We cannot truly love God if we do not love our fellow travelers on this mortal journey. Likewise, we cannot fully love our fellowmen if we do not love God, the Father of us all. The Apostle John tells us, “This commandment have we from him, That he who loveth God love his brother also.” We are all spirit children of our Heavenly Father and, as such, are brothers and sisters. As we keep this truth in mind, loving all of God’s children will become easier.

Actually, love is the very essence of the gospel, and Jesus Christ is our Exemplar.[1]

These words, spoken by President Thomas S. Monson this spring are reflective of the theme of this lesson built from quotes from another president of the Church. In chapter 20 of Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Joseph Fielding Smith, President Smith teaches us to love and serve all of God’s children. In the “From the life of Joseph Fielding Smith” section, three examples of loving service are given by Joseph himself. Section 1 focuses on the idea that we are all children of God, and should love each other because we’re spiritual siblings. Section 2 focuses on working together and caring for each other, with a special focus on Church contexts. Section 3 encourages us to serve and help each other. Section 4 has a charming story about a horse President Smith took care of as a child with the message that we ought not to judge, but take the good in everyone and make room for a few faults. Section 5 focuses on the doctrinal necessity to love God and our fellow humans.

Extra-Manual Resources and Quotes

Perhaps the most obvious choice for a supplementary talk to this lesson is the general conference address by President Thomas S. Monson cited above, and available in full here. Beyond that, however, there are a plethora of quotes and comments available on the subject of love, service, and charity. Another great talk from a few years ago on friendship and love is Marlin K. Jensen, “Friendship: A Gospel Principle,” General Conference, April 1999. Another useful resource related to the story of President Smith’s horse is a clip taken from a short documentary that relates the story of going out with his mother in the middle of the night. It could be used to introduce the section and break up the lesson just a little, and is available here.
I also have several quotes from sisters, most of which, though directed to the Relief Society, are applicable to men. For example, Lucy Mack Smith taught the Relief Society in 1842 that: “We must cherish one another, watch over one another, comfort one another and gain instruction that we may all sit down in heaven together.”[2] Sister Clarissa Smith Williams, Relief Society President, taught in 1922 that: “The greatest thing in the world is love. And if we keep that always in our hearts, and give it as a message to those about us, we will be blessed and will be instruments in blessing those with whom we associate.”[3] Mary Ellen Smoot, Relief Society President, taught in 2000 that: “When we unitedly serve each other and all of our Father’s children, we can be instruments in the hands of God, not only to relieve physical suffering but, more importantly, to succor those who are in need spiritually.”[4]

Yet another wonderful address on the subject came in 2006 from President Gordon B. Hinckley: Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Need for Greater Kindness,” General Conference, April 2006. A few excerpts are as follows:

“I have wondered why there is so much hatred in the world. We are involved in terrible wars with lives lost and many crippling wounds. Coming closer to home, there is so much of jealousy, pride, arrogance, and carping criticism; fathers who rise in anger over small, inconsequential things and make wives weep and children fear.

Racial strife still lifts its ugly head. I am advised that even right here among us there is some of this. I cannot understand how it can be…..

Throughout my service as a member of the First Presidency, I have recognized and spoken a number of times on the diversity we see in our society. It is all about us, and we must make an effort to accommodate that diversity.

Let us all recognize that each of us is a son or daughter of our Father in Heaven, who loves all of His children….

Why can’t all of us reach out in friendship to everyone about us? Why is there so much bitterness and animosity? It is not a part of the gospel of Jesus Christ.”[5]

When it comes to serving and caring for others, a great sermon given in general conference a few years ago by President Henry B. Eyring entitled “Opportunities to Do Good,” comes to mind. If I could, I would place the entire talk here as the essential quotes from it, but I will simply encourage the reader to click the hyperlink to read or view the talk on their own. From the most recent general conference, we have Elder Jeffrey R. Holland’s talk, “Are We Not All Beggars?” There is also, of course the classic quote from Gordon B. Hinckley: “Generally speaking, the most miserable people I know are those who are obsessed with themselves; the happiest people I know are those who lose themselves in the service of others…. By and large, I have come to see that if we complain about life, it is because we are thinking only of ourselves.”[6]
The *Ready Resources for Relief Society* book I have lists several websites that are handy for discovering service opportunities in the area. A few sites that are currently still existent are as follows:

www.volunteermatch.org

www.idealist.org

www.serve.gov

www.nationalservice.gov

In addition the following Church-sponsored sites have some service resources to look into:

www.ldsphilanthropies.org

www.ldscharities.org

https://vineyard.lds.org/

**Come unto Christ Moment**

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“And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.”

Image courtesy LDS.org.
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Towards the end of his earthly ministry, Jesus Christ taught the following to his disciples:

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“Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee?

Then shall the King answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me. Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels: For I was an hungred, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not.

Then shall they also answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee?

Then shall he answer them, saying, verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me. And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal. (Matthew 25: 31-46.)
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The Lord makes it clear that the dividing line between those beings who are saved and those who are not is the service provided to fellow humans in this life’s journey, which in turn reflects on relationships with Himself. King Benjamin likewise taught that: “when ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye are only in the service of your God,” (Mosiah 2:17) and stated, in effect, there is no way we can directly repay God Himself for all that He blesses us with:

“I say unto you, my brethren, that if you should render all the thanks and praise which your whole soul has power to possess, to that God who has created you, and has kept and preserved you, and has caused that ye should rejoice, and has granted that ye should live in peace one with another—I say unto you that if ye should serve him who has created you from the beginning, and is preserving you from day to day, by lending you breath, that ye may live and move and do according to your own will, and even supporting you from one moment to another—I say, if ye should serve him with all your whole souls yet ye would be unprofitable servants. (Mosiah 2:20-21.)

Thus, we serve and repay God in some degree by serving our fellow humans. To King Benjamin, as it was to Christ, to neglect other human beings in need was to neglect God. To serve and impart substance to the poor was to serve God and a necessary part of the process of “retaining a remission of sins from day to day.” (Mosiah 4:26.) Elder B.H. Roberts once expressed this idea succinctly: “About the only way in which men can effectively express their love for God is through service to the children of God, to men.”[8]

God places a premium upon the human soul, revealing to Joseph Smith that “the worth of souls is great in the sight of God; for, behold, the Lord your Redeemer suffered death in the flesh; wherefore he suffered the pain of all men, that all men might repent and come unto him. And he hath risen again from the dead, that he might bring all men unto him, on conditions of repentance.” (D&C 18:10-11). Elsewhere, it was revealed by God that, “This is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man.” (Moses 1:39.) This being God’s purpose, He is pleased when we work together to help rather than hinder each other in the process of gaining eternal life. That is why James wrote that: “Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction and to keep himself unspotted from the world.” (James 1:27.) At its heart, religion is for shaping us into beings that partake of the divine nature and giving us opportunities to develop right relationships with God and with our fellow humans. The Prophet Joseph Smith, in addressing social righteousness, once stated that, “Righteousness is not that which men esteem holiness. That which the world call righteousness I have not any regard for. To be righteous is to be just and merciful. If a man fails in kindness justice and mercy he will be damed.”[9] Once more, righteousness is equated with how we treat each other.

Christ is not only pleased when we serve each other, but he showed the example we need to follow in how we treat each other, for, as President Monson observed: “Love is the very essence of the gospel, and Jesus Christ is our Exemplar. His life was a legacy of love. The sick He healed; the downtrodden He lifted; the sinner He saved. At the end the angry mob took His life. And yet there rings from Golgotha’s hill the words: ‘Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do’—a crowning expression in mortality of compassion and love.”[10]

A Deeper Look

I’ve discussed this idea in my other blog,[11] but in all the recorded sermons and writings of Joseph Smith, Jr. available to us today, only three principles were ever given the lofty title of being a “grand, fundamental principle of Mormonism” or even simply the “fundamental principles.” If taken as the pillars of Mormonism, these principles could be considered the definitive essence of Mormonism, comparable to the “Five Pillars” of Islam or the “Four Noble Truths” and “Eightfold Path” of Buddhism. Yet, while most Mormons would be familiar with, for example, the 12 Articles of Faith or the threefold purpose of the Church, they probably could not list the grand fundamental principles of Mormonism enumerated by Joseph Smith in the latter end of his life.
Joseph Smith, Jr. laid down a few fundamental principles of Mormonism in his final years.

What, then, are these pillars of Mormonism? In 1838, Joseph wrote that, “The fundamental principles of our religion are the testimony of the Apostles and Prophets, concerning Jesus Christ, that He died, was buried, and rose again the third day, and ascended into heaven; and all other things which pertain to our religion are only appendages to it.” In the summer of 1843, Joseph declared that, “the grand fundamental principles of Mormonism is to recieve thruth let it come from where it may,” and that “friendship is the grand fundamental principle of Mormonism.” While each of these three principles deserves a good look, the principle of friendship is the most pertinent to this chapter in the Joseph Fielding Smith manual.

In August of 1842, the Prophet wrote that, “How good and glorious it has seemed unto me, to find pure and holy friends, who are faithful, just, and true, and whose hearts fail not.” On another occasion, he wrote that, “There are many souls whom I have loved stronger than death. To them I have proved faithful—to them I am determined to prove faithful, until God calls me to resign up my breath.” Amidst all the trials and betrayals he had experienced, and perhaps because of those things, Joseph put great value on true friendship. He also felt that friendship could create a heaven wherever it was held: “Animation, virtue, love, contentment, philanthropy, benevolence, compassion, humanity and friendship push life into bliss.” “Let me be resurrected with the saints whether to heaven or hell or any other good place—[where they are is] good society. what do we care if the society is good?”

Beyond the friendships that played important roles in his life, friendship with its consequent brotherhood and sisterhood played an important role in the Prophet’s religious thought. In the Book of Mormon, the foundational document of Mormonism, the Nephite people are visited by the resurrected Christ, who (among other things) declared that, “verily, verily I say unto you, he that hath the spirit of contention is not of me, but is of the devil, who is the father of contention, and he stirreth up the hearts of men to contend with anger, one with another.” (3 Nephi 11:29.) Contention—the opposite of friendship and unity—was of the devil. Building on the teachings of a series of visits from the Christ, the people of the Book of Mormon built a utopian society where “there were no contention in the land, because of the love of God which did dwell in the hearts of the people…. And surely there could not be a happier people among all the people who had been created by the hand of God.” (4 Nephi 1:15-16.) Tribal divisions that had formerly existed among the people faded away during this time, being replaced by unity in Christianity: “There were no… Lamanites, nor any manner of ites’ but they were in one, the Children of Christ, and heirs to the kingdom of God.” (4 Nephi 1:17.) After hundreds of years, this utopian society collapsed, but this was not the last time such a society would appear in Joseph Smith’s restoration scriptures. In his inspired translation of Genesis, Joseph spoke of the people of Enoch, who were called “Zion, because they were of one heart and one mind, and dwelt in righteousness; and there was no poor among them” (Moses 7:18). These people built a city that was called “City of Holiness, even Zion” which was so righteous, that God took it up into heaven. (Moses 7:19-21.)
Together, this dynamic duo of societies demonstrated the ideal that Joseph tried to have the Saints in his day live as they sought to build their own Zion on earth—a people, united in love and friendship. Among the commands given in the voice of the Lord to prepare the Saints to go to the land that Joseph designated as Zion are imperatives such as, “let every man esteem his brother as himself, and practice virtue and holiness before me…. I say unto you, be one; and if ye are not one ye are not mine.” (D&C 38:24, 27.) When Zion failed and the Saints were driven out of the land, it was declared to be at least partly because, “there were jarrings, and contentions, and envyings, and strifes, and lustful and covetous desires among them; therefore by these things they polluted their inheritances.” (D&C 101:6.) Although the Saints had lost their chance to build the city called Zion for the time being, they still strove to build stakes or outposts of Zion wherever they ended up—a process that, though spiritualized in many ways, still continues today.[19]

In addition to the idea of building a physical kingdom of believers united in bonds of love, friendship manifests itself in other core aspects of Mormonism. Salvation, in Joseph Smith’s view, was obtained through covenants and related ordinances, and these covenants of salvation were not only to be made between humans and God, but also between human beings. Most explicit of all covenants of friendship revealed by Joseph Smith, perhaps, was the covenant members of the School of the Prophets made, in which participants greeted each other and declared that, “I receive you to fellowship, in a determination that is fixed, immovable, and unchangeable, to be your friend and brother through the grace of God in the bonds of love, to walk in all commandments of God blameless, in thanksgiving, forever and ever.” (D&C 88:133.) Baptism, for another example, not only involved taking the name of Christ upon an individual but also the covenant to “bear one another’s burdens… mourn with those that mourn; yea, and comfort hose that stand in need of comfort.” (Mosiah 18:8-9.) In addition, the crowning ordinance to be performed for most Mormons in mortality was and is the marriage ordinance performed in the temple, which not only involves covenants with God, but binds a man and wife as well any children they have or may have together eternally by priesthood authority as well as with covenants to each other.

