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Eight Contemporary Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision - What Do We Learn from Them?

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Abstract: One hundred and fifty years ago this spring, a 14-year-old boy named Joseph Smith, Jr., perplexed about questions on religion, walked on a “beautiful, clear day” to a wooded area where he had been cutting wood, approximately a quarter mile from his father’s house, and knelt in earnest prayer. The answer to that prayer, known now as the First Vision, has changed the course of the world and marked with brilliant surety the opening of the dispensation of the fulness of times, a period of preparation for the heralded and oft-prophesied second coming of Jesus Christ. With this vision came a divine call to young Joseph, who “save Jesus only” was destined to do more “for the salvation of men in this world, than any other man that ever lived in it.” (D&C 135:3.)

For the past 150 years, the story of the First Vision has been repeated on the street corner and from the pulpit, and has borne testimony to succeeding generations at the family hearthside. It has made the heart of the poet and musician sing, has sparked the mind and imagination, has been studied diligently, and has been submitted to the unrelenting light of research.

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Illustrated by Jerry Thompson

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By Dr. James B. Allen

One hundred and fifty years ago this spring, a 14-year-old boy named Joseph Smith, Jr., perplexed about questions on religion, walked on a "beautiful, clear day" to a wooded area where he had been cutting wood, approximately a quarter mile from his father's house, and knelt in earnest prayer. The answer to that prayer, known now as the First Vision, has changed the course of the world and marked with brilliant surety the opening of the dispensation of the fulness of times, a period of preparation for the heralded and oft-prophesied second coming of Jesus Christ. With this vision came a divine call to young Joseph,

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Dr. James B. Allen is associate professor of history at Brigham Young University and a high councilor in the BYU Fifth Stake.

● In 1965 a graduate student at Brigham Young University presented a gentle surprise to Mormon scholars when he included in his master's thesis a heretofore unknown description of Joseph Smith's First Vision.¹ What made the new discovery significant was the fact that most writers had supposed that the Manuscript History of Joseph Smith, formally begun in 1838, was the place where the Prophet first committed his remarkable experience to writing. Paul Cheesman's find demonstrated that the story of the First Vision had been dictated as early as 1831-32.²

Recently both Mormon and non-Mormon historians have shown new interest in Joseph Smith's testimony. Not long after the 1831-32 narrative was discovered, a second version that also predated the Manuscript History was brought to light.³ Scholars also began to examine the setting of the vision, seeking to determine the extent to which the events described by Joseph Smith can be verified by other contemporary sources.⁴ In fact, Mormon historiography has entered an exciting new era as more sources are becoming available for research, fresh approaches are being taken by Latter-day Saint writers, and many outstanding scholars are publishing the results of their research. (One of the most significant recent publications was the Spring 1969 issue of *Brigham Young University Studies*, in which ten Mormon writers presented the results of recent research on "Mormon Origins in New York.")

Apparently Joseph Smith did not relate his First Vision very widely during the early years of Church history, for neither Mormon nor non-Mormon publications of the 1830s carried accounts of it.⁵ Although contemporary literature included several allusions to the idea that Joseph had beheld Deity, none of these brief references gave details of the vision.⁶ Because of the absence of the vision from early publications, one hostile writer suggested in 1945 that Joseph Smith did not even "make up" the story until 1835 or later.⁷

Nevertheless, it can now be demonstrated that the Prophet described his experience to friends and acquaintances at least as early as 1831-32, and that he continued to do so in varying detail until the year of his death, 1844. We presently know of at least eight contemporary documents that were written during his lifetime.

1. *The 1831-32 account.* This important document was written when Joseph Smith was 25 or 26 years old. The Church was hardly more than a year old, and Joseph had only recently been impressed with the importance of keeping such historical records.⁸ Preserved in the handwriting of Frederick G. Williams, it was probably written as it was being dictated by

the Prophet. It is doubtful that the manuscript was being prepared for publication, at least in the unpolished form in which it survives. It seems, rather, to have been an early, crudely written, but fervent effort to express for Church members the Prophet's religious feelings, and to record the powerful spiritual impact that the vision had upon him.

2. *The 1835 account.* On November 9, 1835, Joseph told of his early experiences to a visiting Jewish minister. Warren Cowdery, the Prophet's scribe, recorded the interview as part of the Prophet's daily journal.

3. *The 1838-39 account.* The third account is from Joseph Smith's Manuscript History and is the source for the version of the First Vision published in the *Times and Seasons* in 1842 and later in the Pearl of Great Price.⁹ The Prophet began this history in 1838, but the present version was written or copied by James Mulholland in 1839.¹⁰ It is evident that the Prophet intended this narrative to become the basic source for Church literature and that he had a special purpose in mind that does not seem as clear in the earlier renditions. Long the object of almost merciless public abuse, he now told his story "so as to disabuse the public mind, and put all enquirers after truth into possession of the facts. . . ." With such a public purpose in mind, it is likely that this account would be more carefully considered than either of the first two.

