

# The Early Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision

Dean C. Jessee\*

On June 11, 1839, less than two months after his arrival in Illinois from confinement in a Missouri jail, and one month after moving his family into a small log house near Commerce, Illinois, Joseph Smith commenced dictating his history to his clerk James Mulholland.<sup>1</sup> At that time some nineteen years had elapsed since Joseph's First Vision,<sup>2</sup> and nine years had passed since the revelation commanding him to keep a history.<sup>3</sup> Among the causes of this delay were the frustrating circumstances that confronted the Prophet in writing his history—circumstances that did not end in June of 1839.

By October 29 of that year, when Joseph left Nauvoo for Washington, D.C., to present the Missouri grievances of his

---

\*Mr. Jessee is a member of the staff at the LDS Church Historian's Office in Salt Lake City.

<sup>1</sup>Joseph Smith, "History of the Church," (MS, LDS Historian's Library) C-1, p. 954. See also Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City, 1948), Vol. 3, p. 375. (Cited hereafter as *DHC*.)

<sup>2</sup>On this point critics have questioned the reliability of the First Vision account on the ground that the late start on the history combined with the lack of reference to the vision in early Mormon publications indicates an ulterior motive on the part of Joseph Smith in presenting the vision to the world. Fawn Brodie in her biography of the Prophet suggests that "the awesome vision he described in later years may have been . . . sheer invention, created some time after 1834 when the need arose for a magnificent tradition. . . ." *No Man Knows My History* (New York, 1963), p. 25. Others have asserted that lack of reference to the First Vision in early Mormon publications, "refutes the story that the Father and the Son appeared to Joseph Smith in 1820," and "absolutely proves that the early members of the Mormon Church had no knowledge of a vision." Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Joseph Smith's Strange Account of the First Vision* (Salt Lake City, n.d.), p. 3. See also, Wesley P. Walters, "New Light on Mormon Origins from Palmyra (N.Y.) Revival," *Bulletin of Evangelical Theological Society*, Vol. 10 (Fall 1967), p. 228.

<sup>3</sup>The opening words of the revelation given to Joseph Smith at the organization of the Church on April 6, 1830 were: "Behold, there shall be a record kept among you. . . ." Doctrine and Covenants 21:1.

people before the federal government, only fifty-nine pages of his history had been written; and six days after his departure, his scribe James Mulholland died.<sup>4</sup> When Joseph returned to Nauvoo in March 1840, he lamented the passing of his "faithful scribe," and expressed disappointment that an adequate record of his Washington trip had not been kept: "I depended on Dr. Foster to keep my daily journal during this journey, but he has failed me."<sup>5</sup> Robert B. Thompson, who was appointed General Church Clerk on October 3, 1840, continued writing the history where Mulholland left off; however, his untimely death on August 27, 1841 saw only sixteen pages added to the manuscript.<sup>6</sup> By the time Willard Richards was appointed private secretary to the Prophet and General Church Clerk in December 1841, a mere 157 pages of a history that eventually numbered more than two thousand, had been written.<sup>7</sup>

Such were the conditions the Prophet Joseph faced in writing a connected chronicle of his past, that two and a half years before his death he apologetically explained:

Since I have been engaged in laying the foundation of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints I have been prevented in various ways from continuing my Journal and the History, in a manner satisfactory to myself, or in justice to the cause. Long imprisonments, vexatious and long continued Law Suits - The treachery of some of my Clerks; the death of others; and the poverty of myself and Brethren from continued plunder and driving, have prevented my handing down to posterity a connected memorandum of events desirable to all lovers of truth. . . .<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup>*DHC*, Vol. 4, pp. 88-89.

<sup>5</sup>Smith, "History," C-1, p. 1023. See also *DHC*, Vol. 4, p. 89.

<sup>6</sup>*DHC*, Vol. 4, p. 89.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, Vol. 4, p. 470. The manuscript of the "History" shows that the first 59 pages were written by James Mulholland, that Robert B. Thompson wrote at least part of the next 16, and that William W. Phelps had written 82 pages before Willard Richards began writing. It was not until after Richards' appointment in December 1841 that any significant progress was made on the written history.

<sup>8</sup>Smith, "History," C-1, p. 1260. See also *DHC*, Vol. 4, p. 470. Speaking to the newly appointed Twelve in February 1835, Joseph Smith remarked ". . . if I now had in my possession every decision which has been had upon important items of doctrine and duties, since the commencement of this work, I would not part with them for any sum of money; but we have neglected to take minutes of such things, thinking perhaps that they would never benefit us afterwards. . . . and now we cannot bear record to the church and to the world of the great and glorious manifestations which have been made to us, with that degree of power and authority we otherwise could, if we now had these things to publish abroad." Smith, "History," B-1, p. 575.