Fellowship among the Saints was also prerequisite to gain power and reconciliation with God. Joseph told the Relief Society that, “it grieves me that there is no fuller fellowship—if one member suffer all feel it[,] by union of feeling we obtain pow’r with God”[20] and that, “If you would have God have mercy on you, have mercy on one another.”[21] Likewise, in the version of the Sermon on the Mount preached by the risen Christ in the Book of Mormon, the Christ states that, “Therefore, if ye shall come unto me, or shall desire to come unto me, and rememberest that thy brother hath aught against thee—go thy way unto thy brother, and first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come unto me with full purpose of heart, and I will receive you.” (3 Nephi 12:23-24.) To reconcile with Christ, the Saints must reconcile with each other.

Part of Joseph Smith’s vision for this grand principle of Mormonism, at least by the end of his life in 1844, was to bridge ecclesiastical differences and build friendships with people who believed than the Mormons. In 1842, the Prophet wrote that:

“The Mussulman condemns the heathen, the Jew, and the Christian, and the whole world of mankind that reject his Koran, as infidels, and consigns the whole of them to perdition. The Jew believes that the whole world that rejects his faith and are not circumcised, are Gentile dogs, and will be damned. The heathen is equally as tenacious about his principles, and the Christian consigns all to perdition who cannot bow to his creed, and submit to his ipse dixit [dogma].

But while one portion of the human race is judging and condemning the other without mercy, the Great Parent of the universe looks upon the whole of the human family with a fatherly care and paternal regard; He views them as His offspring, and without any of those contracted feelings that influence the children of men, causes “His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.”[22]

Like the God Joseph portrayed here, Joseph taught that Mormons were to reach out, care for, and befriend men and women of other faiths. He declared that, “If it has been demonstrated that I have been willing to die for a Mormon I am bold to declare before heaven that I am just as ready to die for a presbyterian. a baptist or any other denomination.”[23] Further, in July of 1843—a time when Mormonism was becoming more distant from mainstream Christianity and its teachings—Joseph offered this interesting statement in a sermon that was noted as “a conciliatory address to Strangers & all”:

“By union of feeling we obtain pow’r with God.”
"Wherein do you differ from other in your religious views?" In reality & essence we do not differ so far in our religious views but that we could all drink into one principle of love. One the grand fundamental principles of Mormonism is to receive truth let it come from where it may.—we believe in the great Eloheim, who sits enthroned in yonder heavens.—so do the presbyterians. If as a skillful mechanic In taking a welding heat I use a borax & allum &c. an succeed in welding you all together shall I not have attained a good object.

If I esteem mankind to be in error shall I bear them down? No! I will will lift them up. & in his own way if I cannot persuade him my way is better! & I will ask no man to believe as I do. Do you believe in Jesus Christ &c? So do I. Christians should cultivate the friendship with others & will do it.[24]

“But how truly magnanimous this declaration is,” observes writer Don Bradley, “cannot be appreciated without knowing the origin within scripture of the phrase ‘drink into one.’” Bradley continues:

Outside of the 9 July 1843 sermon, the phrase appears in LDS literature only in 1 Corinthians 12:13, where Paul uses the expression to explain the mystical or metaphorical “body of Christ”:

For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit. (1 Corinthians 12:12–13)

Invoking this passage, Joseph Smith conveyed the radical idea that the Latter-day Saints and those of other traditions jointly comprise the body of Christ….

Joseph envisioned a Christendom united by faith in God and Jesus Christ and by mutual love, a contemplated unity which might best be understood on the model offered by Freemasonry. Freemasons have long sought cross-denominational unity, without ecclesiastical integration, based on belief in God, brotherhood, and a commitment to truth and to relieving the needs of the poor.

While advocating Christian unity, however, Joseph clearly did not envision the institutional unification of Christendom, the merging of all church structures into one. He continued to maintain Mormonism’s exclusive claims to authority to perform ordinances or sacraments. Sandwiched between his ecumenical 9 July and 23 July sermons, for instance, Joseph dictated and taught a revelatory text declaring that the sacrament of marriage was eternally binding only if performed by the priesthood of Elijah and that Joseph himself was the one man on earth holding the keys of this priesthood.[25]

In a sermon preached later in the month, Joseph continued the thought of welding all religions together in bonds of friendship by teaching that:

Friendship is the grand fundamental principle of Mormonism, [it is designed] to revolution[ize and] civilize the world.—pour forth love. Friendship [is] like Bro Turley [in his] Blacksmith Shop [welding iron to iron; it unites the human family with its happy influence].

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Friendship is on the of grand fundamental principles of Mormonism and ought to be a defining force in all interactions that Mormons have with those inside their families and faith communities as well as with those of other faiths. If applied more fully, as Joseph Smith taught it should be, it would not only revolutionize and civilize the world, but would turn Mormonism into a veritable heaven on earth.


[11] The full essay that this comes from is available here.

[12] Joseph Smith, Jr., Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007), 49.


[15] Joseph Smith, Jr., Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), 461.

[16] Smith, Teachings of the Presidents, 463

[17] Smith, Teachings of the Presidents, 342


[19] For further reading on the idea of Zion in Mormonism, I have a four-part series of blog posts starting here.


[22] Times and Seasons, 15 April 1842, 758


PATRIOT PROPHET: THE NEW TEACHINGS OF THE PRESIDENTS OF THE CHURCH MANUAL

As a teenager, I became acquainted with both Ezra Taft Benson’s teachings and the Teachings of the Presidents of the Church manual series that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has been working on for over 15 years now to serve as the manuals for Relief Society and Elders Quorum meetings and a basis for Church members’ gospel reference books collections. At the time, I was very impressed with President Benson’s teachings because of both the thoughts expressed and the way in which they were expressed. So, not understanding that the Teachings of the Presidents of the Church series were not yet complete, I asked my mother if I could borrow her copy of Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Ezra Taft Benson book so I could read it. She informed me that she didn’t think they had that one yet. Not quite believing her, I searched the house, but, of course, didn’t find it. Well, now the Church released has Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Ezra Taft Benson as the lesson manual for Elders Quorum and Relief Society for 2015 and I have finally had the chance to read it.

There’ve been a few subtle changes since previous books in the series. First, the cover artwork seems to be an actual picture rather than a painting for the first time. Second, while the “teaching help” sections at the end of each chapter are still largely drawn from the Church’s official teaching manual Teaching, No Greater Call, they seem to have a larger number drawn from other resources, such as conference talks, Ensign articles, etc. Third, as is usually the case, the lessons are drawn from things that Ezra Taft Benson emphasized and taught most frequently during his ministry—at least the ones deemed most necessary to the modern, international Church. As such, the flavor of the book and subject matters selected are slightly different than other years, though the standard temple, Jesus Christ, Joseph Smith, missionary work, and other such lessons are still present. Since Ezra Taft Benson was more focused on behavioral issues than doctrine, however, more emphasis is placed on topics such as repentance, sharing and reading the Book of Mormon, and strengthening the family rather than things like the Plan of Salvation or the nature of the Atonement or God like we had in, say, the more doctrinally-minded Joseph Fielding Smith manual. That being said, let’s glance through a few themes emphasized by President Benson in his lifetime and how they are reflected in this manual.

More than any other topic, Ezra Taft Benson will probably be remembered for his emphasis on reading and sharing the Book of Mormon. By July 1989, President Benson had delivered thirty-nine public addresses on the Book of Mormon—fourteen of which were delivered in general conferences. As such, it is not surprising to find that two chapters of the 24 chapter manual are devoted entirely to the subject, and that it shines through in many of the other chapters in the book. Of course, we find the most famous quotes on the subject, such as the statement that the Book of Mormon is the keystone of our religion and that “just as the arch crumbles if the keystone is removed, so does all the Church stand or fall with the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon,” as well as his belief that “it is not just that the Book of Mormon teaches us truth, though it indeed does that. It is not just that the Book of Mormon bears testimony of Christ, though it indeed does that, too. But there is something more. There is a power in the book which will begin to flow into your lives the moment you being a serious study of the book.”[1] We also find a few other insightful thoughts on the subject that I find quite interesting, such as his statement that, “The Doctrine and Covenants is the binding link between the Book of Mormon and the continuing work of the Restoration through the Prophet Joseph Smith and his successors.”[2]
Ezra Taft Benson reading the scriptures.

The Book of Mormon is not the only emphasis Ezra Taft Benson had during his time as a general authority. As one excellent history of the Church observed, “He gave prophetic advice to parents, commemorated the bicentennial of the U.S. Constitution with a general conference address on its inspiration, called upon the Saints to love the Lord, denounced the evil of pride, spoke to children about their responsibilities, encouraged the elderly, and reminded the Saints of their duty toward the aged.”[3] Most of these themes come out in the manual in one chapter or another. For example, the advice to parents comes in chapter 15, “The Sacred Calling of Fathers and Mothers;” the themes of encouraging the elderly and duty toward the aged come out in Ch. 16, “The Elderly in the Church;” while several other chapters dwell on family-related themes, including an entire chapter on the law of chastity (the fourth manual in the series to do so). Since President Benson’s most famous sermon may very well be his “Beware of Pride,” General Conference Address, there is an entire chapter devoted to that sermon after a brief historical introduction. The theme of calling upon the Saints to love the Lord comes forward in the first and last chapters of the book (gratefully providing a Christmas text in the proper season in the latter case), with another chapter on Christ in the early part of the book.

As mentioned in the list of themes, patriotism and the U.S. constitution were important to Ezra Taft Benson. He was, perhaps, the most conservative and patriotic of all LDS Presidents to date, believing and preaching that the United States was “the cradle of liberty,” that it had a “prophetic mission” and served as “the Lord's base of operations in these latter days.”[4] He served as a member of a U.S. President’s Cabinet while serving as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve and held other political positions related to his profession in agriculture prior to his call as a general authority. He was a staunch supporter of American freedoms and fought bitterly against what he saw as the great evils of communism (and most other liberalistic agendas, which he often labeled “communistic”), embracing and advocating the controversial and conservative policies espoused by the John Birch Society. He particularly did this during President David O. McKay’s tenure. During Benson’s presidency, however, he rarely addressed these topics, and the manual—reflecting that shift of emphasis and the needs of the international Church today—provides no chapters on patriotism, anti-communism, or the U.S. Constitution. There is one chapter on “Freedom of Choice, and Eternal Principle,” but this chapter focuses on using freedom and moral agency to make good choices and become something better rather than human liberty and rights. The manual does, however, readily speak of his service in the US government and American patriotism in the “Life and Ministry of Ezra Taft Benson” section at the start of the manual.

Ezra Taft Benson, the Patriot Prophet

On a historical note, the manual does not cover the controversies associated with Ezra Taft Benson’s service in the Church, such as his anti-communist campaigns and outspokenness about his political views, his efforts to block and dismantle Leonard J. Arrington’s Church History department (known as the “Camelot” era to Mormon historians because of the openness and objectivity of the department during that time) because he felt the histories they were producing weren’t faith promoting, and the fact that he suffered from dementia and many other health problems in his final years of life. I also felt that the chapter on Joseph Smith, Jr. tends to perpetuate an un-nuanced view of the Prophet’s history and the Mormon hero-worship of its founder, though this is probably more a reflection on Ezra Taft Benson than the manual. It is very understandable that the manual is this way on both accounts (avoiding the darker history of Benson and Smith), considering that the manual is instructionally-produced devotional literature focused on promoting faith in a Mormon-specific way, not a historical textbook. Despite these omissions, I did feel that the historical sections of the book were well-put together, though I was somewhat disappointed that many of the chapters’ “From the Life of Ezra Taft Benson” sections reflected more on his sermons than life, despite the name of the section.
As a final note, one of my favorite chapters in the book was the one on repentance (chapter 5). Eugene England characterized President Benson—along with Spencer W. Kimball—with the quote that “great religious leaders both comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable,”[5] and I felt that was well represented within this chapter. Perhaps my favorite quote from the chapter was that:

“The Lord works from the inside out. The world works from the outside in. The world would take people out of the slums. Christ takes the slums out of people, and then they take themselves out of the slums. The world would mold men by changing their environment. Christ changes men, who then change their environment. The world would shape human behavior, but Christ can change human nature. …

Yes, Christ changes men, and changed men can change the world.[6]

Anyway, the manual is pretty solid overall and will be a great course of study for the next year and will serve well as reference book in the future. I am excited to work with it as an Elder’s Quorum instructor. For those interested in reading more, the manual is available for reading here, and available for purchase here.


FOR some time President Woodruff’s health had been failing. Nearly every evening President Lorenzo Snow visited him at his home. This particular evening the doctors said that President Woodruff could not live much longer, that he was becoming weaker every day. President Snow was greatly worried. We cannot realize today what a terrible financial condition the Church was in at that time—owing millions of dollars and not being able to pay even the interest on its indebtedness.