4. *The Orson Pratt account (1840).* Orson Pratt of the Council of the Twelve published in England in 1840 a missionary tract entitled *Interesting Accounts of Several Remarkable Visions and of the Late Discovery of Ancient American Records*. Elder Pratt had obviously been close to Joseph Smith and had heard the account of the First Vision from him. His narrative was similar to Joseph's 1838-39 account, except that it elaborated upon several details. Whether these were given to him by Joseph or whether he was using literary license is not known, but some of his additions seem to be verified by other sources.

5. *The Orson Hyde account (1842).* Another member of the Twelve, Orson Hyde, published a missionary tract in Germany in 1842 entitled *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)*. It contained an account of the vision similar to that of Orson Pratt, much of it, in fact, having been copied directly from the earlier publication.

6. *The Wentworth Letter (1842).* In the same year that Joseph Smith's Manuscript History began publication in the *Times and Seasons*, the Prophet prepared a brief history of the Church and a discussion of Church doctrine for John Wentworth. The letter was published in the *Times and Seasons* on March 1.¹¹

7. *New York Spectator* (1843). In the summer of 1843 the editor of the *Pittsburgh Gazette* visited Joseph Smith in Nauvoo. His account, which included the First Vision as related to him by the Prophet, appeared in the *New York Spectator* on September 23.

8. *A personal diary* (1844). An entry in the personal diary of Alexander Neibaur illustrates that the Prophet sometimes told the story to small, rather intimate groups. Neibaur, a German immigrant, had been brought to Nauvoo to teach German to the Prophet and others. On May 24, 1844, Joseph told his sacred experience to Neibaur, who recorded it in his diary in the sincere, unpolished style that one would expect from a humble man not used to writing in English. At present, this is the only contemporary diary known to Mormon scholars that contains such an account.¹²

Whenever new historical information is published, a host of questions demand answers, and the disclosure that Joseph Smith told his story more than once has been no exception. Scholars have asked whether the Prophet's description of his experience squares with other known historical events, to what degree the various accounts are consistent with each other, and how one might explain the differences. Several factors undoubtedly affected the over-all nature of Joseph Smith's narratives: (1) his age and experience at the time a particular account was given; (2) the circumstances under which he gave each account, including any special purposes he may have had in mind; (3) the possible literary influence of those who helped him write it; and (4) in the case of versions written by others, the fact that different points would impress different people, and therefore they would record the story somewhat differently. One would hardly expect to find every account to be precisely alike, but it is fortunate that these eight reports come from a wide variety of circumstances, thus accentuating the significance of the consistency that does exist.

Actually, the differences between the accounts may be grossly overemphasized, for the truth is that there is wide and general agreement in detail among all of them. Another impressive fact is that the 1831-32 version, which was the first to be recorded, is actually the most comprehensive of all. This early narrative includes all the essential elements of the more carefully prepared Manuscript History and contains more additional details than any other source. When all the accounts are combined, only two areas appear that may need some explanation: (1) the time of the vision and (2) the fact that the first account appears to make specific reference to only one personage. A brief explanation of each of these areas seems appropriate.

1. *The time of Joseph's early religious quest and of the First Vision.* There are two questions involved in



the question of timing: (a) when did Joseph Smith first begin to search for religious truth, and (b) when did he have his vision?

It is only the 1838-39 narrative that gives any detail about the religious excitement that stirred young Joseph's interest (although the Neibaur diary mentions it), and the question has arisen as to whether a general religious movement of the proportions described by the Prophet actually took place in those years mentioned and whether his description squares with the known facts. It has been argued, for example, that no such movement took place in the town of Palmyra in the spring of 1820.¹³ Joseph said that the excitement began "sometime in the second year after our removal to Manchester," which could mean almost any time in the year 1819 or 1820. Further, his narrative does not specifically state that such a movement centered or even began in Palmyra. The Smith family, by 1819, lived outside the village of Palmyra, on a farm that was actually in the township (not village) of Manchester.¹⁴ The phrase "in the place where we lived" could easily refer, in context, not to any town but, rather, to the general area.

In addition, Joseph referred to the "whole district of

Left: Lane approaching the Sacred Grove, from an old photograph by Daniel B. McRae. Below: View inside the Sacred Grove, taken by George Edward Anderson in the early 1900's. Page 10: Distant view of Sacred Grove from the yard of the Joseph Smith Sr. home, also by Anderson.



country" affected by the awakening, and this could be interpreted very broadly. Professor Milton Backman has demonstrated conclusively that there was considerable religious excitement in the general area in 1819 and 1820, and that "spiritual quickenings" were particularly intense in 1819.¹⁵ Joseph had ample opportunity to know of and become involved in camp meetings and other religious activities in the vicinity of his home during 1817, 1818, or 1819, and none of the accounts of his vision are inconsistent with these facts.

