

Opening the Heavens

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Opening the Heavens

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1820–1844

Edited by
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The Earliest Documented Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision

Dean C. Jessee

The direct, primary historical sources pertaining to Joseph Smith's First Vision now known total ten accounts in thirteen documents—eight 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.

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 bennefit of an education suffice it to say I was nearly instructid in reading writing and the ground rules of Arithmatic which const[it]uted my whole literary acquirements.”¹

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 inability 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.”² And 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 record-keeping plan 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,³ procedures for creating 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*. 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.⁴ 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.”⁵ 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 manuscript before he too met an untimely death on August 27, 1841.⁶

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. The *History* would not be finished

during his lifetime.⁷ Shortly 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 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 sufferings of the first Elders and Saints of this last kingdom might not wholly be lost to the world.”⁸ The historical records of Joseph Smith’s life, including those pertaining to the First Vision, are best seen in this context.

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,” 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.⁹ This 1832 narrative contains the 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 hand. 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 by ~~strikeouts~~. Brackets [] indicate editorial comments.

A History of the life of Joseph Smith Jr. an account of his marvilous 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 brough<t> 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 Gospel – < – the Law and Commandments as they were given unto him – > and 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 Siegnior 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 chिल्dren and as it required the 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 instructtid in reading ~~and~~ writing and the ground <rules> of Arithmetic which constuted my whole literary acuirements. At about the age of twelve years my mind become seriously imprest [p. 1] with regard to the all important concerns 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 differant denominated led me to marvel excedingly 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 divi[si]ons the wicke[d]ness 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 ~~mand~~ <mankind> did not come unto the Lord but that they had apostatised from the true and liveing 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 magesty 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 magesty and in the strength of beauty whose power and intilgence in governing the things which are so exceding great and [p. 2] marvilous 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 omnipotant and omnipreasant power a being who makith 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 according to th[e]ir ungodliness and to bring to pass that which <hath> been spoken by the mouth of the prophets and Ap[ost]les 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 [I] could find none that would believe the hevny vision nevertheless I pondered these things in my heart.¹⁰

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 hand, 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 Matthias 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 at the different systems taught the children of men, I knew not who was right or who was wrong and I considered it of the first importance that I should be right, in matters that involve 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 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 upbradeth not; information was what I most desired at this time, and with a fixed determination 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 p[r]ay, 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 me head, and filled me with Joy unspeakable, 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 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.¹¹

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 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."¹² 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 "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."¹³ 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, including introductory sentences changed from first to third person, the entry included by Warren Cowdery for November 9, 1835, in which Joseph related his 1820 Vision experience to Matthias, 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 [Matthias] 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 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] 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.[⁹]¹⁴

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

On November 14, 1835, five days after the Robert Matthias visit, Joseph Smith related his vision to Erastus Holmes, from Newberry, Clermont County, Ohio, who 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 visitations that I received afterward,