My father went to his room in the Salt Lake Temple, dressed in his robes of the Priesthood, knelt at the sacred altar in the Holy of Holies in the House of the Lord and there plead to the Lord to spare President Woodruff’s life, that President Woodruff might outlive him and that the great responsibility of Church leadership would not fall upon his shoulders. Yet he promised the Lord that he would devotedly perform any duty required at his hands. At this time he was in his eighty-sixth year.

Soon after this President Woodruff was taken to California where he died Friday morning at 6:40 o’clock September 2nd, 1898. President George Q. Cannon at once wired the information to the President’s office in Salt Lake City. Word was forwarded to President Snow who was in Brigham City. The telegram was delivered to him on the street in Brigham, He read it to President Rudger Clawson, then President of Boxelder Stake, who was with him, went to the telegraph office and replied that he would leave on the train about 5:30 that evening. He reached Salt Lake City about 7:15, proceeded to the President’s office, gave some instructions and then went to his private room in the Salt Lake Temple.

President Snow put on his holy temple robes, repaired again to the same sacred altar, offered up the signs of the Priesthood and poured out his heart to the Lord. He reminded the Lord how he plead for President Woodruff’s life to be spared, that President Woodruff’s days would be lengthened beyond his own; that he might never be called upon to bear the heavy burdens and responsibilities of the Church. “Nevertheless,” he said, “Thy will be done. I have not sought this responsibility but if it be Thy will, I now present myself before Thee for Thy guidance and instruction. I ask that Thou show me what Thou wouldst have me do.”

After finishing his prayer he expected a reply, some special manifestation from the Lord. So he waited,—and waited—and waited. There was no reply, no voice, no visitation, no manifestation. He left the altar and the room in great disappointment. Passing through the Celestial room and out into the large corridor a glorious manifestation was given President Snow which I relate in the words of his grand-daughter, Allie Young Pond, now the wife of Elder Noah S. Pond, recently president of the Northern States Mission:
One evening while I was visiting grandpa Snow in his room in the Salt Lake Temple, I remained until the door keepers had gone and the night-watchmen had not yet come in, so grand-pa said he would take me to the main front entrance and let me out that way. He got his bunch of keys from his dresser. After we left his room and while we were still in the large corridor leading into the celestial room, I was walking several steps ahead of grand-pa when he stopped me and said: ‘Wait a moment, Allie, I want to tell you something. It was right here that the Lord Jesus Christ appeared to me at the time of the death of President Woodruff. He instructed me to go right ahead and reorganize the First Presidency of the Church at once and not wait as had been done after the death of the previous presidents, and that I was to succeed President Woodruff.’

‘Then grand-pa came a step nearer and held out his left hand and said; ‘He stood right here, about three feet above the floor. It looked as though He stood on a plate of solid gold.’

‘Grand-pa told me what a glorious personage the Savior is and described His hands, feet, countenance and beautiful white robes, all of which were of such a glory of whiteness and brightness that he could hardly gaze upon Him.

‘Then he came another step nearer and put his right hand on my head and said: ‘Now, grand-daughter, I want you to remember that this is the testimony of your grand-father, that he told you with his own lips that he actually saw the Savior, here in the Temple, and talked with Him face to face.’

Lorenzo Snow had a vision of Christ in the Salt Lake Temple, similar in some ways to the one Joseph Smith described in the Kirtland Temple.

During the June conference in 1919 at an M. I. A. officers’ meeting in the Assembly Hall I related the above testimony. President Heber J. Grant immediately arose and said:

In confirmation of the testimony given by Brother LeRoi C. Snow quoting the grand-daughter of Lorenzo Snow, I want to call attention to the fact that several years elapsed after the death of the Prophet Joseph before President Young was sustained as the president of the Church; after the death of President Young, several years elapsed again before President Taylor was sustained, and again when he died several years elapsed before President Woodruff was sustained.

After the funeral of President Wilford Woodruff, the apostles met in the office of the First Presidency and brother Francis M. Lyman said: “I feel impressed, although one of the younger members of the quorum, to say that I believe it would be pleasing in the sight of the Lord if the First Presidency of the Church was reorganized right here and right now. If I am in error regarding this impression. President Snow and the senior members of the council can correct me.”

President Snow said that he would be pleased to hear from all the brethren upon this question, and each and all of us expressed ourselves as believing it would be pleasing to the Lord and that it would be the proper thing to have the Presidency organized at once.

When we had finished, then and not till then, did Brother Snow tell us that he was instructed of the Lord in the temple the night after President Woodruff died, to organize the Presidency of the Church at once. President Anthon H. Lund and myself are the only men now living who were present at that meeting.

May the Lord bless and guide us by his spirit continually and may the testimony that we possess of the divinity of the work ever abide with us and our faithfulness be an inspiration to lead others to a knowledge of the gospel, [p.679] is my prayer and I ask it in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

A few days after the M. I. A. conference, in an interview with President Lund in his office, he retold the incident to me as given by President Grant regarding the meeting in the office of the First Presidency on Tuesday morning, September 13th, 1898, at which Lorenzo Snow was chosen President of the Church. He also said that he heard father tell a number of times of the Savior’s appearance to him after he had dressed in his temple robes, presented himself before the Lord and offered up the signs of the Priesthood.
I related this experience in the Eighteenth ward sacramental service. After the meeting Elder Arthur Winter told me he also had heard my father tell of the Savior’s appearance to him in the Temple instructing him not only to reorganize the First Presidency at once but also to select the same counselors that President Woodruff had. Presidents George Q. Cannon and Joseph F. Smith.


**TRUE AND FAITHFUL: THE 2014 TEACHINGS OF THE PRESIDENTS OF THE CHURCH MANUAL**

Once every year or two, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints releases a new manual for in church meetings. These manuals—the Teachings of the Presidents of the Church—cover the teachings of one prophet, seer and revelator who has presided over the Church in the past. The manuals have not been chronological in their order of release. For example, the past three to be released have been Joseph Smith (1st president), George Albert Smith (8th president) and Lorenzo Snow (5th president). As a result, it has become somewhat of a guessing game as to who will be up next. For those who have walked into Distribution Centres in recent times, however, the Teachings of the Presidents of the Church book for 2014 has been revealed: Joseph Fielding Smith. In addition to the new manual, the Church has put up a video gallery with short presentation on the prophets’ lives and teachings. Several of these videos will be linked to this post.
That being the case, who was Joseph Fielding Smith and why should we be excited to study his life and teachings next year? To be honest, I have struggled with this man for a number of years—his opinionated, but occasionally less-than-doctrinal statements; his arch-conservatism; and his stern attitude have caused me to have less-than-congenial feelings towards him in the past. In more recent times, however, I have been reconciled to his life, work, and words and have come to appreciate him for the good that he did. Joseph Fielding Smith served as a general authority for about 62 years—one of the longest periods of anyone in the Church—serving in several important positions while doing so, including Church Historian, a counselor in the Salt Lake Temple presidency unofficial secretary to the president of the Church, president of the Genealogical Society of Utah, president of the Quorum of the Twelve, and finally becoming president of the Church when he was 93 years old. Despite his advanced age, he actively served as president for two and one-half years, leading changes in Church structure and correlation that still affect us to this day. Despite a few statements that are problematic here and there, he was one of the great gospel scholars of our history, producing 25 books on gospel subjects, regularly publishing articles in periodicals in addition to his many, many sermons. He was indeed a man of God, one who was characterized by the words “true and faithful.”

Joseph Fielding Smith came from a strong heritage in the Church. His paternal grandfather was Hyrum Smith—the brother of Joseph Smith who also served as patriarch to the Church for a number of years. Joseph Fielding’s father was Joseph F. Smith, who served as an apostle and then as president of the Church during an important period of transition. Joseph Fielding’s mother—Juliana Lambson Smith—came from one of the early pioneer families in the Salt Lake Valley and was related to George A. and Bathsheba W. Smith’s niece (Bathsheba was general Relief Society President for a number of years and George A. Smith was her husband and an apostle and counselor to Brigham Young). Juliana had not been able to have any sons prior to Joseph and so, as Joseph Fielding’s son-in-law later explained, ‘she went before the Lord and, like Hannah of old, ‘vowed a vow.’ Her promise: that if the Lord would give her a son, ‘she would do all in her power to help him be a credit to the Lord and to his father.’ The Lord hearkened to her prayers, and she kept her promises to him’ (Smith Teachings 1).

Joseph Fielding Smith’s parents in 1916.

Joseph Fielding Smith’s life was not an easy one by any means. Since his father practiced polygamy and was a leader in the Church, there were many mouths to feed and much work to do, particularly at times when Joseph F. went away on Church assignments or to hide from federal officials on polygamist hunts. Many responsibilities that would—under normal circumstances—be adult tasks were left to young Joseph Fielding. When he moved out and onwards in life, he would experience many trials, including that of being a widower three times over, none of which were experienced as polygamist marriages. He also would be expected to devote most of his time and talents to the Church in his adult life, resulting in a full-time mission to England shortly after his first marriage began and the many later assignments mentioned above.

Character
A nesting doll of Joseph Fielding Smith.

What sort of a man did this life create? In the public eye he was known as a stern, straightforward and orthodox man, somewhat similar to how Elder Boyd K. Packer is often seen today. There is a story that is attached to both Joseph Fielding Smith and J. Golden Kimball that tells of the man speaking at a stake conference and telling the stake members that if they don’t repent of their neglect in paying tithing, only 10% of them would make it to the Celestial Kingdom. After he received some complaints from offended members, Elder Smith/Kimball returned to tell them that after careful consideration he could acknowledge that he was wrong to make the statement he did and apologized for it… because he realized that only 5% of those members would make it to the Celestial Kingdom. One person who was acquainted with him describe Joseph as being “a quite, retiring introvert, dignified and detached, who always seemed somewhat uncomfortable in a public setting and who never sought to call attention to himself” (Smith Teachings 22-23).

Yet, that was only one side of the man. His second wife described him as being “a kind, loving husband and father whose greatest ambition in life is to make his family happy, entirely forgetful of self in his efforts to do this…. The man I know is unselfish, uncomplaining, considerate, thoughtful, sympathetic, doing everything within his power to make life a supreme joy for his loved ones” (Smith Teachings 74). Elder Francis M. Gibbons—a secretary for the First Presidency—recalled that: “His decisions were always made in kindness and love and with the widest latitude of mercy that the circumstances could justify” (Smith Teachings 84).

Perhaps his sternness towards members was born of a combination of his introversion and his heart-felt conviction that calling repentance was the best way to express his love and concern for mankind. He once asked a congregation:

"Who is your best friend, or who loves you the most?… The person who tells you all is well in Zion… or the person who warns you of the calamities and the difficulties that are promised unless the principles of the gospel are lived? I want you to know that I love the members of the Church and I do not want of them to point an accusing finger at me when we pass beyond the veil of mortal existence and say, “If you had only warned me I would not be in this predicament.” And so I raise the warning voice in hopes that my brothers and sisters may be prepared for a kingdom of glory (Smith Teachings 83-84).

Church Callings

President Smith worked hard to fulfill his duty, whether to call repentance, serve his family, or to fulfill his many callings in the Church. It was perhaps due to this that President Gordon B. Hinckley recalled that President Smith “used three great words that I can never forget.” Those three words were “true and faithful” and they apply to Joseph Fielding Smith as much as he tried to have others live up to those words (see Smith Teachings 1). During his early life, Joseph assisted his father in his assignments, even going to dedicate a meetinghouse in Brigham City in his stead. Joseph Fielding even joked that his first assignment came when he was a baby—when he was nine months old he accompanied his father and Brigham Young to St. George, Utah to attend the temple dedication (see Smith Teachings 117).

Significant among the callings that Joseph Fielding Smith served in as an adult include his call to be an Assistant Church Historian (1906-1921) and Church Historian (1921-1970); Apostle (1910-1972) and President of the Quorum of the Twelve (1951-1970); Counselor in the Salt Lake Temple Presidency (1919-1935), President of the Salt Lake Temple (1945-1949), and President of the Genealogical Society of Utah (1934-1961); as a counselor in the First Presidency (1965-1970) and finally as President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (1970-1972). Now, let us look at each of these assignment groups and Joseph’s feelings about and accomplishments in each of them.

1. Church Historian
Joseph Fielding Smith served longer as Church Historian than any other man in LDS history. Among his accomplishments is a volume called *Essentials in Church History*—one of the most widely-read single volume histories of the Church. *Sunstone Magazine* listed it among “Fifty Important Mormon Books” because at the time of its publication:

> There was no one-volume Church history for use by members….. This book, which has gone through many editions, was used extensively for over fifty years in various Church settings….. One may dispute the book’s value as an accurate Church history text, but one cannot discount the influence it had on Mormon historiography and on several generations of Mormons (Bench 55).

Of particular interest to Joseph Fielding was defending the name and reputation of his grandfather and great-uncle Hyrum Smith and Joseph Smith, Jr. He consistently testified of the Prophet’s life and mission, stating that “I have always been very grateful for the testimony coming to me through the Spirit of the Lord that Joseph Smith, the Prophet of God, was called to stand at the head of the Dispensation of the Fulness of Times” (Smith *Teachings* 106). Among the works he produced involving his great-uncle was the *Teaching of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, which served for years in the Church as the standard resource for the Prophet's words.