Joseph Smith reached his fourteenth birthday on December 23, 1819. In the earliest account of the vision, he said he had pondered his religious concerns from the age of 12 to 15. In 1835 he said that he was "about 14" when he began to reflect upon the importance of a future state. His use of the word "about" indicates that the validity of his history did not hinge on a precise date, and it is significant to note that both Orson Pratt and Orson Hyde merely wrote that he was "somewhere about fourteen or fifteen" when his spiritual awakening began. In the earliest narrative Joseph Smith said that he was in the sixteenth year of his age (that is, 15 years old) when the vision took

place, while in the 1838-39 statement he said it was in the early spring of 1820, which would have made him 14. Later in the same account he said "I was an obscure boy only between fourteen and fifteen years of age or thereabouts."¹⁶

What all of this seems to suggest is that Joseph Smith's main interest, as far as time is concerned, was merely to explain that these things happened in his early teens. But it would not be inconsistent with any of the accounts to suggest that he became involved in the religious excitement of the time during the summer or fall of 1819, while he was still 13 years old; that his concern worked on him for many months; and that it was, indeed, sometime in the spring of the following year that he finally decided to pray. If in his preliminary effort to record the story in 1831-32 he said he was 15 instead of 14 when the vision occurred, he simply made a slight correction in his more carefully prepared history.

2. *Was it one personage or two?* All accounts of the First Vision but one specify that two heavenly personages appeared to young Joseph, and three (Wentworth letter, Orson Pratt, and Orson Hyde) state that these personages exactly resembled each other. There is no doubt that the Prophet intended to convey the message that they were the Father and the Son.

In the earliest narrative Joseph Smith simply said, "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. . . ." When relating his experience in 1835, Joseph first told of one personage appearing in the "pillar of fire." Then: "another personage soon appeared like unto the first." The latter gave him the all-important message. The idea that the personages appeared one after the other is repeated in the *New York Spectator*, as well as in Neibaur's diary.

While the other narratives do not describe the event just that way, nothing in them precludes the possibility that he may have seen one personage first, and then the other.¹⁷ The main point of emphasis, especially in the official 1838-39 account, was that "I had actually seen a light and in the midst of that light I saw two personages, and they did in reality speak unto me, or one of them did." Remembering that the 1831-32 manuscript is a rough, unpolished effort to record the spiritual impact of the vision on him, that this was probably the first time Joseph Smith had even tried to commit his experience to writing, and that in the other narratives the important message was delivered by the Son, it is probable that in dictating to his scribe the Prophet simply emphasized "the Lord" and his message. Obviously, the various versions of the event do not contradict each other in this one

essential point, even though they emphasize different ideas and details.

We believe that Joseph Smith was telling the truth each time he related his experience, and that the scribes recorded his ideas as accurately as possible. Thus, a study of the combined accounts presents some fascinating new insights into the experience and personal development of the young prophet. Not only do we discover more details about what may have happened both before and after he entered the Sacred Grove, but we also gain valuable insight into how these events affected him personally and helped him in his spiritual growth. While space does not permit the full republication here of all the accounts, they may readily be found elsewhere.¹⁸ What follows is an attempt to weave them into a composite story of Joseph's sacred experience in order to show their value and their consistency.

In the year 1819 young Joseph Smith and his parents and brothers and sisters lived in what is now Manchester township in western New York. This region has been dubbed the "burned-over district," because of the intense outpouring of religious enthusiasm that characterized it in the early nineteenth century.¹⁹ Itinerant preachers, camp meetings, intense spiritual experiences, and conversions all were common in the area, and in 1819-20 some sort of revival activity took place in at least ten towns within a 20-mile radius of the Smith home.²⁰

With all this religious activity going on, young Joseph Smith found himself influenced in many ways. He undoubtedly attended some of the revival activities, and he saw some members of his family join the Presbyterian Church.²¹ He naturally thought about his own salvation, and many questions came to his mind. According to his earliest statement, he became seriously concerned for the welfare of his soul, and this led to an intensive searching of the scriptures. For two or three years, in fact, he tried to evaluate the different denominations and found that they did not agree with what he saw in the scriptures.

He also became concerned with the "wickedness and abominations" of the world, as well as his own sins. He became almost overwhelmed with the awesomeness of the eternities,²² and finally, as Orson Pratt recorded, he 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." He also desired the emotional experience he had witnessed in others, for he later told Alexander Neibaur that in a

revival meeting "he wanted to get Religion too [and] wanted to feel and shout like the Rest. . . ."²³

These concerns quite naturally caused him to look at the various denominations, probably with the intent of joining one of them. Here, however, as recorded in practically all the accounts,²⁴ he became disillusioned, especially with the fact that the ministers would contend so bitterly for converts. It became so bad, he wrote in 1838, that "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."²⁵

At this point the young prophet became even more confused. He still wanted to join a church, and he actually began to favor the Methodists. When he finally decided to make it a matter of prayer, he had in mind specifically that he wanted to "know what church to join."²⁶ In looking at all the churches, he said in 1835, "I knew not who was right or who was wrong but considered it of the first importance to me that I should be right."