The factors that retarded Joseph Smith's progress on his history did not prevent periodic beginnings. The Prophet added:

I have continued to keep up a Journal in the best manner my circumstances would allow, and dictate for my history from time to time, as I have had opportunity, so that the labors and sufferings of the first Elders and Saints of this last kingdom might not wholly be lost to the world.<sup>9</sup>

On at least three occasions prior to 1839 Joseph Smith began writing his history.<sup>10</sup> The earliest of these is a six-page account recorded on three leaves of a ledger book, written between the summer of 1831 and November 1832. An analysis of the handwriting shows that the narrative was penned by Frederick G. Williams, scribe to the Prophet and counselor in the First Presidency. Inasmuch as Williams was converted to Mormonism in the fall of 1830 and immediately left on a mission to Missouri, the writing of this history could not have preceded his meeting with Joseph Smith in mid-1831. Nor was the history written after November 27, 1832, since on that date the ledger book in which it was written was converted to a letter book for recording important historical Church documents. There are many evidences for this assertion.

First, although they were later cut from the volume, the three leaves containing the history match the cut edges and quality and markings of the paper of the page ends. The terminal letters of words severed when the pages were removed also match. The cut page stubs immediately precede the November 27, 1832, letter entry on the first of the remaining pages.

Second, the numbering sequences indicate this arrangement. The pages of the history were numbered one through six and the November 27 letter begins on page "1a." Both the history and the letter are in Williams' handwriting. He would not have needed to begin the letter page with "1a" had there

---

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup>The Prophet did very little writing himself. On July 5, 1839, he records, "I was dictating history. I say dictating, for I seldom use the pen myself. I always dictate all my communications, but employ a scribe to write them." "History," C-1, p. 963. See also *DHC*, Vol. 4, p. 1. The extreme scarcity of holographic material among the documents originated by Joseph Smith confirms this statement. Joseph Smith's authorship of the three historical accounts portrayed in these pages must be regarded within this framework.

not been other numbered pages preceding it. This brings up the third point.

In addition to the commencement of the letter book on November 27, 1832, Joseph Smith also started a daily journal. On that day he records having purchased a book for the purpose of keeping "a minute account of all things that come under my observation."<sup>11</sup> The beginning of the journal and letter book on the same day is of more than coincidental significance. It not only provides the terminal point in dating the earliest known historical narrative of the Prophet's life, but establishes the start of an important precedent in preserving the history of the Church. By recording important historical Church documents in the letter book, and his own life's events in the journal, the Prophet set a precedent that continued throughout the remainder of his life. Only the failure of his scribes, or the intrusion of other circumstances beyond his control, interrupted the continuation of this precedent. Significantly, these records provided important sources for the later writing of Joseph's official history.<sup>12</sup>

The 1831-32 history transliterated here contains the earliest known account of Joseph Smith's First Vision.<sup>13</sup>

A History of the life of Joseph Smith Jr an account of his marvilous experience and of all the mighty acts which he doeth in the name of Jesus Chist the son of the living God of whom he beareth record and also an account of the rise of the church of Christ in the eve of time according as the Lord

firstly brought forth and established by his hand he receiving the testamony from on high secondly the ministering of Angels thirdly the reception of the holy Priesthood by the ministering of Aangels to adminster the letter of the Gospel - the Law and commandments as they were given unto him - and the ordinencs, forthly a confirmation and reception of the high Priesthood after the holy order of the son of the living God power and ordinance from on high to preach the Gospel in the administration and demonstration of the spirit the Kees

<sup>11</sup>Joseph Smith, "Journal" (MS, LDS Historian's Library), 1832-1834, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup>These records were the basic sources for the later "official" history.

<sup>13</sup>"Kirtland Letter Book" (MS, LDS Historian's Library), 1829-1835, pp. 1-6. This account is presented here with the punctuation and spelling of the original. This account has been mistakenly dated "near 1833" because of the addition of a loose page with Williams' signature under the date of 1833. This page, which is not of the same paper stock as the other pages of the ledger, was added at a later date.



of the Kingdom of God conferred upon him and the continuation of the blessings of God to him &c-----

State

I was born in the town of Charon in the <sup>State</sup> of Vermont North America on the twenty third day of December A D 1805 of goodly Parents who spared no pains to instructing me