2. Apostle

As an apostle, Joseph Fielding felt it was his responsibility to be a special witness of Jesus Christ. He once said: “I try to love Him, our Redeemer, above all else. It is my duty to. I travel up and down in this country as one of His special witnesses” (Smith *Teachings* 49). This need to testify of the Savior extended to his family as well. One son recalled:

> [Once] as I sat alone with my father in his study, I observed that he had been in deep meditation. I hesitated to break the silence, but finally he spoke. “Oh my son, I wish you could have been with me last Thursday as I met with my Brethren in the temple. Oh, if you could have heard them testify of their love for their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ!” And then he lowered his head and tears streamed from his face and dropped to his shirt. Then, after many seconds, without as much as raising his head, but moving his head back and forth, he said, “Oh, how I love my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!” (Smith *Teachings* 50).

Joseph Fielding Smith’s other great accomplishment as an apostle was sharing his knowledge of Gospel doctrine. His love for Church doctrine began at a young age. His father handed him a copy of the Book of Mormon when he was eight years old and told him to read it. Joseph “received this Nephite record with thanksgiving and applied [himself] to the task which has been assigned” (Smith *Teachings* 139). He pushed himself to finish chores quickly or left baseball games early to study the Book of Mormon along with the other scriptures and publications of the Church, secluding himself “in the hayloft or in the shade of a tree to get back to his reading” (Smith *Teachings* 4). When he worked at ZCMI he carried a pocket-sized edition of the New Testament with him to read on lunch breaks and as he walked to and from his job. As an apostle, President Heber J. Grant was known to have said that Joseph was the “best posted man on the scriptures” among all the General Authorities (Smith *Teachings* 141).
President Smith’s love for the gospel and deep understanding of the Church’s doctrine led to the publication of dozens of books and articles and over 125 sermons in general conference, in addition to scores of other addresses in stake conferences and other events on the beliefs and teachings of Mormonism. He was considered a great authority on the matter and was often approached by letter, phone, and in person with questions and concerns. To help answer these questions he began a feature series in the *Improvement Era* (the Church’s main adult publication at the time) that has since been published in the five-volume *Answers to Gospel Questions*. Although not every position he held has been accepted as Church doctrine—statements about people of African descent and the priesthood, evolution[1], and other matters stand among the most glaring examples—he spoke with his understanding of the doctrine as taught by other general authorities of the past and provided a strong, conservative voice in understanding LDS doctrine.

3. Temple Presidency and President of the Genealogical Society of Utah

President Smith had a deep love and appreciation of genealogical work and work for the dead. At the cornerstone ceremony of the Ogden Temple he stated, “temple building and temple ordinances are at the very heart of our religion…. There is no more glorious work than the perfecting of family units through the ordinances of the house of the Lord” (Smith *Address*).

As a youth, Joseph Fielding watched the work on the Salt Lake City Temple progress—a process that took 40 years all told (construction began 23 years before he was born). He once said, “I used to wonder whether I would ever live long enough to see the temple completed” (Smith *Teachings* 5). When he was 17 years old he attended the dedication ceremony and would later serve in various positions in the temple presidency there. As President of the Church he dedicated the Ogden, Utah Temple and presided at the dedication of the Provo, Utah Temple—the first two temples to be dedicated in Utah since statehood had been achieved. As President of the Genealogical Society of Utah—an organization founded in the 1890s to provide support for temple work in the Church—President Smith was a “principle force behind the society” and helped its growth and efficiency by studying the libraries and programs of the eastern United States and introducing improved methods of filing and record keeping to the Utah society during a time of great expansion in genealogical and temple work (see Alexander 313-315; Allen and Leonard 483).

In connection with his belief in eternal families and the “perfecting of family units” President Smith also placed great emphasis on strengthening the family. His teachings reflect a desire to strengthen eternal marriage and to bring up children in light and truth. One of the methods he focused on was family home evening, stating that “Fathers and mothers who faithfully hold family home evenings and who build family unity in every way possible, fulfill with honor the greatest of all responsibilities—that of parenthood (Smith *Teachings* 211).

4. President of the Church

After the death of David O. McKay in January 1970, Joseph Fielding Smith became president of the Church. Although he was ninety-three years old when he rose to the helm of the Church, President Smith “proved that he was still vigorous both mentally and physically…. He kept up at a remarkable pace, including an active speaking schedule, and many who had been critical of a system that allowed aged men to govern had ample reason to change their minds” (Allen and Leonard 594).

His ministry was only two and one-half years—and much of what President Smith did was an outgrowth of David O. McKay’s
administration—yet, there were several important changes in the Church that took place during that time: the education program, the Historical Department, and the publications program were all reorganized; the Social Services Corporation was organized and a training program for bishops was initiated; and the teacher development program of the Church was expanded. In addition, the Church was becoming an increasingly international organization and President Smith helped to deal with this growth, organizing fourteen new missions and several new stakes as well—including the first stakes in Asia (Tokyo, Japan) and Africa (Johannesburg, South Africa). It was also under Joseph Fielding’s administration that the first area conference was held in Manchester England, strengthening the Church abroad (see Allen and Leonard 594-596). President Joseph Fielding Smith’s ministry was short, but oversaw an important period of transition and correlation.

Conclusion

Joseph Fielding Smith was a man who was faithful and true to His Lord during his life. He was known in public as a stern, orthodox man with a great understanding of the scriptures and LDS Church doctrine who published scores of books and articles to defend and teach about his faith and beliefs. In other settings, he was known as a loving, merciful man who cared very much for his family and for mankind. Summarizing President Smith’s life and labors, Bruce R. McConkie wrote that he was characterized by three things:

1. His love of the Lord and absolute, unswerving fidelity with which he sought to signify that love by keeping his commandments and doing ever those things which would please the Lord.

2. His loyalty to the Prophet Joseph Smith and the everlasting truths restored through him; to his grandfather, the Patriarch Hyrum Smith,…[who] met a martyr’s death; and to his father, President Joseph F. Smith, whose name is enshrined forever in the celestial city as one who endured valiantly in the cause of him whose blood was shed that we might live.

3. His own gospel scholarship and spiritual insight; his own unwearying diligence as a preacher of righteousness; and his own course of feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the widow and the fatherless, and manifesting pure religion by precept as well as by example (Smith Teachings 26-27).

I have come to appreciate and understand this servant of the Lord as I have studied his life and teachings in recent times. Perhaps the Salt Lake Tribune said it best when it wrote this eulogy:

Joseph Fielding Smith, a man stern in devotion to his creed, yet tender in regard for essential needs of people everywhere, gave wise counsel to his associates, loving care to his family and exalted leadership to his church responsibilities. He will be missed, but remembered with special esteem (Smith Teachings 32).

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The Church's official stance on evolution is that "Upon the fundamental doctrines of the Church we are all agreed. Our mission is to bear the message of the restored gospel to the world. Leave geology, biology, archaeology, and anthropology, no one of which has to do with the salvation of the soul of mankind, to scientific research, while we magnify our calling in the realm of the Church...."

"Upon one thing we should all be able to agree, namely, that Presidents Joseph F. Smith, John R. Winder, and Anthon H. Lund were right when they said: 'Adam is the primal parent of our race'" [First Presidency Minutes, April 7, 1931].

POST-CONTEMPORARY RECOLLECTIONS ABOUT JOSEPH SMITH’S FIRST VISION

The event known as the First Vision gradually took its place as the founding story of Mormonism. As it rose to prominence, contemporary saints recorded recollections of times that the Prophet shared his sacred experience in the grove with them, resulting in several later reminiscences. These are found in transcripts of sermons, missionary tracts, and memoirs of these faithful pioneer saints. Since these accounts have a barrier of time—increasing the chances of faulty memory—they are not as reliable as contemporary secondary or primary accounts of the vision, but are of interest nonetheless.

The apostles and missionaries of the Church were among the earliest people to publish accounts of the vision. Building on the tradition that Orson Pratt and Orson Hyde began by including recitals of the vision in their missionary pamphlets, John Taylor and Lorenzo Snow produced their own versions of the vision for their fields of labor. The earlier of these two was written by Elder Taylor for the French mission in 1850. As it has come to us, this record went as follows:

"The church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was first organized in the Town of Manchester, Ontario County, State of New York, U.S.A., 6th April 1830. Previous to this an holy angel appeared unto a young man about fifteen years of age, a farmer's son, named Joseph Smith, and communicated unto him many things pertaining to the situation of the religious world, the necessity of a correct church organization, and unfolded many events that should transpire in the last days, as spoken of by the Prophets. As near as possible I will give the words as he related them to me. He said that "in the neighborhood in which he resided there was a religious revival, (a thing very common in that country) in which several different denominations were united; that many professed to be converted; among the number, two or three of his father's family. When the revival was over, there was a contention as to which of these various societies the person who was converted should belong. One of his father's family joined one society, and another a different one. His mind was troubled, he saw contention instead of peace, and division instead of union; and when he reflected upon the multiform creeds and professions there were in existence, he thought it impossible for all to be right, and if God taught one, He did not teach the others, "for God is not the author of confusion." In reading his bible, he was remarkably struck with the passage in James, 1st chapter, 5th verse. "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." Believing in the word of God, he retired into a grove, and called upon the Lord to give him wisdom in relation to this matter. While he was thus engaged, he was surrounded by a brilliant light, and two glorious personages presented themselves before him, who exactly resembled each other in features, and who gave him information upon the subjects which had previously agitated his mind. He was given to understand that the churches were all of them in error in regard to many things; and he was commanded not to go after them; and he received a promise that the fulness of the gospel should at some future time be unfolded unto him; after which the vision withdrew leaving his mind in a state of calmness and peace (Taylor 255-256)."
We see in John Taylor’s account influences of both the Pratt-Hyde-Smith publications and the “official” 1838 account. Elder Taylor would go on to be, perhaps, the man who spoke of the vision second most often, after Orson Pratt and there are many sermons recorded in the Journal of Discourses and other sources in which this man of God spoke of the First Vision.

Before we look at the accounts that come from Orson Pratt’s discourses, however, the second of the missionary accounts mentioned above was written by Lorenzo Snow as he labored in Italy as an apostle in 1852 as part of a larger pamphlet known in English as The Voice of Joseph. His account was as follows:

Joseph Smith, junior, whom it pleased the Lord to select and appoint to restore the primitive Gospel and apostolic Priesthood, was born in 1805 in Vermont, United States. When about 15 years of age, being seriously impressed with the necessity of seeking the Lord and preparing for a future state, his mind became much perplexed through difficulties thrown in the path of his researches by the multitude of religious sects and parties with which he was surrounded. Each system claimed its right and power to give belief and hope, but none to communicate knowledge of its divine Authority. In comparing them one with another there seemed too much confusion, the same also appeared in looking at each separately;—turning therefore from these clashing systems, and having been encouraged, and inspired with the following passage in St. James “If any of you lack wisdom let him ask of God;” he retired to a grove, a little distance from his father’s, and in fervent prayer besought the Lord to communicate with him, and reveal the way of salvation. While thus engaged a light brilliant and glorious appeared in the heavens gradually descending towards him till he was enveloped in its power, and wrapped in celestial vision; when he beheld two glorious beings similar in dress and appearance who informed him that the religious sects had all departed from the ancient doctrine of the apostles, and that the Gospel, with its gifts and blessings should be made known to him at a future period. Many important things were manifested in this vision which the brevity of this work will not admit our noticing (Snow 1).

Much like the John Taylor tract, this publication depends much on the previously-published accounts of the Wentworth Letter, the Pratt and Hyde pamphlets and the 1838 account. Nevertheless, Elder Snow has left us a polished and pleasant account of the First Vision.

A few years after the Snow account was published, Elder Orson Pratt spoke of the First Vision again, as he did more often than any other general authority of his lifetime. In a sermon dated as the 14th of August 1859, he said,

What is the testimony of the Latter-day Saints in regard to the calling of any one in this church? We want now to test ourselves. Are we the kingdom of God that was to be established in the last days? or are we not? Have we the characteristics of that kingdom? Have we been called in that way and manner that the servants of God in ancient days were called?
To answer this question, let us go back to Joseph Smith — the one that organized this church by the commandment of the Almighty. I will give you a brief history as it came from his own mouth. I have often heard him relate it.