At the same time, young Joseph had begun to suspect that perhaps none of the churches were right. The first time he recorded the vision he declared that in searching the scriptures he "found that mankind did not come unto the Lord but that they had apostatized 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. . . ."²⁷

Later he explained his feelings this way: "I often said to myself, what is to be done? Who of all these parties is right? Or are they all wrong together?"²⁸ His youthful mind apparently still clung to the hope that one of the contending sects was "right," but at the same time he could not ignore the disturbing possibility that "the true and living faith" no longer existed. Orson Hyde went so far as to write that "he gave up hope ever to find a sect or party that was in possession of the pure and unadulterated truth."²⁹

Amid this war of words and feelings the Prophet's mind was drawn especially to James 1:5. "If any of you lack wisdom," he read, "let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not, and it shall be given him." Said Joseph Smith, "Never did any passage of scripture come with more power to the heart of man than 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. . . . 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."³⁰

Young Joseph decided then, for the first time in his

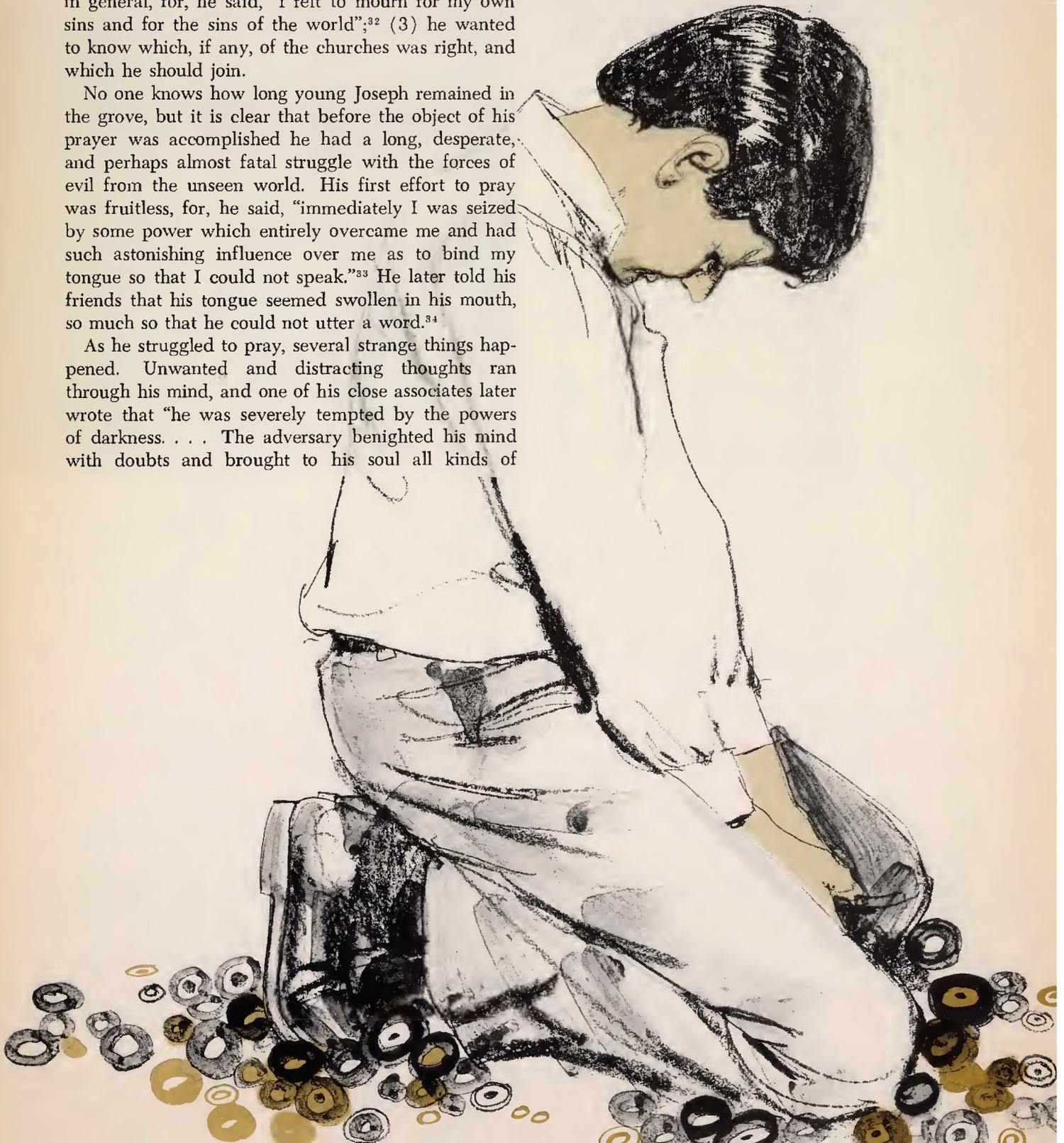
life, to pray vocally about the matter. After months of struggle, he finally knew the course he must follow, and sometime in the spring of 1820 he went to a familiar spot in the woods near his home to make the attempt.³¹ The months of anguish had resulted in obvious spiritual maturity, and he had at least three serious questions on his mind: (1) He was concerned for his own salvation and sought forgiveness of his sins; (2) he was concerned for the welfare of mankind in general, for, he said, "I felt to mourn for my own sins and for the sins of the world";³² (3) he wanted to know which, if any, of the churches was right, and which he should join.

