti ate [*sic*] thing was to be heard in all the field.

No living thing neither animal or vegetable was there she myself an an [*sic*] attendant spirit that stood at my side of this personage i enquirer the meaning of what I saw and why i was traveling in this gloomy place ["He go are" [?]erased] He <said> this field is the world which his [*sic*] inanimate & dumb as to the things pertaining to the true religion or the order of Heavenly things all is darkness But travel on and on a certain log by the wayside you will find a box whose contents will make you wise and if you eat the same you shall have wisdom and understanding.

I did as I as directed and presently came to box I took it up and placed it under my left arm forced up the lid and began to taste of its contents when all maner [*sic*] of beasts and horned cattle and roaring animals rose up on every side and rushed upon me tearing the Earth tossing their horns in air bellowing round *him* <me> threatning [*sic*] every moment to devour <me>

They came so close upon me that I was forced to drop the box-and fly for my life although, it *the possession of* made me the happiest of anything <of which> i ever had possession i awoke trembling with terror

Most of the other divinely inspired dreams depicted Joseph Sr. searching but awakening before he discovers the heavenly treasure, except for one that came in 1811 while living in Lebanon, New Hampshire.

. . . I travelled a short distance farther, and came to a narrow path; I entered it, and ~~traveling a short~~ proceeding some ~~distance~~ farther, beheld a beautiful stream of water, which ran from the east to the west. . . as far as my eyes could extend, I could see a rope running along the bank, about as high as a man could reach; and beyond me was a low but very pleasant valley, in which stood a tree, such as I had never seen before: it was exceedingly handsome, insomuch that I looked upon it with wonder and admiration: its beautiful branches spread themselves, somewhat, in the form of an umbrella; and it bore a kind of fruit, in shape, much like a chesnut [*sic*] burr, and as white, or whiter than snow:

I gazed upon the fruit with considerable interest— presently the burrs or shells began to open, and shed their particles, or the fruit which they contained, which was of dazzling whiteness. I drew near and began to eat of it, and I found it delicious beyond description; and, as I was eating, I said in my heart, I cannot eat this alone, I must bring my wife and children, that they may partake with me. Accordingly, I went and brought the family; which consisted of a wife and seven children; and we all commenced eating and praising God for this blessing— we were exceedingly happy, insomuch that our joy could not easily be expressed. While we were engaged in this manner, I beheld a spacious building, standing opposite the valley that we were in, which building appeared to reach to the very heavens. It was full of doors and windows, and they were all filled with people that were very finely dressed: when these people observed us in the low valley, under the tree, they pointed the finger of scorn at us; and treated us with all manner of disrespect and contempt. But their contumely [*sic*] we utterly disregarded. I soon turned to my guide, and inquired of him, the meaning of the fruit. He told me it was the pure love of God shed abroad in the hearts of all those who love him and keep his commandments. He then commanded me to go and bring the rest of my children— I told him we were all there. “No;” he replied, “look yonder, you have two more, and you must bring them also.” So I raised my eyes, and I saw two small children, standing some distance off. I immediately went to them and

brought them to the to the tree; and they commenced eating with the rest; and we all rejoiced together. The more we eat the more we seemed to desire, until we even got down upon our knees, and scooped it up, eating it by double-hand-fulls. After feasting in this manner a short time, I asked my guide what was the meaning of the spacious building that I saw. He replied, “it is Babylon, it is Babylon; and it must fall: the people in the doors and windows, are the inhabitants thereof; who scorn and despise the saints of God because of their humility.” I soon awoke, clapping my hands together for joy (“Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1845,” 53-55, *josephsmithpapers.org*).

One can conjecture that any similarities between this dream and Lehi’s vision of the Tree of Life would have been exciting to both Josephs. There were also several differences. Hugh Nibley offers a reading of Lehi’s vision that accentuates thirteen elements consistent with Arabian desert imagery (*An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 1988, ch. 20). Lucy’s later telling of Joseph, Sr.’s experience might account for verbal similarities to Lehi’s account in 1 Nephi 8, with which Lucy had become familiar. In the Bible, we also find prophets receiving similar visions (e.g., Isaiah 6; Dan 11; Ezek 38:2; 39:4, 17-22; and Rev 4; 19:17-20; 20:7-8; etc.).

Joseph Smith, Jr. Childhood (1805-1819)

Joseph Smith, Jr. was born December 23, 1805 on his Grandfather Mack’s farm in Sharon, Vermont, the fifth child of Lucy and Joseph Smith, Sr.’s eleven children. The Smiths stayed in Sharon for a relatively short time; they moved around the Connecticut River Valley eight times in twenty years. The family lived just one town away from Dartmouth College in Lebanon, New Hampshire. When typhus fever swept through the Smiths, an infection festered in Joseph’s leg, and a team of Dartmouth doctors were called in. They tried an experimental operation to bore into the bone and chip out the infected pieces. Afterward, Joseph, Jr. limped on crutches for three years, including during their move to upstate New York.

In 1813, Joseph went with his uncle Jesse Smith to Salem, Massachusetts as a part of his recuperation from this operation. On that trip, the two of them may well have discussed religious issues, since Jesse at that time was filing a protest against his being required to pay a local church tax in Vermont. His written protest expressed many concerns about doctrinal and practical matters in his local congregation to which he took exception (John W. Welch, “Jesse Smith’s 1814 Protest,” *BYU Studies* 33 no. 1 [1993]: 131-44).