He was wrought upon by the Spirit of God, and felt the necessity of repenting of his sins and serving God. He retired from his father's house a little way, and bowed himself down in the wilderness, and called upon the name of the Lord. He was inexperienced, and in great anxiety and trouble of mind in regard to what church he should join. He had been solicited by many churches to join with them, and he was in great anxiety to know which was right. He pleaded with the Lord to give him wisdom on the subject; and while he was thus praying, he beheld a vision, and saw a light approaching him from the heavens; and as it came down and rested on the tops of the trees, it became more glorious; and as it surrounded him, his mind was immediately caught away from beholding surrounding objects. In this cloud of light he saw two glorious personages; and one, pointing to the other, said, "Behold my beloved Son! hear ye him." Then he was instructed and informed in regard to many things pertaining to his own welfare, and commanded not to unite himself to any of those churches. He was also informed that at some future time the fulness of the Gospel should be made manifest to him, and he should be an instrument in the hands of God of laying the foundation of the kingdom of God (JD 7:220-221).

Elder Pratt would testify of the Prophet's First Vision to the end of his life and — like John Taylor and many other general authorities — could fill up several pages with quotes about the First Vision. For brevity, however, we will look at only one other sermon in which he retold the vision towards the end of his life. Orson said,

Joseph Smith, ...was a boy about fourteen years of age at the time the Lord first revealed himself in a very marvelous manner to him. The circumstances were these: This boy, in attending religious meetings that were held in his neighborhood, seemed to be wrought upon in a very wonderful manner, and he felt great concern in relation to the salvation of his soul... but how to satisfy himself he did not know. If he went to one denomination they would say, "We are right, and the others are wrong," and so said all the others. Like most boys of his age, Joseph had never read the Bible to any great extent, hence he was unable to decide in his own mind, as to which was the true church. When he saw several denominations contending one with the other, he naturally enough supposed that some of them must be wrong. He began to search the Bible in his leisure time after his work was done upon the farm; and in perusing the New Testament, he came across a passage which is very familiar indeed to most of my hearers; the passage reads thus — If any of you lack wisdom let him ask of God, who giveth to all men liberally and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him." Mr. Smith really believed this passage. He did not read this as one would read a novel, thinking that is was all imaginary; but, from his heart, he believed that it meant what it said, and he said to himself — "I certainly lack wisdom in relation to my duty. I do not know which of these denominations is correct, and which is the church of Christ. I desire to know, with all my heart, and I will go before the Lord, and call upon his name, claiming his promise." He therefore retired a short distance from his father's house, into a little grove of timber, and called upon the Lord, claiming this promise, desiring to know his duty and to be informed where the true Church of Christ was. While thus praying, with all his heart, he discovered in the heavens above him, a very bright and glorious light, which gradually descended towards the earth, and when it reached the tops of the trees which overshadowed him, the brightness was so great that he expected to see the leaves of the tree consumed by it; but when he saw that they were not consumed he received courage. Finally the light rested down upon and overwhelmed him in the midst of it, and his mind at the same time seemed to be caught away from surrounding objects, and he saw nothing excepting the light and two glorious personages standing before him in the midst of this light. One of these personages, pointing to the other, said — "Behold my beloved Son! hear ye him." After this, power was given to Mr. Smith to speak, and in answer to an inquiry by the Lord as to what he desired, he said that he desired to know which was the true Church that he might be united thereunto. He was immediately told, that there was no true Church of Christ on the earth, that all had gone astray, and had framed doctrines, and dogmas, and creeds by human wisdom, and that the authority to administer in the holy ordinances of the Gospel was not among men upon the earth, and he was strictly commanded to go not after any of them, but to keep aloof from the whole of them. He was also informed that, in due time, if he would be faithful in serving the Lord, according to the best of his knowledge and ability, God would reveal to him still further, and make known to him the true Gospel, the plan of salvation, in its fulness.

Mr. Smith had this vision before he was fifteen years old, and, immediately after receiving it, he began to relate it to some of his nearest friends, and he was told by some of the ministers who came to him to enquire about it, that there was no such thing as the visitation of heavenly messengers, that God gave no new revelation, and that no visions could be given to the children of men in this age. This was like telling him that there was no such thing as seeing, or feeling, or hearing, or tasting, or smelling. Why? Because he knew positively to the contrary; he knew that he had seen this light, that he had beheld these two personages, and that he had heard the voice of one of them;... and he continued to testify that God had made himself manifest to him (JD 17:279-280, Sept. 20, 1874).
We see here specific details not mentioned before, but that seem to be logical inferences from the texts Joseph left behind, such as telling “some of his nearest friends” in addition to multiple ministers telling him the vision was false and that he had not read the Bible very much before the religious excitement his town experienced. One could easily assume that these were memories that Pratt had from hearing Joseph talk about the vision, but as we have no other record that records the details in that manner, it is hard to tell.

In addition to the apostles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the rank and file members also left memoirs of hearing Joseph Smith speak of the First Vision. For example, Edward Stevenson—mentioned in a previous post for his 1893 recollection—also left a journal entry on the 27th May 1883 in which he wrote:

> With uplifted hand he [Joseph Smith] said, “I am a witness that there is a God, for I saw Him in open day, while praying in a silent grove, in the spring of 1820.” He further testified that God, the Eternal Father, pointing to a separate personage, in the likeness of Himself, said, “This is my Beloved Son; hear ye Him.” O how these words thrilled my entire system and filled me with joy unspeakable—to behold one who, like Paul the Apostle of olden time, could with boldness testify that he had been in the presence of Jesus Christ! (cited in Cheesman 27-28).

A more striking account comes to us through the journal of Charles L. Walker—a member of the Church from the latter part of the nineteenth century. While living in Southern Utah, he wrote,

> 2nd February, Thursday, 1893, attended Fast meeting…. Br. John Alger said while speaking of the Prophet Joseph, that when he, John, was a small boy he heard the Prophet Joseph 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. After [the] meeting a few of us questioned him about the mater and 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 to the action with the words so as the illustrate and at the same time impress the occurrence on the minds of those unto whom he was speaking (Cited in Cheesman 30).

Here we see a detail found nowhere else that I know of—of God touching Joseph’s eyes to reveal the Savior. Since this is a tertiary account—a record written by someone recalling what someone else said or did—that was produced fifty years after Joseph died (and over seventy years after the First Vision took place), it is liable to be faulty, however it is an interesting idea.

Another post-contemporary recollection was recently unearthed in conjunction with the lost sermons project. On 17 July 1853, Milo Andrus—an early convert who had served in Zions Camp and who had served several missions—stated:
Repent from your heart, reform of [your] sins, be baptized in name of Jesus Christ—and the promise is you shall receive the gift of Holy Ghost. What is its effects? If effects upon you [are] as it was in [the] day of Pentecost, inasmuch as you have the same experience. After you have walked in obedience to commandments of God, then the promise is you shall see visions, dream dreams, and have revelations of Jesus Christ—of which thousands in this congregation can rise up and testify.

Suffice it to say that the nations of earth, both Christian and heathen, were in darkness, and darkness covered the nations. There was none to bear testimony, no prophet in [the] land. The seers, revelators, and prophets were all covered up by the wisdom of uninspired men. In this situation, the individual that was called upon by the high courts of heaven to present a certainty to the human family: do you want to know who he was? I take great pleasure telling of it…

I was a boy, first nineteen years of age, when I heard the testimony of that man, Joseph Smith, that an angel came and that glory shone and the trees seemed to be consumed in a blaze and he was there entrusted with this information: that darkness covered the earth, that the great mass of the Christian world was universally wrong and their creeds were all upon an uncertain foundation. “Now as young as you are,” [he was told], “I call upon you from this obscurity: go forth and build up my kingdom on the earth” (Andrus)

Although not technically an account of the First Vision, it is also of interest to make at least a note about the most famous poem and hymn that memorializes the momentous event: George Manwaring’s “Joseph Smith’s First Prayer.” As sung from our hymn book today, the text is as follows:

Oh, how lovely was the morning!
Radiant beamed the sun above.
Bees were humming, sweet birds singing,
Music ringing thru the grove,
When within the shady woodland
Joseph sought the God of love,
When within the shady woodland
Joseph sought the God of love.
Humbly kneeling, sweet appealing—
’Twas the boy’s first uttered prayer—
When the pow’rs of sin assailing
Filled his soul with deep despair;
But undaunted, still he trusted
In his Heav’nly Father’s care;
But undaunted, still he trusted
In his Heav’nly Father’s care.
Suddenly a light descended,
Brighter far than noonday sun,
And a shining, glorious pillar
O’er him fell, around him shone,
While appeared two heav’nly beings,
God the Father and the Son,
While appeared two heav’nly beings,
God the Father and the Son.

"Joseph, this is my Beloved;

Hear him!" Oh, how sweet the word!

Joseph's humble prayer was answered,

And he listened to the Lord.

Oh, what rapture filled his bosom,

For he saw the living God;

Oh, what rapture filled his bosom,

For he saw the living God (Hymns 26).

George Manwaring was a British convert who wrote the poetry after being inspired by a painting entitled "The First Vision" created by the LDS artist C. C. Christiansen in the 1800s. The text was published in the Juvenile Instructor—a periodical published for the youth of the Church—in 1878. Prior to publication, it is apparent that this beloved poetic setting underwent some extensive editing, since in Brother Manwaring's own notebook at least the first stanza was as follows:

’Twas on a lovely morn in spring

The sun was shining bright,

When Joseph saw the woodland shade

And humbly kneeling there he prayed

For Wisdom and for light.

The published edition was set to music by A.C. Smyth—a professional Mormon musician—using an expanded version of American composer Sylvanus Billings Pond’s tune, Divinity, and was published in the 1889 Latter-day Saints’ Psalmody (see Davidson 54-55), and continues to serve in our hymnbooks today as one of our more popular hymns of the Restoration.

Stained glass doors to the Palmyra Temple depicting the Sacred Grove.

The First Vision has taken on great importance for the Mormon people and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as whole. It is considered by many to be the greatest event to take place since the Atonement and Resurrection of Jesus Christ as it was the curtain-raising event that initiated the Restoration of the Church and Gospel of Jesus Christ in modern times. Many accounts were produced by Joseph Smith as well as people who came in contact with him. Of the latter category, many accounts were produced after Joseph Smith’s lifetime. While these accounts must be approached cautiously, they are rather interesting to read to gain insights into this important theophany. Between these records and the many other accounts that have been given, we can gain a fuller picture of the pivotal event that launched the career of the Prophet of the Restoration, Joseph Smith, Junior and how it has shaped the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.
The Holy of Holies in the Salt Lake City Temple, with its stained glass window of the First Vision.

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Due to the importance that the First Vision is given by the Latter-day Saints, records that fill in the details of this experience are precious to believers. Luckily, it seems that Joseph Smith related the story of his First Vision many times throughout his life. Orson Pratt recalled in 1859 that, “I have often heard him [Joseph Smith] relate it” (JD 7:220-221). Journals and reminiscences from the era give us a few such accounts, filling in details and helping us to understand that the how the early Saints reacted to the Vision.
Edward Stevenson recalled later in life that Joseph had visited the Pontiac, Michigan Branch in 1834, and during one of the meetings, “The Prophet testified with great power concerning the visit of the Father and Son, and the conversation he had with them.” Rather than commenting on the specifics of the Vision, however Stevenson went on to recall how he felt: “Never before did I feel such power as was manifested on these occasions” (cited in Stevenson 19-20). The problem with this account, however, is that we have no other indication that Joseph spoke of the First Vision prior to the Nauvoo period and thus, it seems to fly in the face of what we understand about how the Saints approached the vision in the 1830s. Noting this, historian James B. Allen wrote,

"The reminiscence was written… some fifty years later, and on this issue it runs directly counter to all contemporary evidence. No one questions the personal integrity of Stevenson, but it is likely that after fifty years his memory played tricks on him by combining things he heard in one period with things he heard at other times. Another possibility is that he heard Joseph relate the account privately, to a select group, even though he was not proclaiming it publicly (Emergence 44-45).

The fact that Stevenson may have confused when or where he heard about the First Vision serves to underscore the fact that contemporary accounts—that is, accounts written by Saints during Joseph Smith’s lifetime—are far more valuable to us. Fortunately, we have five known to us at this point, which provide us with several important details—the Orson Pratt account, the Orson Hyde account, the Alexander Neibaur account, the David Nye White account, and the Levi Richards account. Although the Orson Pratt and Orson Hyde accounts were published first, we will save discussion of those accounts for later on, due to their length.

We only have one contemporary account mentioning Joseph Smith preaching about the First Vision in public.

While the Stevenson account may or may not be accurate, we do have one contemporary journal entry that tells of Joseph speaking about the First Vision in a public address. Levi Richards, a cousin of Brigham Young, recorded a sermon given at the Nauvoo Temple on 11 June 1843. According to the diary, Levi,

"Attended Meeting at the Temple weather vary fine moderately warm. heard J. Smith preach from Math “Oh Jerusalem Jerusalem &c, how oft would I have gathered you, as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings & Ye would not, behold your house is left unto you desolate &c Pres. J. Smith bore testimony to the same saying that when he was a youth he began to think about 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 he received for answer that none of them were right, that they were all wrong, & that the Everlasting Covenant 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 (Cited in Cook, Kindle Location 4256-4263).