No one knows how long young Joseph remained in the grove, but it is clear that before the object of his prayer was accomplished he had a long, desperate, and perhaps almost fatal struggle with the forces of evil from the unseen world. His first effort to pray was fruitless, for, he said, "immediately I was seized 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."³³ He later told his friends that his tongue seemed swollen in his mouth, so much so that he could not utter a word.³⁴

As he struggled to pray, several strange things happened. Unwanted and distracting thoughts ran through his mind, and one of his close associates later wrote that "he was severely tempted by the powers of darkness. . . . The adversary benighted his mind with doubts and brought to his soul all kinds of

improper pictures and tried to hinder him in his efforts and the accomplishment of his goal."³⁵

At one point, Joseph said, "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."³⁶ During the struggle "thick darkness" seemed to gather around him, and he



felt that he was “doomed to sudden destruction” and must abandon himself to the power of “some actual being from the unseen world.”³⁷

In spite of this alarm, he was able to gather enough inner strength to continue his fervent prayer and call upon God for deliverance. It was then that he saw overhead a “pillar of light,” which seemed to shine “above the brightness of the sun at noon day.”³⁸ It seemed gradually to descend, even increasing in brightness so that “by the time 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. . . . It continued descending slowly, until it rested upon the earth, and he was enveloped in the midst of it.”³⁹

As soon as the light appeared, he felt himself freed from his spiritual enemy, and as the light rested upon him he was “filled with the spirit of God.”⁴⁰ As described later, “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. . . .”⁴¹ He then saw within the light a personage, who was soon joined by another personage,⁴² and the two exactly resembled each other in features and likeness.⁴³ They seemed to be standing above him in the air and their own “brightness and glory” defied all description.⁴⁴

The messages and information received by Joseph as the vision progressed were all that a boy with his concerns could ask for, and more. He received a knowledge of the reality of Christ, as one of the persons called him by name, then pointed to the other and said, “This is my beloved Son, Hear him.”⁴⁵ He was also told, “Joseph my son thy Sins are forgiven thee,” and the Savior declared, “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.”⁴⁶

Young Joseph was undoubtedly astonished at all that was happening, but as he gained possession of himself, he asked which of all the sects was right and which he should join.⁴⁷ He was informed that he should join none of them, for, he said, 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.’”⁴⁸

The personage who was speaking warned him further that certain professors of religion were “all corrupt, that they draw near to me with their lips but their hearts are far from me; they teach for doc-



trines the commandments of men, having a form of Godliness but they deny the power thereof.”⁴⁹ He was warned a second time against joining any of the churches, and he was given the promise that “the fulness of the gospel should at some future time be made known unto me.”⁵⁰ In addition, he was told “many other things” that he was unable to write,⁵¹ and he saw “many angels” in his vision.⁵²

According to scripture, it would be impossible for man to behold Deity with his natural eyes.⁵³ Joseph Smith made it clear that this profound experience transcended his physical senses and had an exhausting effect upon him. “When I came to myself again,” he wrote in 1838, “I found myself lying on my back looking up into Heaven,” and he told Alexander Neibaur that he endeavored to rise but felt feeble.

The effect of this vision on the mind of the youthful prophet was great. After all his earlier confusion, he now felt comforted, and his mind was left in “a state of calmness and peace indescribable.”⁵⁴ According to his earliest account, “my soul was filled with love and for many days I could rejoice with great joy and the Lord was with me.”



This expresses as well as anything could the tender feelings that must have overwhelmed him. It is little wonder that he should wish to tell his experience to friends and acquaintances, and one can sense his profound disappointment when, as he stated in the same account, he "could find none that would believe the heavenly vision." Later he described in detail the immediate unfriendly reception he received upon telling of the vision. He was particularly disappointed at the surprising reaction of a Methodist preacher who "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 Apostles and that there never would be any more of them."⁵⁵

It seemed to him that he was being attacked from all sides, for, as he wrote in 1838: "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 I was an obscure boy between fourteen and fifteen years of age or there-

abouts 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 sufficient 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."⁵⁶

There is no contemporary evidence (i.e., documents from the 1820s) to show that Joseph Smith told his story very widely in 1820; and it is not clear, even from his own accounts, how long he continued to tell it. With the reception he apparently received, it was probably not very long. The lack of evidence is not surprising, however, for even if certain ministers warned people not to believe young Joseph, they were also preoccupied with many other things that to them were more important. Since this was a time when many were claiming spiritual experiences, the claims of a 14-year-old boy were hardly something the ministers would record. Nor would such a youth have much likelihood of finding his way into the newspapers or diaries of the time, even though he later said that all the "great ones" were against him. To a young boy, the rejection of such an experience by those whom he respected would have been most frustrating, and he would tend to emphasize this frustration as he told of the experience in later years.