<sup>the</sup> in <sup>the</sup> christian religion at the age of about ten years my Father Joseph Smith Siegnior moved to Palmyra Ontario County in the State of New York and being in indigent circumstances were obliged to labour hard for the support of a large Family having nine children and as it required the exertions of all that were able to render any assistance for the support of the Family therefore we were deprived of the bennifit of an education suffice it to say I was nearly instructed in reading

rules

~~and~~ writing and the ground <sup>rules</sup> of Arithmatic which constuted my whole literary acquirements. At about the age of twelve years my mind became seriously imprest with regard to the all important concerns for the wellfare of my immortal Soul which led me to searching the Scriptures believeing as I was taught, that they contained the word of God thus applying myself to them and my intimate acquaintance with those of differant denominations led me to marvel excedingly for I

they did not ~~adorn~~

discovered that <sup>they did not</sup> ~~instead~~ of adorning their profession by a holy walk and Godly conversation agreeable to what I found contained in that sacred depository this was a grief to my Soul thus from the age of twelve years to fifteen I pondered many things in my heart concerning the sittuation of the world of mankind the contentions and divions the wickeness and abominations and the darkness which pervaded the ~~of~~ <sup>the</sup> minds of mankind my mind become excedingly distressed for I became convicted of my Sins and by searching the

mankind

Scriptures I found that ~~man~~ <sup>mankind</sup> did not come unto the Lord but that they had apostatised from the true and liveing faith and there was no society or denomination that built upon the Gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the new testament and I felt to mourn for my own Sins and for the Sins of the world for I learned in the Scriptures that God was the same yesterday to day and forever that he was no respecter to persons for he was God for I looked upon the sun the glorious luminary of the earth and also the moon rolling in their magesty through the heavens and also the stars shining in their courses and the earth also upon which I stood and the beast of the field and the fowls of heaven and the fish of the waters and also man walking forth upon the face of the earth in magesty and in the strength of beauty whose power and intilgence in governing the things which are so exceding great and marvilous even in the likeness of him

who created <sup>them</sup> ~~him~~ and when I considered upon these things  
 my heart exclaimed well hath the wise man said <sup>it is a</sup> ~~the~~ fool  
<sup>that</sup> ~~that~~ saith in his heart there is no God my heart exclaimed all  
 all these bear testimony and bespeak an omnipotent and  
 omnipreasant power a being who makith Laws and de-  
 creeth and bindeth all things in their bounds who filleth  
 Eternity who was and is and will be from all Eternity to  
 Eternity and when I considered all these things and <sup>that</sup> ~~that~~  
 being seeketh such to worship him as worship him in spirit  
 and in truth therefore I cried unto the Lord for mercy for  
 there was none else to whom I could go and ~~to~~ obtain  
 mercy and the Lord heard my cry in the wilderness and  
 while <sup>the</sup> in <sup>in the 16th year of my age</sup> attitude of calling upon the Lord <sup>a</sup> pillar of ~~fire~~  
 light above the brightness of the sun at noon day come down  
 from above and rested upon me and I was filld with the  
 spirit of God and <sup>the</sup> ~~the~~ opened the heavens upon me and I  
 saw the Lord and he spake unto me saying Joseph <sup>my son</sup> ~~thy~~  
 Sins are forgiven thee. go thy <sup>way</sup> ~~way~~ walk in my statutes and keep  
 my commandments behold I am the Lord of glory I was  
 crucified for the world that all those who believe on my  
 name may have Eternal life <sup>behold</sup> ~~the~~ world lieth in sin ~~and~~ at  
 this time and none doeth good no not one they have turned  
 asside from the Gospel and keep not <sup>my</sup> ~~not~~ commandments they  
 draw near to me with their lips while their hearts are far  
 from me and mine anger is kindling against the inhabi-  
 tants of the earth to visit them acording to this ungodliness  
 and to bring to pass that which <sup>hath</sup> ~~been~~ spoken by the mouth  
 of the prophets and Apostles behold and lo I come quickly  
 as it written of me in the cloud <sup>clothed</sup> ~~in~~ the glory of my Father  
 and my soul was filled with love and for many days I  
 could rejoice with great joy and the Lord was with me but  
 could find none that would believe the heavenly vision. . . .