The primary significance of this account is, as mentioned above, that it is the only time we know Joseph mentioned the vision in public discourse. There is little new information presented, but it is nice to have another account of the vision, as brief as it is.

Since public discourses on the subject were rare, more often than not, retellings of the Prophet’s initial theophany occurred in more personal settings, such as the one that Isabella Horne recalled hearing the Prophet speak in one non-contemporary account:
I heard him [Joseph Smith] relate his first vision when the Father and Son appeared to him; also his receiving the gold plates from the Angel Moroni. This recital was given in compliance with a special request of a few particular friends in the home of Sister Walton, whose house was ever open to the Saints. While he was relating the circumstances the Prophet’s countenance lighted up, and so wonderful a power accompanied his words that everybody who heard them felt his influence and power, and none could doubt the truth of his narration (Cited in Madsen 90).

Note that this narration occurred by special request of friends in a house, rather than in an unprompted retelling in a public setting. Much like Edward Stevenson, the focus of this reminiscence is on the feelings of the meeting rather than the words spoken, but it helps us get a feel for the settings Joseph felt comfortable speaking of the sacred experience of his youth.

Edward Stevenson, Levi Richards, and Alexander Neibaur.

One of the few contemporary journal entries we have that record what Joseph said on the subject comes to us from Alexander Neibaur—a Jewish German convert who came to Nauvoo and began to teach German to the Prophet and others. He was, notably, the grandfather of Hugh Nibley. The entry, dated 24 May 1844 records the words of an evening conversation with Joseph Smith:

After Dinner . . . called at BR. J.S. met Mr. Bonnie. Br. Joseph tolled us the first call he had a Revival Meeting, his Mother, Br. and Sisters got Religion. He wanted to get Religion too, wanted to feel and shout like the rest but could feel nothing, opened his Bible of the first Passage that struck him was if any man lack wisdom let him ask of God who giveth to all men liberallity & upbraideth not. Went into the Wood to pray, kneels himself Down, his tongue was closet cleaveh to his roof–could utter not a word, felt easier after awhile—saw a fire toward heaven came near and 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, have gone astray There is none that Doeth good, not one, but this is my Beloved Son harken ye him, the fire drew nigher, Rested upon the tree, enveloped him comforted I endeavored to arise but 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 (Neibaur; Allen Eight 12).

Most of the details found in this account are found in the other First Vision accounts, though written in the sincere, unpolished style that one would expect from a humble man not used to writing in English. The most interesting and unique details here, however, are the description of the appearance of the personages—details not found in any other retelling of Joseph’s experience. Interestingly, other visionary accounts by Mormons also state that the Savior had blue eyes. For example, John Murdock recalled that during the School of the Prophets, after the Prophet promised them that they could see the Lord if they were worthy, “The visions of my mind were opened, and the eyes of my understanding were enlightened, and I saw the form of a man, most lovely, the visage of his face was sound and fair as the sun. His hair a bright silver grey, curled in most majestic form, His eyes a keen penetrating blue” (Cited in Brown and Smith 140, 165). In light of these interesting statements, it is fascinating to note that there is some evidence that the All-Seeing eyes on the Salt Lake Temple were originally painted blue (Brown and Smith 140).

Similar to the description of the Personages given in Neibaur’s account, the All-Seeing Eye of the Salt Lake Temple was probably meant to be blue.

While most contemporary accounts come from members, we do have a few accounts from discussions with non-members, such as the 1835 account of Joseph telling the story of the First Vision to a visiting man, written in Joseph’s journal by Warren Cowdery. Another such account comes from an 1843 interview with the Prophet, published by David Nye White (the nonmember editor of the Pitsburg Gazette) in the The New York Spectator on September 23. According to the article, Joseph told the editor:
The Lord does reveal himself to me. I know it. He revealed himself first to me when I was about fourteen years old, a mere boy. 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 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 came 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 (White).

Again, most of the details are found elsewhere, except the description of the grove that is detailed enough to state that it was “the woods where my father had a clearing” and that he went “to the stump where I had struck my axe when I had quit work.” It must also be noted here, however, that while most of the accounts being presented in this post were written soon after the listener heard Joseph relate the experience, every one of these accounts have passed through the filters of what the writer heard, what stood out to them in their memory, as well as their own way of speaking of things. Journalists, for example, have somewhat of a bad reputation of editing and twisting words even with modern recording equipment. But, such sentiment can be applied to all secondary accounts, and thus, even contemporary accounts must be approached with caution.

The White account gives us more details about the setting the First Vision took place in

The first account of the First Vision to be published was not actually written by Joseph Smith, but by Orson Pratt. Pratt—mentioned above as having heard Joseph speak of the vision many times—wrote a pamphlet relating events in Church history and outlines of basic Church doctrine while serving as a apostolic missionary in Scotland in 1840. A section of this Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Vision relating the First Vision is as follows:

Mr. Joseph Smith, jun. who made the following important discovery, was born in the town of Sharon, Windsor county, Vermont, on the 23d December, A.D. 1805. When ten years old, his parents, with their family, moved to Palmyra, New York; in the vicinity of which he resided for about eleven years, the latter part in the town of Manchester. Cultivating the earth for a livelihood was his occupation, in which he employed the most of his time. His advantages for acquiring literary knowledge, were exceedingly small; hence, his education was limited to a slight acquaintance, with two or three of the common branches of learning. He could read without much difficulty, and write a very imperfect hand; and had a very limited understanding of the ground rules of arithmetic. These were his highest and only attainments; while the rest of those branches, so universally taught in the common schools, throughout the United States, were entirely unknown to him. When somewhere about fourteen or fifteen years old, 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 saw, that if he understood not the 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 the
Joseph Smith, Jr., to whom the angel of the Lord was sent first, was born in the town of Sharon, Windsor County, Vermont, on the 23rd of December, 1805. When ten years old, his parents with their family, moved to Palmyra, New York, in the vicinity of which he resided for about eleven years, the latter part in the town of Manchester. His only activity was to plow and cultivate the fields. As his parents were poor and had to take care of a large family, his education was very limited. He could read without much difficulty, and write a very imperfect hand; and had a very limited understanding of the elementary rules of arithmetic. These were his highest and only attainments; while the rest of those branches, so universally taught in the common schools throughout the United States, were entirely unknown to him. When some where about fourteen or fifteen years old, he began seriously to reflect upon the necessity of being prepared for a future state of existence; and while the rest of those branches, so universally taught in the common schools throughout the United States, were entirely unknown to him. When some where about fourteen or fifteen years old, 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. He saw, that if he understood not the way, it would be impossible to prepare 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. He saw, that if he understood not the way, it would be impossible to

This account seems to have influenced Joseph Smith’s Wentworth letter as well as Orson Hyde’s account that covered the First Vision. Hyde’s account—the last one we will display here—was published while he was serving as an apostolic missionary in Germany in 1842. This document, published as A Cry From the Wilderness, A Voice from the Dust of the Earth, seems to have taken Pratt’s publication and added details to adapt it to the German culture of the time. The section relating the First Vision is as follows,

This account seems to have influenced Joseph Smith’s Wentworth letter as well as Orson Hyde’s account that covered the First Vision. Hyde’s account—the last one we will display here—was published while he was serving as an apostolic missionary in Germany in 1842. This document, published as A Cry From the Wilderness, A Voice from the Dust of the Earth, seems to have taken Pratt’s publication and added details to adapt it to the German culture of the time. The section relating the First Vision is as follows,
cause to the organization of so many different sects and parties, and whose feelings against each other were poisoned through hate, envy, malice and rage. He felt that there should be only one truth, and that those who would understand it correctly, would understand it in the same manner. Nature had gifted him with a strong, discerning mind and so he looked through the glass of soberness and good sense upon these religious systems which all were so different; but nevertheless all drawn from the scripture of truth. After he had sufficiently assured himself to his own satisfaction that darkness was covering the earth, and gross darkness the minds of the people, he gave up hope ever to find a sect or party that was in the possession of the pure and unadulterated truth. He accordingly commenced pursuing 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 1:5. 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. And thus he started to send the burning desires of his soul with a faithful determination. 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. 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. However, the overflowing mercy of God came to buoy him up, and gave new impulse and momentum to his dwindling strength. Soon the dark clouds disappeared, and light and peace filled his troubled heart. And again he called upon the Lord with renewed faith and spiritual strength. At this sacred moment 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. They told him that his prayers had been answered, and that the Lord had decided to grant him a special blessing. He was told not to join any of the religious sects or any party, as they were all wrong in their doctrines and none of them was recognized by God as His Church and kingdom. He received a promise that the true doctrine—the fulness 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 (Cited in Cheesman 158-160).

There are, all together, the five known contemporary accounts of the First Vision. Two were published by Mormons during Joseph Smith’s lifetime—Orson Pratt and Orson Hyde’s missionary tracts—while one was published by a non-Mormon named David Nye White. Two others come down to us from journals, one—Alexander Neibaur’s entry—records a personal conversation held after dinner, while the other—Levi Richard’s record—tells of a public discourse where the Prophet bore witness of the vision. These records are slightly less reliable than accounts written by Joseph or under his supervision, but still give us important details that would otherwise be unknown, and may have greater confidence placed in them than later recollections. Thus, these valuable documents help us to gain a deeper understanding of Mormonism’s founding story.

Harston’s After the First Vision painting.

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THE 1842 ACCOUNT OF THE FIRST VISION: JOSEPH SMITH’S PROPHETIC CALL

The last account of the First Vision to be written by Joseph Smith himself was—somewhat ironically—the first to be published. This account—written in 1842—was a part of what has become known as the Wentworth Letter. This document was initially prepared at the request of a John Wentworth—editor of the Chicago Democrat—in behalf of his friend George Barstow, who was writing a history of New Hampshire. The document Joseph Smith wrote in response covered the history of the Church up to that point, concluding with a statement about the future of the Church (the Standard of Truth) and a summary of a few basic beliefs (the Articles of Faith). Barstow never published the document, since he decided to only cover events through the year 1819 in his book, but a copy of the document was published in the Nauvoo periodical the Times and Seasons on March 1, 1842 (see Smith 437). The text was reprinted again with some slight revisions by Daniel Rupp in 1844 in a book called An Original History of the Religious Denomination at Present Existing 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 I was about fourteen years of age I began to reflect upon the importance of being prepared for a future state, and upon inquiring about 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 all men liberally and upbraideth not and it shall be given him.” [James 1:5]. 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-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 (Smith 438).
This account is, perhaps, the most polished and easily-digested of all the accounts we have of the First Vision. It is also the most brief and direct of all the accounts. It has often been noted that there are extensive similarities between the *Wentworth Letter* and Orson Pratt’s *Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions*. Both of these accounts approach the First Vision in the same basic way, relying on the same vocabulary at several key points. Church historian Steven C. Harper noted:

> The 1842 Wentworth letter is very similar in some ways to Orson Pratt’s account. I don’t know whether Joseph Smith actually used Orson Pratt’s pamphlet to draft his Wentworth letter or if there was a source document behind the two of them. I don’t know. Other folks seem more certain about that than I’m willing to be, but clearly… there is a relationship between those accounts (Harper and Topp).

Whatever the case—the two accounts are similar, and the Orson Hyde account seems to be based closely on both of these accounts as well.

While this account is similar to a few other contemporary accounts, it is unique among the Joseph Smith accounts for speaking of the First Vision as a vision rather than a physical experience. As Joseph states it, “my mind was taken away from the objects with which I was surrounded, and I was enwrapped in a heavenly vision.” This understanding could lead to a possible reconciliation of the First Vision with a statement that some anti-Mormon authors have hit upon: In Section 84 of the Doctrine and Covenants, Joseph Smith stated that “without the ordinances thereof, and the authority of the priesthood, the power of godliness is not manifest unto men in the flesh; for without this no man can see the face of God, even the Father, and live” (D&C 84:21-22). Since it seems that Joseph received what we call the Melchizedek priesthood sometime between 1829 and 1832—about nine years after the First Vision—at first glance this statement would either invalidate the First Vision or be invalidated by the vision. Looking at the *Wentworth Letter* account, however, we see another idea in place—that it was indeed a vision, separate from the world around him and not a literal beholding the face of God as a physical experience.

The other notable unique aspect in this letter is the promise that is given at the end—that, as Joseph said, “the fulness of the gospel should at some future time be made known unto me.” It is here that we have in writing a hint of his future prophetic calling—the central point that early Church leaders referred to the First Vision experience to proclaim. The fact that this is the only account written by Joseph that mentions a pending mission begs an interesting question, however—was the First Vision truly the moment that Joseph was called to the ministry?
Certainly the First Vision had an important role in the Prophet’s religious identity. It outlined the need for something to happen in the religious world and confirmed a direct link between Joseph and Deity. We do not see, however, a mission given or an immediate call to action—just an interview for information. Granted, in the Wentworth Letter we are told that Joseph was promised that “the fullness of the gospel” would be revealed to him in the future, and in the 1838 “official” account, Joseph refers to himself as “one called of God” (JS-H 1:28) between the First Vision and the visit of the Angel Moroni, but there is no explicit indication of what that calling was.