A possible clue to the nature of whatever criticism was made is seen in the recollection of a certain Mrs. Palmer, a non-Mormon, who apparently grew up in the vicinity of Joseph Smith's home and later settled in Utah. As an elderly woman, she recalled "the excitement stirred up among some of the people over the boy's first vision, and of hearing her father contend that it was only the sweet dream of a pure-minded boy." According to the reminiscence, she also heard certain church leaders criticizing her father for his friendship with the "Smith boy," and saying that he must be "put down."⁵⁷

All of this does not presume, of course, to provide all the details of what happened at the time of Joseph Smith's First Vision. Nor does it presume to answer all the questions that may be raised about the meaning and implications of the vision. It has simply demonstrated that the account was repeated several times and in several different ways, even by the Prophet, and that although each narrative emphasizes different ideas and events, none is incompatible with other accounts. There is a striking consistency throughout all the narratives, and if one wishes he may combine them into an impressive report that in no way contradicts any of the individual accounts. Moreover, the descriptions given of events related to the vision but that happened outside the grove are consistent with our knowledge of contemporary events.

In the last analysis, the First Vision becomes truly meaningful in a personal way only when one seeks, as Joseph Smith sought, to reach God through private, earnest supplication. ○

FOOTNOTES

1 Paul R. Cheesman, "An Analysis of the Accounts Relating to Joseph Smith's Early Visions" (Master's thesis, College of Religious Instruction, Brigham Young University, 1965), Appendix D.
 2 Dean C. Jessee, "The Early Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision," *Brigham Young University Studies*, Vol. 9 (Spring, 1969), pp. 277-78.
 3 This document, discovered by Dean Jessee, was first printed in James B. Allen, "The Significance of Joseph Smith's 'First Vision' in Mormon Thought," *Dialogue*, Vol. 1 (Autumn, 1966), pp. 40-41.
 4 Wesley P. Walters, "New Light on Mormon Origins from Palmyra (N.Y.) Revival," *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Vol. 10 (Fall, 1967), pp. 227-44. Milton V. Backman, Jr., "Awakenings in the Burned-Over District: New Light on the Historical Setting of the First Vision," *Brigham Young University Studies*, Vol. 9 (Spring, 1969), pp. 301-20. Wesley P. Walters, "New Light on Mormon Origins from the Palmyra Revival," *Dialogue*, Vol. 4 (Spring, 1969), pp. 59-81. Richard L. Bushman, "The First Vision Story Revived," *Dialogue*, Vol. 4 (Spring, 1969), pp. 82-93.
 5 Allen, *op. cit.*, pp. 30-32.
 6 As early as June 1830, a revelation alluded to something like the First Vision: "For, after that it truly was manifested unto this first elder, that he had received a remission of his sins, he was entangled again in the vanities of the world. . . ." *Book of Commandments* (Independence, Missouri, 1833), Vol. 24, pp. 6-7. Cf. *The Evening and the Morning Star*, Vol. 1 (June 1832), pp. 6-7. Cf. D&C 20:5. There are some slight variations in the latter references, including the dating of the revelation as April instead of June. An 1831 revelation read, "Wherefore, I the Lord, knowing the calamity which should come upon the inhabitants of the earth, called upon my servant Joseph, and spake unto him from heaven, and gave him commandments. . . ." *Book of Commandments* 1:4. Cf. D&C 1:17. In February 1831, Obadiah Dogberry, publisher of the *Palmyra Reflector*, reported on news of the Mormons in Ohio, where, according to his correspondent, Joseph Smith's followers were affirming that he "had seen God frequently and personally." *The Reflector*, February 14, 1831, p. 102.
 7 Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History* (New York: Alfred A.

Knopf Company, 1946), p. 25.
 8 In April 1830, a revelation required that a record be kept in the Church. In March 1831, John Whitmer was appointed to keep a history. See D&C 21:1; 47:1; 69:2-3.
 9 There were a few minor changes between the original Manuscript History and the publication in the *Times and Seasons*. There have been a few additional changes in the account found in the Pearl of Great Price. The reason for these changes is not always clear, although in some cases it was probably simply a matter of improving grammatical style. In any case, the essential details and meaning of the account have not been changed, and the changes are not significant enough to discuss in the text above.
 10 Jessee, "The Early Accounts," pp. 277-78.
 11 Essentially the same material was published in I. Daniel Rupp, *An Original History of the Religious Denominations at Present Existing in the United States* (Philadelphia, 1844), pp. 404-405.
 12 An excerpt of the diary, which is housed in the Church Historian's office, says: "Br Joseph told us the first call he had a Revival Meeting his Mother, Br & Sister got Religion He wanted to get Religion too wanted to feel & shout like the Rest but could feel nothing, opened his Bible & the first Passage that struck him was if any man lack wisdom let him ask of God who giveth to all men liberally & upbaideth not went into the Wood to pray kneels himself down his tongue was closet cleaved to his roof could utter not a word, felt easier after a while-saw a fire toward 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 while 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, They 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 comforted indeavoured to arise and felt Uncomen feeble-got into the house told the Methodist priest & said this was not a age for god to Reveal himself in Vision Revelation has ceased with the New Testament." Note that the only exception to the idea that the Son delivered the important message of the Vision is found in this account, but Neibaur could easily have become confused on the chronology of detail by the time he got home and wrote it in his diary.
 13 Walters, in both articles referred to above.
 14 Actually, Professor Milton Backman has found that this area was called Farmington town when the Smiths moved there, but the name was changed to Manchester township a few years later.
 15 Backman, *op. cit.*, especially pp. 305ff., where he shows what was happening to the Methodists. This is important because of Joseph's assertion that the excitement he remembered began with the Methodists.