By 1816, the year without a summer, the Smiths gave up trying to eke out a living from the rocky shallow soil of Vermont along with many Vermonters. They headed southwest to find more fertile farmland in the relatively young town of Palmyra, New York. (The area west of the Appalachians as not opened to American settlers until 1791.) By 1816, with the promise of the nearby Erie Canal opening in less than a decade, Palmyra’s population grew to over 3,000.

In 1832 Joseph penned a brief biography where he recorded only one sentence about the first decade of his life. It singled out his religious education at home: “[My] goodly parents spared no pains to instructing me in the Christian religion” (Jessee, *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 10). The religious revival of 1816 and 1817 was in progress when the Smiths arrived in Palmyra. The family attended many revivals, in part to sell their homemade cakes and beer. Yet which church to join was an unsettled

question in their home. This lack of belonging to a denomination was normal for the area, according to Cornell historian Whitney Cross: “An overwhelming majority of western New Yorkers sympathized with the churches and attended meetings regularly. Relatively few, however, ‘professed’ religion, attended Communion, or belonged in the legal or religious sense to the church proper” (*The Burned Over District*, 41). That changed for the Smith family within a few years, as Joseph was called to be a Prophet.

Timeline of Joseph Smith’s Life

December 23, 1805	Joseph Smith, Jr., born to Joseph Smith and Lucy Mack, in Sharon, Windsor County, Vermont
1813	Contracts typhus fever; complications require leg operation.
1816	Family moves from Vermont to Palmyra, New York.
Spring 1820	Receives First Vision.
September 21, 1823	Interviews with angel Moroni; sees gold plates.
January 18, 1827	Marries Emma Hale at South Bainbridge, New York.
September 22, 1827	Receives Book of Mormon plates from the angel Moroni.
April-July 1828	Translates and loses 116 pages of the Book of Lehi (D&C 3, 10).
April 7, 1829	Resumes translation of ancient Book of Mormon record with scribe Oliver Cowdery.
May 15, 1829	He and Oliver receive Aaronic Priesthood from John the Baptist (D&C 13).
May-June 1829	He and Oliver receive Melchizedek Priesthood from Apostles Peter, James, and John.
June 11, 1829	Secures the copyright for the Book of Mormon.
June 1829	Completes Book of Mormon translation in Fayette, New York.
March 26, 1830	Book of Mormon for sale at E. B. Grandin’s Bookstore in Palmyra.
April 6, 1830	Organization of the Church of Christ at the Whitmer farmhouse in Fayette, New York.
June 1830	Receives revelation known as Moses, chapter one.
January 2, 1831	Receives revelation to gather followers to Ohio (D&C 37-38).
February 1831	With Sidney Rigdon, receives vision of the Three Degrees of Glory (D&C 76).
March 24, 1832	Mob tars and feathers him near John Johnson farmhouse in Hiram, Ohio.
July 23, 1833	Kirtland Temple cornerstones laid.
May 5, 1834	Leaves Kirtland as leader of Zion’s Camp.
February 14, 1835	Organizes Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.
February 28, 1835	Organizes Quorum of the Seventy.
March 27, 1836	Dedicates Kirtland Temple (D&C 109).
April 3, 1836	Receives a series of visions in Kirtland Temple with Oliver Cowdery (D&C 110).

April 26, 1837	Revelation on naming—The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (D&C 115).
October 31, 1838	Taken prisoner by Missouri militia near Far West, Missouri; taken to Richmond Jail
December 1, 1838	Imprisoned in Liberty Jail.
March 20-25, 1839	Writes epistle from Liberty Jail to Latter-day Saints in Quincy, Illinois (D&C 121-123).
May 10, 1839	Moves to Commerce (later known as Nauvoo), Illinois.
August 15, 1840	Introduces the ordinance of Baptism for the Dead.
January 19, 1841	Receives revelation to build Nauvoo Temple and Nauvoo House (D&C 124).
March 17, 1842	Organizes Female Relief Society of Nauvoo with his wife Emma Smith as president.
May 4, 1842	Administers first full temple endowments in the upper room of the Red Brick Store.
July 12, 1843	Records revelation on the New and Everlasting Covenant of Marriage (D&C 132).
January 29, 1844	Becomes candidate for the office of US President.
June 7, 1844	The <i>Nauvoo Expositor</i> incites anger by vilifying Joseph Smith and calling for the repeal of the Nauvoo Charter.
June 27, 1844	Mob kills Joseph and his brother Hyrum Smith in Carthage, Illinois.

Resources

JosephSmithPapers.org; *BYU Studies; Encyclopedia of Mormonism*; Richard L. Anderson, *Joseph Smith's New England Heritage* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1971 reprint 2003); BookofMormonCentral.org; BYU Religious Studies Center; FairMormon.org; James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard, *The Story of the Latter-day Saints*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1976); S. Kent Brown, Donald Q. Cannon, and Richard H. Jackson, eds., *Historical Atlas of Mormonism* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 6; Whitney Cross, *The Burned Over District* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1950); John W. Welch, "Jesse Smith's 1814 Protest," *BYU Studies* 33 no. 1 (1993): 131-144; Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984); Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3rd edition (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1988).