What event would serve as Joseph’s initial prophetic call then? The most likely candidate would be the visit of the Angel Moroni. During that interview—according to Joseph’s later record—we have Moroni telling the young prophet that “God had a work for me to do” and then relating the existence of the golden plates that would become the Book of Mormon (see JS-H 1:33-35)—indicating that Joseph’s initial prophetic call would be to translate this ancient record into a modern language. Indeed, four years later, Joseph was told by the Lord in a revelation that, “You have a gift to translate the plates; and this is the first gift that I bestowed upon you; and I have commanded that you should pretend to no other gift until my purpose is fulfilled in this; for I will grant unto you no other gift until it is finished” (D&C 5:4), giving validation to the idea that Joseph felt the translation would be his prophetic mission for the first few years.

Upon inspection, we also see that the visit of the angel Moroni both spoke of and led to more action than the First Vision. Elder M. Russell Ballard—a senior member of the Quorum of the Twelve today—wrote that “instead of simply telling him [Joseph] that all was well and that God still loved him, Moroni came to put Joseph to work” (41). Richard Lyman Bushman also noted that, “If Joseph initially understood the First Vision as his conversion, similar to thousands of other evangelical conversions, this vision [of Moroni] wrenched Joseph out of any ordinary track” (44). When it comes to the level of action following the visions, there is a difference as well. After the First Vision, Joseph told at least the Methodist minister and perhaps a few other individuals about what he had saw and heard, but did little else, especially since he received such a negative reaction. As Richard Lyman Bushman noted, “the 1820 vision did not interrupt the Smith family’s round of work” (41). After the visit of the Angel Moroni, however, Joseph produced a large religious text that he claimed was scripture—the Book of Mormon—gathered believers to support and assist him in the production of this text, began to record revelations from God, and organized the Church of Christ—later to be known as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

To further our examination of the subject, let us compare the 1820 and 1823 visions of Joseph Smith to the prophetic calls expressed in the Bible and other Hebraic texts. In doing so, it must be kept in mind that the culture of the prophet writing affects how he speaks of his experiences. We have discussed previously how Joseph Smith’s 1832 account of the First Vision was written in the form of a born-again narrative and Christopher C. Jones has demonstrated that even the 1838 account was influenced by the style of a Methodist conversion narratives (see Jones), indicating that the Prophet’s style was influenced by the culture he lived in. Blake T. Ostler, in writing about ancient prophetic commissions noted that, “Such theophanic experiences [experiences of visions of God] were placed anciently ‘at the beginning of the traditions of the works and words of the prophet’ as a means of providing ‘vindication and legitimization of the prophet in his office’, which meant that “these narratives are probably not simply transcripts of what was experienced at the time. They are as well accounts designed to serve certain definite ends and they no doubt to a certain extent stylized the call” (68). All accounts of prophetic calls are influenced by the culture of the prophet in question, some aspects of which may be very symbolic, meaning Joseph’s experience will be recorded differently than Isaiah’s or Ezekiel’s experiences. We may, however, catch glimpses of what the ancient prophets truly experienced and compare it to what Joseph Smith experienced.

There are two types of prophetic calls found in the Bible—the “narrative” type, which includes a dialogue with God or other divine messenger; and the “throne theophany” type, which introduces the prophetic commission with a vision of the heavenly throne of God (see Ricks 97). Both of these literary patterns also have use in apocryphal Jewish works and the revealed scriptures produced by Joseph Smith—including both the Book of Mormon and the Joseph Smith Translation of Genesis (published today, in part, as the Book of Moses). In reality, however, the throne theophany is really just a specific genre of the narrative call, so we will look at both types as one.
The Prophetic Call

The prophetic call narrative consists of several parts, some of which may be absent or in a different order in individual cases. The general outline, formed from combining Blake T. Ostler’s summary of the throne theophany and Stephen D. Rick’s outline of the narrative form is as follows:

1. **Historical Introduction:** A brief introductory remark providing circumstantial details such as time, place, and historical setting.
2. **Divine Confrontation:** Either deity or an angel appears in glory to the individual.
3. **Reaction:** The individual reacts to the presence of the deity or his angel by way of an action expressive of fear, unworthiness, or having been overpowered (Ostler 69).
4. **Throne-Theophany:** A theophany is a vision of God, and a throne-theophany is a vision where “the individual sees the council of God and God seated upon his throne. This element distinguishes the throne-theophany commission from” the narrative call form (Ostler 70).
5. **The Introductory Word:** The introductory word serves to both “arouse the attention [of the prophet]” and to “spell out the specific basis or grounds for the commission” (cited in Ricks 99). Often, the reasons for why the one called upon will serve as a prophet is explained.
6. **Commission:** The individual recipient is commanded to perform a given task and assume the role of prophet to the people.
7. **Protest or Objection:** The prophet responds to the commission by claiming that he is unable or unworthy to accomplish the task. This element is usually absent when the reaction element is present.
8. **Reassurance:** “The deity reassures the prophet that he will be protected and able to carry out the commission.” In many occasions a miraculous sign is given to the prophet.
9. **Conclusion:** “The commission form usually concludes in a formal way, most often with a statement that the prophet has begun to carry out his commission” (Ostler 69-70; see also Ricks 97).

There are many great examples of the prophetic commission. To illustrate the different parts of the call, we will look at Moses’s experience with the burning bush, Jeremiah’s call, Lehi’s throne-theophany in the Book of Mormon and Enoch’s vision in the Book of Moses.

Jeremiah, Moroni, Lehi and Enoch are great examples of the prophetic call patterns.

The historical introduction element fills the function of establishing the time and place setting and giving certain biographical information about the prophet. For example, Isaiah’s call begins with the statement that, “In the year that King Uzziah died I saw also the Lord” (Isaiah 6:1), indicating that the vision took place at a time of “transition, crisis and import” (Ostler 74).

In Nephi’s account of his father, Lehi’s, call, he relates that,
It came to pass in the commencement of the first year of the reign of Zedekiah, king of Judah, (my father, Lehi, having dwelt at Jerusalem in all his days); and in that same year there came many prophets, prophesying unto the people that they must repent, or the great city Jerusalem must be destroyed. Wherefore it came to pass that my father, Lehi, as he went forth prayed unto the Lord, yea, even with all his heart, in behalf of his people (1 Nephi 1:4-5).

In this account we have context telling the date, a little of Lehi's history, and an indication of Jerusalem's situation. Both of these historic introductions help set the tone and give reasons for why the prophet is going to be called.

The next element in the call pattern is the divine confrontation—an often unexpected visit from Deity or one of His messengers. Moses, for example, was tending the flocks of his father-in-law Jethro when "the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush.... And Moses said, I will now turn aside, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt" (Ex. 3:1-3). Jeremiah simply relates that "Then the word of the Lord came unto me, saying..." (Jeremiah 1:4). The Enoch text states that, "It came to pass that Enoch journeyed in the land, among the people; and as he journeyed, the Spirit of God descended out of heaven, and abode upon him" (Moses 6:26). After Lehi prays in behalf of his people, "there came a pillar of fire and dwelt upon a rock before him; and he saw and heard much" (1 Nephi 1:6). This divine confrontation describes the appearance of the Divine and is often followed by the reaction.

The reaction element is an expression of unworthiness on the part of the prophet-to-be in response to being in the presence of a glorious being. Generally the reaction element or the protest elements are present, but not both. Lehi left the pillar of fire and "returned to his own house at Jerusalem; and he cast himself upon his bed, being overcome with the Spirit and the things which he had seen" (1 Nephi 1:7). Isaiah exclaimed, "Woe is me! For I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts" (Isaiah 6:5).

The introductory word element of the narrative form serves to both "arouse the attention of the prophet" and to "spell out the specific basis or grounds for the commission" (cited in Ricks 99). Often, the reasons for why the one called upon will serve as a prophet is explained. In the burning bush experience, after the divine messenger identifies Himself as "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Ex. 3:6), and adds, "I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters.... I have also seen the oppression wherewith the Egyptians oppress them" (Ex. 3:7, 9). As a result of this, the Lord stated that, "I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land unto a good land and a large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey" (Ex 3:8). Enoch was called due to the wickedness and unbelief of the people: "And for these many generations, ever since the day that I created them, have they gone astray, and have denied me, and have sought their own counsels in the dark" (Moses 6:28). Rather than the historical context of the call, Jeremiah was commissioned to serve as the Lord's spokesman because of a premortal foreordination: "Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee" (Jer. 1:5).

The throne-theophany is an ascension narrative where the prophet is taken into or shown the heavens with God sitting upon His throne, surrounded by the heavenly council. This element is specific to the throne-theophany narratives and is not present in the basic narrative calls. Ezekiel states that:

I saw visions of God.... And above the firmament that was over [the seraphim's] heads was the likeness of a throne, as the appearance of a sapphire stone: and upon the... throne was the likeness as the appearance of a man.... This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord (Ezekiel 1:1, 26, 28).

Isaiah's throne-theophany was reported by him by saying, "I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. Above it stood the seraphims... and one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory" (Isaiah 6:1-3). In the Lehi account, the prophet is "overcome with the Spirit" and "was carried away in a vision, even that he saw the heavens open, and he thought he saw God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels in the attitude of singing and praising their God" (1 Nephi 1:8).

Following the steps above is the actual commission of the prophet. In the case of Moses, God tells him, "Come now therefore, and I will send thee unto Pharaoh, that thou mayest bring forth my people the children of Israel out of Egypt" (Ex. 3:10). Jeremiah is told by Deity that, "I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations" (Jer. 1:5). Enoch's commission actually comes before the introductory word, since the Lord states the commission and then offers the explanation: "And he heard a voice from heaven, saying: Enoch, my son, prophesy unto this people and say unto them—Repent, for thus saith the Lord: I am angry with this people" (Moses 6:27). Lehi's narrative does not
specifically spell out the commission, however, we see in the following chapter that, “the Lord spake unto… [Lehi], and said unto him:
Blessed art thou Lehi, because of the things which thou hast done; and because thou hast been faithful and declared unto this people
the things which I commanded thee, behold, the seek to take away thy life” (1 Nephi 2:1), indicating that there was a commission that
Lehi set out to fulfill.

After the commission is extended, the prophet generally protests his inability to fulfill his prophetic commission, hence the step known
as the objection or protest. Moses initially objects to his call by saying, “Who am I, that should go unto Pharaoh, and that I should bring
forth the children of Israel out of Egypt?” (Ex. 3:11) and continues from there to offer four more objections in his dialogue with the Lord.
Since the reaction element is present in Lehi’s call, the protest element is absent. Jeremiah, however, objects that, “Ah, Lord God!
Behold I cannot speak: for I am a child” (Jer. 1:6), and, similarly, Enoch states that he was “but a lad, and all the people hate me; for I
am slow of speech; wherefore am I thy servant?” (Moses 6:31).

In response to this objection, God reassures the prophet that He will aid him in their commission. To Moses, He states, “Certainly I will
be with thee” (Ex. 3:12), indicating that Moses will not face Pharaoh on his own power, but will have divine assistance. To Jeremiah,
the Lord states, “Say not, I am a child: for thou shalt go to all that I shall send thee, and whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak.
Be not afraid of their faces: for I am with thee to deliver thee, saith the Lord” (Jer. 1:7-8). To Enoch, God’s response contains both
command and reassurance: “Go forth and do as I have commanded thee, and no man shall pierce thee. Open thy mouth, and it shall be
filled, and I will give thee utterance…. Behold my Spirit is upon you, wherefore all thy words will I justify; and the mountains shall flee
before you, and the rivers shall turn from their course” (Moses 6:32, 34). Lehi is visited by a glorious being who gave the prophet a book
that fills him with the Spirit of the Lord as he reads (1 Nephi 1:10-12). He learns from this book that whatever efforts he puts into his
commission those at Jerusalem will reject his message and be destroyed, however, he knows that the Lord promises protection to his
servant, as Nephi reminds us with his comment that God “is mighty even unto the power of deliverance” for those who will do His will (1
Ne. 1:20).

Often, to leave a token of and to guarantee the commission, God give the prophet a sign. Moses is told that he and the children of Israel
would “serve God upon this mountain” (Ex. 3:12). After more objection is offered, his hand is made leprous and then healed again, and
(after yet more objections are offered), Moses is given a rod “wherewith thou shalt do signs” (Ex. 4:17). God touches Jeremiah’s mouth,
and says, “Behold, I have put my words in thy mouth” (Jer. 1:9). In the case of Enoch, God tells him to “anoint [his] eyes with clay, and
wash them” (Moses 6:35). After this was done, Enoch “beheld the spirits that God had created; and he beheld also things which were
not visible to the natural eye” (Moses 6:36; see Ricks).