The Various Elements of Joseph Smith's First Vision,
As Recorded or Clearly Implied in the Eight Contemporary Accounts

	1831-32	1835	1838-39	Pratt	Hyde	Wentworth	Spec-tator	Nei-baur
Religious excitement of the period			●					●
Joseph's concern for his soul (or future state)	●			●	●	●		●
Disillusionment with various denominations	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	
Joseph's concern for mankind in general	●							
His quest for forgiveness of sin	●							
His quest to know which church (if any) was right	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
His searching the scriptures	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
His prayer	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
The strange force of opposition		●	●	●	●			●
Appearance of the light	●	●	●	●			●	●
Appearance of Deity	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
(Two personages)		●	●		●	●	●	●
The message:								
1. Forgiveness of sins	●	●		●				
2. Testimony of Jesus	●	●	●				●	
3. Join no church (all were wrong)	●		●	●	●	●	●	●
4. Gospel to be restored				●	●	●		
Joseph filled with love	●							
Unsuccessful effort to get others to believe the story	●		●					●

¹⁶ The words "or thereabouts" were not included in the *Times and Seasons* account, April 1, 1842, p. 748, nor are they in the present Pearl of Great Price. It is significant, however, that the Prophet should put them in his manuscript as he was preparing it.

¹⁷ In later years, at least one other person who had known Joseph Smith wrote of hearing him describe the appearance of one person before the other. See Cheesman, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

¹⁸ The three manuscript versions (1831-32, 1835, and 1838-39) are in Jesse, *op. cit.*, and the Wentworth Letter (1842) follows that article. The Pratt and Hyde versions are reproduced in Cheesman, appendices C and G. The *New York Spectator* report is in Preston Nibley, *Joseph Smith the Prophet* (Salt Lake City, 1946), p. 31. The Neibaur version is in footnote 12 above.

¹⁹ For a full account of the period, see Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-over District* (Ithaca, 1950). Chapter 8, "The Prophet," deals with the Mormons.

²⁰ Backman, *op. cit.*, pp. 312-13.

²¹ 1838-39 Manuscript, and Joseph Smith 2:7.

²² The 1831-32 manuscript is full of poignant expressions indicating the depth of young Joseph's feelings: "my mind became exceedingly distressed for I became convicted of my Sins . . ."; "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 when I considered these things my heart exclaimed well hath the wise man said it is a fool that saith in his heart there is no God my heart exclaimed . . . all these bear testimony and bespeak an omnipotent and omnipresent power . . ."; "I cried unto the Lord for mercy for there was none else to whom I could go . . ."

²³ Neibaur journal.

²⁴ Except Neibaur, and this account clearly implies the same thing.

²⁵ Cf. Joseph Smith 2:6.

²⁶ *New York Spectator* account. Cf. 1838-39 manuscript and Joseph Smith 2:10.

²⁷ 1831-32 manuscript.

²⁸ 1838-39 manuscript. Cf. the Wentworth letter and the Orson Pratt account. Joseph wrote to Wentworth: "I determined to investigate the subject more fully believing that if God had a church it would not be split into fractions." Orson Pratt wrote: "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?" The common point in all these accounts is the possibility that none of the churches could be correct.

²⁹ At this point an interesting problem occurs with respect to the 1838-39 manuscript. After telling of his asking the heavenly visitors which of all the sects was right, Joseph added, in parenthesis, "(for at this time it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong)." While this seems somewhat inconsistent, it may actually reflect the real confusion of the 14-year-old Joseph, who did not want to believe, deep in his heart, that there was no "true" church, even though his mind already asked the obvious questions: "Who of all these parties are right? Or are they all wrong together?" The confusion within the account, then, might reflect the actual experience of a young man who had thought the unthinkable and yet had not let it sink into his soul (or heart), because it was not what he wanted to believe. Certainly the deep, personal emotions described in nearly all the accounts could lead to a desire to join some church, and hence Joseph's hesitancy to believe that all were wrong. Cf. *Times and Seasons*, April 1, 1842, p. 748, and Joseph Smith 2:18. The words in parentheses were published in the *Times and Seasons* as well as in all editions of the Pearl of Great Price down to 1902. In the new edition of that year, and in all subsequent editions, it was deleted.