In October 1834 Oliver Cowdery, the editor of the *Mes-  
 senger and Advocate*, introduced the first published history of  
 the Church. This work was presented in the form of corre-  
 spondence between Cowdery and William W. Phelps, and was  
 anticipated as a "full history of the rise of the Church of the  
 Latter Day Saints, and the most interesting parts of its prog-  
 ress, to the present time." It was further announced by the



marvelous even in the likeness of him who created ~~him~~<sup>them</sup>  
 and when I considered upon these things my heart exclaim-  
 -ed well hath the wise man said ~~the~~<sup>it is as if</sup> ~~for~~<sup>that</sup> ~~in~~<sup>in</sup>  
 his heart there is no god my heart exclaimed all all  
 these bear testimony and bespeak an omnipotent  
 and omnipotent power a being who maketh laws and  
 decreeth and bindeth all things in their bounds who  
 filleth Eternity who was and is and will be from all  
 Eternity to Eternity and when I considered all these things  
 and that ~~that~~<sup>that</sup> being ~~such~~<sup>deserving</sup> such to worship him as wor-  
 -ship him in spirit and in truth therefore I cried unto  
 the Lord for mercy for there was none else to whom I could go and  
 to obtain mercy and the Lord heard my cry in the wilderness  
 and while in ~~the~~<sup>the</sup> attitude of calling upon the Lord, a pillar of  
 fire light above the brightness of the sun at noon day  
 came down from above and rested upon me and I was filled  
 with the spirit of God and ~~the~~<sup>the</sup> ~~opened~~<sup>opened</sup> the heavens upon me  
 me and I saw the Lord and he spake unto me saying  
 Joseph ~~thy~~<sup>my son</sup> ~~thy~~<sup>thy</sup> sins are forgiven thee go thy ~~way~~<sup>way</sup> ~~in~~<sup>in</sup>  
 statutes and keep my commandments behold I am the  
 Lord of glory I was crucified for the world that all them  
 who believe on my name may have eternal life ~~the~~<sup>but</sup> ~~world~~<sup>world</sup>  
 birth in sin ~~and~~<sup>and</sup> at this time and none doeth good no  
 not one they have turned aside from the Gospel and  
 keep not ~~my~~<sup>my</sup> commandments they draw near to me with their  
 lips while their hearts are far from me and mine anger  
 is kindling against the inhabitants of the earth to visit  
 them according to their ungodliness and to bring to pass  
 that which ~~has~~<sup>has</sup> been spoken by the mouth of the proph-  
 -ets and of ~~the~~<sup>the</sup> ~~behold~~<sup>behold</sup> and so I come quickly as it was  
 written of me in the cloud ~~in~~<sup>clothed</sup> in the glory of my Father  
 and my soul was filled with love and for many days I  
 could rejoice with great joy and the Lord was with me  
 but could find none that would believe the heavenly  
 vision nevertheless I pondered these things in my heart  
~~about that time very much and about after many~~

No. 11

A License, Liberty Power and authority, Given to Eben Green,  
Minister and Prebiter, that he has been baptised and succeeded into  
this Church of Christ baptised and established on the sixth day of April  
in the year of our Lord on, show and eight hundred and thirty seven  
to the commandment of the Lord, and agreed to the Law of the Land  
This proves therefore that he has been ordained a Priest under the  
hand of Liberty Higdon, according to the articles & covenant of this  
Church on the 14<sup>th</sup> day of January A.D. 1833 in the Town of Westmore  
Langs Co Ohio

Wm. Williams Secy of Cong.

A License written by Frederick G. Williams on January 14, 1833. By courtesy of the Church Historian.



editor that "our brother J. Smith Jr. has offered to assist us. Indeed, there are many items connected with the fore part of this subject that render his labor indispensable. With his labor and with authentic documents now in our possession, we hope to render this a pleasing and agreeable narrative."<sup>14</sup> In a series of eight letters that followed, Cowdery presented random historical events, beginning in the October 1834 issue of the paper with an account of the priesthood restoration, and terminating in the October 1835 issue with the visit of Moroni to Joseph Smith.

A copy of the eight letters was transcribed into the Prophet's journal in 1835. On October 29 Joseph recorded that he went with his newly appointed scribe, Warren Parrish, to obtain his "large journal" from Frederick G. Williams. Later that same day Parrish began writing "a history" of Joseph's life by concluding "President Cowdery's second letter to W. W. Phelps, which President Williams had begun."<sup>15</sup> A check of the handwriting in the journal reveals the point at which Parrish commenced copying the second Cowdery letter to Phelps. It also shows that Parrish continued writing to the end of the eighth letter. At this point, however, unlike the published account, the journal narrative does not end, but continues in a different style. The transition is marked by a change in handwriting from Warren Parrish to that of Warren A. Cowdery and is prefaced with the following introduction: "Here the reader will observe that the narrative assumes a different form. The subject of it becoming daily more and more noted, the writer deemed it proper to give a plain, simple and faithful narrative of every important item in his every day occurrences. . . ."<sup>16</sup> Then follows 142 pages of daily, journal-type entries written in the third person singular, commencing with September 22, 1835, and continuing to January 18, 1836. In this journal, under the date of November 9, 1835, an interview with a Jewish minister is recorded in which Joseph Smith again relates the account of his First Vision:<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup>*Messenger and Advocate* (Kirtland, Ohio), October 1834, p. 13.