Finally, there is the conclusion—the formal ending of the call, often concluding words from the divine spokesman or a statement that the
prophet has begun his work. Jeremiah relates that the Lord concluded his call by stating, “see, I have this day set thee over the nations
and over the kingdoms, to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build, and to plant” (Jer. 1:10), while the
Lehi account just simply states that “after the Lord had shown so many marvelous things unto” him, he went out and “began to prophesy
and to declare unto them [the Jews] concerning the things which he had both seen and heard” (1 Nephi 1:18). Enoch’s account simply
states that “it came to pass that Enoch went forth in the land, among the people… and cried with a loud voice, testifying against their
works; and all men were offended because of him” (Moses 6:37).

All of these elements form the prophetic call narrative of Hebrew literature.

Joseph Smith’s Visions as Prophetic Calls
How well do Joseph Smith’s accounts of the First Vision and Moroni’s visits line up with the prophetic call narrative form? Let us break them down and discuss each element.

- **The Historical Introduction:** The background given by Joseph Smith of his childhood and—more importantly—the religious excitement of the Second Great Awakening around his home serve as the best historical introduction for his prophetic calling. Great care is taken to outline the divisions and contentions among them as well as his own internal conflicts that came as a result of the strife he saw around him, indicating the timeframe and the need for a prophet prior to his First Vision. We do not get as strong of a historical introduction for the visit of Moroni, other than a date, the fact that he made a few poor choices after his previous experience and felt like he needed to receive confirmation of his worthiness.

- **Divine Confrontation:** We have a strong divine confrontation for both accounts. In the First Vision, Joseph states he saw “I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head, above the brightness of the sun, which descended gradually until it fell upon me… When the light rested upon me I saw two Personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the air” (JS-H1:15-16). Concerning the visit of Moroni, Joseph wrote that,

"While I was praying unto God and endeavoring to exercise faith in the precious promises of scripture, on a sudden a light like that of day, only of a far purer and more glorious appearance and brightness, burst into the room. Indeed the first sight was as though the house was filled with consuming fire. The appearance produced a shock that affected the whole body. In a moment a personage stood before me, surrounded with a glory yet greater than that with which I was already surrounded (Smith 439)

**The Reaction:** We don’t see a strong reaction from Joseph, other than, perhaps, speechlessness, since he states that it took him a minute to “get possession of myself, so as to be able to speak” (JS-H 1:18) during the First Vision. Prior to the First Vision, Joseph had a concern with salvation, stating that, “I became convicted of my Sins… and I felt to mourn for my own Sins” (Jessee 3), however, this was not a reaction to the divine confrontation, but a part of what drove him to pray in the first place.

Similarly, in the Moroni experience, Joseph prayed because he “frequently fell into many foolish errors, and displayed the weakness of youth, and the foibles of human nature” (JS-H 1:28). He went on to say, “In consequence of these things, I often felt condemned for my weakness and imperfections…. [and] I betook myself to prayer and supplication to Almighty God for forgiveness of all my sins and follies” (JS-H 1:29). One difference for this latter vision, however, was that Joseph had already experienced the First Vision and felt particularly condemned because his choices were “not consistent with that character which ought to be maintained by one who was called of God as I had been” (JS-H 1:28), almost serving as a delayed reaction to the First Vision.

- **Throne Theophany:** Joseph’s calls seem to fit more in the basic narrative form than a throne-theophany, thus this element is absent. On a side note, however, we do see a throne theophany in the 1832 vision of the Degrees of Glory (often called “the Vision”—see D&C 76:19-24).

- **The Introductory Word:** following the initial divine confrontation of the First Vision, the Lord spoke to Joseph, calling him by name, and stating in reference to the second personage, “This is my beloved Son. Hear Him!” (JS-H 1:17). Joseph was forgiven of his sins, and in response to Joseph’s question about which church to join, he was told, “That I must join none of them, for they were all wrong… [and] that those professors were all corrupt” (JS-H 1:19), and that “all religious demoniations were believing in incorrect doctrines, and that none of them was acknowledged of God as His Church and kingdom” (Smith 438). This statement would spell out the specific basis for Joseph’s commission—to found a Church that did teach correct doctrines, etc.

In relation to the visit of Moroni, Joseph recounts that the angel, “called me by name, and said unto me that he was an messenger sent from the presence of God to me, and that his name was Moroni; that God had a work for me to do; and that my name should be had for good and evil among all nations, kindreds, and tongues, or that it should be both good and evil spoken of among all people” (JS-H 1:33) and that “I was chosen to be an instrument in the hands of God to bring about some of His purposes in this glorious dispensation” (Smith 439). This statement outlined the purpose of the angel’s visit and the fact that Joseph would be called as a prophet.

- **The Commission:** As mentioned previously, the First Vision contains no explicit commission. The need for a prophet is
explained, however, there is no statement of requirements for action in the near future, only a promise that "the fullness of the gospel" would be revealed to Joseph at a later date (Smith 438). In comparing Joseph's records with the Lehi narrative, we do see that the ancient prophet's call wasn't explicate either (probably due to Nephi's editing), however we see action afterwards resulting from his commission. There is little immediate action from Joseph's call, as previously mentioned. In the case of the Moroni visit, however, we see that Joseph is told about a “book deposited, written upon gold plates… [and] the fullness of the everlasting Gospel was contained in it” (JS-H 1:34). Further, Joseph was told where to get it and given instructions about how to live after he had the plates (see JS-H 1:42). The next day, Joseph began to visit the place the plates were located and received instruction from heavenly messengers. The plates themselves formed the foundation of Joseph's early prophetic career.

Protest or Objection: Joseph's accounts do not mention any protests or objections after the message of each vision was given.

Reassurance: As discussed in the reaction section, Joseph went into both vision experiences feeling condemned for his sins. In the First Vision experience, he was told by the Savior, "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 crucifyed for the world that all those who believe on my name may have Eternal life” (Jessee 4). During the Moroni visit, Joseph was informed that God had forgiven his sins as well (see Smith 57). Neither of those statements were directly related to the Lord's support in his prophetic calling. We find, however, that Moroni informed Joseph that there were seer stones that “God had prepared… for the purpose of translating the book" stored along with the gold plates (JS-H 1:35), indicating that Joseph would not perform the translation on his own power, but would have divine assistance.

The Conclusion: In the 1838 account of the First Vision, we have a final reminder from the Lord that Joseph was not to join any of the churches, the closing of the vision and Joseph returning home and telling his mother that Presbyterianism is not true, which serves very well as the conclusion to that account (JS-H 1:20). In the case of the Moroni visit, we have the disappearance of the messenger followed by repeated visits, the angel commanding him to tell his father about the visions, and the visit to the Hill Cummorah, indicating that he began his work with the Book of Mormon, serving as an effective end to the initial visits of the Angel Moroni.

Both the First Vision and the visit of the angel Moroni feature many of the aspects of the traditional prophetic call. The First Vision is stronger in the earlier aspects of the prophetic call—the historical introduction especially—and both contain a divine confrontation, while the Moroni accounts leave us with a stronger sense of the commission and reassurance for the Prophet. Another option is presented by this observation—perhaps the two visions work together to form Joseph Smith's prophetic commission in two parts. After all, Lehi had the vision with the pillar of fire (which is, interestingly enough, how Joseph described the pillar of light on several occasions) and then went home to his bed where he had the throne-theophany experience. Perhaps the First Vision served much as the pillar of fire experience did for Lehi—the first half of his commission—and the nighttime visit of Moroni to Joseph's bedroom corresponded to Lehi's dream upon his bed, just with a longer time gap between the two parts in Joseph's case. In that light, the feelings of condemnation for his lifestyle that led to the prayer prior to the Moroni appearance could fit very well into the reaction category of the narrative form, with the message of forgiveness and the divine aids that would be given forming the reassurance. Since the prophetic call would be regarded as two divine confrontations, that step, the historical introduction, the introductory words, and the conclusions would be duplicated with the stronger historical introduction being vested in the first vision and the stronger conclusion resting in the latter vision. The commission, meanwhile, would be specific to the Moroni visit. For a final comparison, we will use the basic format compared to Lehi's vision to show how they would line up.

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This chart shows the comparison between Lehi and Joseph Smith's prophetic calls, highlighting the similarities and differences in the historical introduction, commission, and reassurance aspects of each vision.
Historical Introduction

“It came to pass in the commencement of the first year of the reign of Zedekiah, king of Judah... there came many prophets, prophesying unto the people that they must repent, or the great city of Jerusalem would be destroyed. Wherefore it came to pass that my father, Lehi, as he went forth prayed unto the Lord, yea, even with all his heart, in behalf of his people” (1 Nephi 1:4-5).

“Some time 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.... 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 poignant.... At length I came to the conclusion that I must either remain in darkness and confusion, or else I must... ask of God.... 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 eighteen hundred and twenty” (JS-H 1:5, 8, 13, 14).

Divine Confrontation

And it came to pass as he prayed unto the Lord, there came a pillar of fire and dwelt upon a rock before him; and he saw and heard much (1 Nephi 1:6)

“I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head, above the brightness of the sun, which descended gradually until it fell upon me.... When the light rested upon me I saw two Personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the air” (JS-H 1:15-16). “On a sudden a light like that of day, only of a far purer and more glorious appearance and brightness, burst into the room. Indeed the first sight was as though the house was filled with consuming fire. The appearance produced a shock that affected the whole body. In a moment a personage stood before me, surrounded with a glory yet greater than that with which I was already surrounded” (Smith 439)
| Introductory Word | “He saw and heard much” (1 Nephi 1:6) | “One of them spake unto me, calling me by name and said, pointing to the other—This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!… I asked the Personages who stood above me in the light, which of all the sects was right… I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong” (JS-H 1:17-19).The angel, “called me by name, and said unto me that he was a messenger sent from the presence of God to me, and that his name was Moroni; that God had a work for me to do; and that my name should be had for good and evil among all nations, kindreds, and tongues, or that it should be both good and evil spoken of among all people” (JS-H 1:33) and that “I was chosen to be an instrument in the hands of God to bring about some of His purposes in this glorious dispensation” (Smith 439). |
| Reaction | “And because of the things which he saw and heard he did quake and tramble exceedingly. And it came to pass that he returned to his own house at Jerusalem; and he cast himself upon his bed, being overcome with the Spirit and the things which he had seen” (1 Nephi 1:6-7). “During the space of time which intervened between the time I had the vision and the year eighteen hundred and twenty-three… I frequently fell into many foolish errors, and displayed the weakness of youth, and the foibles of human nature… not consistent with that character which ought to be maintained by one who was called of God as I had been…. In consequence of these things, I often felt condemned for my weakness and imperfections… [and] I betook myself to prayer and supplication to Almighty God for forgiveness of all my sins and follies” (JS-H 1:28-29). |
| Throne-Theophany | “And being thus overcome with the Spirit, he was carried away in a vision, even that he saw the heavens open, and he thought he saw God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels in the attitude of singing and praising their God (1 Nephi 1:8).” | NA |
**Commission**

Later on, “the Lord spake unto my father… and said unto him: Blessed art thou Lehi, because… thou hast been faithful and declared unto this people the things which I commanded thee” (1 Nephi 2:1).

“He called me by name, and said unto me that… God had a work for me to do; and… there was a book deposited, writted upon gold plates” (JS-H 1:33-34).

**Reassurance**

“And it came to pass that when my father had read and seen many great and marvelous things, he did exclaim many things unto the Lord; such as… because thou art merciful, thou will not suffer those who come unto thee that they shall perish!” (1 Nephi 1:14).

Joseph was informed that God had forgiven his sins (see Smith 57). Moroni also informed Joseph that there were seer stones that “God had prepared… for the purpose of translating the book” stored along with the gold plates (JS-H 1:35).

**Conclusion**

“The Lord had shown so many marvelous things unto my father, Lehi, yea, concerning the destruction of Jerusalem, behold he went forth among the people, and began to prophesy and to declare unto them concerning the things which he had both seen and heard” (1 Nephi 1:18).

“I left the field, and went to the place where the messenger had told me the plates were deposited” (JS-H 1:50).

The First Vision did serve an important part of Joseph Smith’s prophetic call, but must be placed together with the visit of the Angel Moroni for a complete picture of the Prophet’s commission.

**Works Cited**


A duecento anni dalla morte di mons. The baptism within the AFM and the ZCC is a historical prove that
the two churches has a similar historical foundation, that is the ministry of Alexander Dowie and his discipline John G. Lake. Both the Pentecostal and the Zionist churches owe their historical roots from the ministries of Alexander Dowie and John G. Lake. It is interesting to note how the two branches divided over the history as I will prove that in the pages to come. But in the beginning there was no division at all. Divisions came only after the missionaries and the pioneers of these movements returned to their homeland. Modern Church is a charitable society promoting liberal Christian theology. It defends liberal positions on a wide range of issues including gender, sexuality, interfaith relations, religion and science, and biblical scholarship. In church affairs it supports the role of laity and women ministers. Members receive the journal Modern Believing and the newsletter Signs of the Times. A substantial account of its theology is Paul Badham's The Contemporary Challenge of Modernist Theology. From 2011-2013 it