³⁰ 1838-39 manuscript. Cf. Joseph Smith 2:12-13.

³¹ He told an editor, as reported in the *New York Spectator* account, that "I immediately went out into the woods where my father had a clearing, and went to the stump where I had struck my axe when I had quit work, and I kneeled down, and prayed."

³² Both of these concerns are clear in the 1831-32 manuscript.

³³ 1838-39 manuscript. Cf. Joseph Smith 2:15.

³⁴ 1835 manuscript. Cf. Neibaur journal.

³⁵ Orson Hyde account.

³⁶ 1835 manuscript.

³⁷ 1838-39 manuscript.

³⁸ 1831-32 manuscript. The "pillar of light" has been variously described as a "pillar of fire" (1835), a "very bright and glorious light" (Pratt), and "a fire toward heaven" (Neibaur).

³⁹ Orson Pratt account. Cf. Neibaur journal and 1835 manuscript.

⁴⁰ 1831-32 manuscript.

⁴¹ Orson Pratt account.

⁴² 1835 manuscript, *New York Spectator*, and Neibaur journal.

⁴³ Wentworth letter. Cf. 1835 manuscript and Pratt and Hyde accounts.

⁴⁴ 1838-39 manuscript.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* Cf. *New York Spectator*.

⁴⁶ 1831-32 manuscript. Cf. 1835 manuscript and Orson Pratt account, both of which confirm the statement that his sins were forgiven.

⁴⁷ 1838-39 manuscript. Cf. Neibaur, who wrote that Joseph asked, "Must I join the Methodist church?"

⁴⁸ 1835 manuscript. Cf. Orson Pratt account, this part of which seems to have been copied almost word for word from the 1835 statement. Cf. also the *New York Spectator* and the 1838-39 manuscript.

⁴⁹ 1838-39 manuscript. Cf. Neibaur journal.

⁵⁰ Wentworth letter, Pratt and Hyde accounts.

⁵¹ 1838-39 manuscript.

⁵² 1835 manuscript.

⁵³ See John 1:18. Cf. Moses 1:2; D&C 67:10-13; 32:30.

⁵⁴ Pratt and Hyde accounts. See also Neibaur journal.

⁵⁵ 1838-39 manuscript. See also Neibaur journal.

⁵⁶ 1838-39 manuscript. Cf. Joseph Smith 2:22.

⁵⁷ This document is reproduced, in part, in Truman G. Madsen's prologue to the Spring, 1969, issue of *BYU Studies*, p. 235. As Madsen points out, we do not know enough yet about the document to rely on its complete authenticity. It is quoted here simply as an interesting document that

may well prove to be genuine as researchers continue to probe the sources. Joseph's own testimony on this subject is corroborated by that of his mother, as well as by accounts of non-Mormon writers who knew him as a young man. Richard L. Anderson's incisive article in the same issue of *BYU Studies* carefully analyzes some of these writers, including Mother Smith, and presents convincing verification for Joseph's claims with regard to what was happening both before and after his experience in the Sacred Grove.

The Spoken Word

"The Spoken Word" from Temple Square, presented over KSL and the Columbia Broadcasting System January 25, 1970. © 1970.

"How could I face my children . . ."

By Richard L. Evans

This was heard from a wonderful, forthright grandfather. He had just talked with a young grandson—one of those searching sessions when a child asks direct, innocent questions—when a child with steady eyes and innocent honesty could make a man earnestly examine himself to see if he detects any deception within his own soul. And then this honest, grateful grandfather asked a simple question: "How could I face my children, my grandchildren, and tell them I had done wrong?" Don't try to hide your heart from a boy. "Boys," wrote Emerson, "know truth from counterfeit as quick as a chemist does."¹ Too often we hear of abuse of children: cruelty, corruption. One can scarcely conceive of this being so, and it reminds us of this sobering indictment from our Savior: ". . . whoso shall offend one of these little ones . . . it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea."² It is something to think of. Children come here clean and sweet and teachable, from the Father of us all. Innocent they come, and innocent they are, until environment or example is otherwise. "The mind," said William Ellery Channing, "like the body, depends upon the climate it lives in, on the air it breathes."³ Heaven help those who abuse or neglect or corrupt, or are cruel to children, or who are indifferent to the environment that takes their innocence from them. Children have a right to be protected from exploitation and from evil influence. "I have commanded you to bring up your children in light and truth."⁴ "How could I face my children — anyone's children — and tell them I had done wrong?" Lord, help us to live to feel clean and comfortable with honest, innocent children, and with others also, and with our own souls inside.

¹Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Education*.

²Matthew 18:6.

³William Ellery Channing, *On the Elevation of the Laboring Classes*.

⁴Doctrine and Covenants 93:40.