<sup>15</sup>Smith, "History," B-1, p. 631. See also *DHC*, Vol. 2, p. 293.

<sup>16</sup>Smith, "History," A-1, p. 105 (numbering from the back of the book).

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 120-122. Quoted with the punctuation and spelling of the original.

Monday Nov. 9th. . . . While sitting in his house this morning between the hours of ten and eleven a man came in and introduced himself to him calling himself Joshua the Jewish Minister. His appearance was something singular, having a beard about three inches in length which is quite grey, his hair was also long and considerably silvered with age. He had the appearance of a man about 50 or 55 years old. He was tall and straight, slender frame, blue eyes, thin visage, and fair complexion. He wore a green frock coat and pantaloons of the same color. He had on a black fur hat with a narrow brim. When speaking he frequently shuts his eyes and exhibits a kind of scowl upon his countenance. He (Joseph) made some inquiry after his name, but received no definite answer. The conversation soon turned upon the subject of Religion, and after the subject of this narrative had made some remarks concerning the bible, he commenced giving him a relation of the circumstances, connected with the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, which were nearly as follows. Being wrought up in my mind respecting the subject of Religion, and looking at the different systems taught the children of men, I knew not who was right or who was wrong, but considered it of the first importance to me that I should be right, in matters of so much moment, matter involving eternal consequences. Being thus perplexed in mind I retired to the silent grove and there bowed down before the Lord, under a realizing sense (if the bible be true) ask and you shall receive, knock and it shall be opened, seek and you shall find, and again, if any man lack wisdom, let of God who giveth to all men liberally & upbraideth not. Information was what I most desired at this time, and with a fixed determination to obtain it, I called on the Lord for the first time in the place above stated, or in other words, I made a fruitless attempt to pray. My tongue seemed to be swollen in my mouth, so that I could not utter, I heard a noise behind me like some one walking towards me. I strove again to pray, but could not; the noise of walking seemed to draw nearer, I sprang upon my feet and looked round, but saw no person, or thing that was calculated to produce the noise of walking. I kneeled again, my mouth was opened and my tongue loosed; I called on the Lord in mighty prayer. A pillar of fire appeared above my head; which presently rested down upon me, and filled me with unspeakable joy. A personage appeared in the midst of this pillar of flame, which was spread all around and yet nothing consumed. Another personage soon appeared like unto the first: he said unto me thy sins are forgiven thee. He testified also unto me that Jesus Christ is the son of God. I saw many angels in this vision. I was about 14 years old when I received this first communication. . . .



November 1835

at this time. And with a fixed determination to obtain it, I called on the Lord for the first time in the place above stated, or in other words, I made a fruitless attempt to pray. My tongue seemed to be swollen in my mouth, so that I could not utter, I heard a noise behind me like some one walking towards me, I strove again to pray, but could not; the noise of walking seemed to draw nearer; I sprang upon my feet and looked round, but saw no person or thing that was calculated to produce the noise of walking. I knelt again, my mouth was opened and my tongue raised, I called on the Lord in mighty prayer. A pillar of fire appeared above my head, which presently rained down upon me, and filled me with unspeakable joy. A personage appeared in the midst of this pillar of flame, which was spread all around and yet nothing consumed. Another personage soon appeared like unto the first: he said unto me Thy sins are forgiven thee. He testified also unto me that Jesus Christ is the son of God. I saw many angels in this vision. I was about 14 years old when I received this first communication. When I was about 17 years I had another vision of angels; in the night season, after I had retired to bed. I had not been asleep, but was meditating upon my past life and my experiences. I was well aware I had not kept the commandments, and I repented heartily for all my sins and transgressions, and humbled myself before him, whose eye surveys all things at a glance. All at once

that said party of the second part is to continue to send said Lyman H. Cowdery to such a school as in it he may obtain, in the five years aforesaid, a full and complete knowledge of the whole of sciences embraced in a collegiate or classical education.

In witness whereof we have hereunto set our hands and seals — — —

In presence of  
H. Parrish

W. H. Cowdery  
Lyman H. Cowdery  
Joseph Smith Jr.

A page of the 1835 account of Joseph Smith's First Vision as recorded by Warren A. Cowdery. The bottom section is part of an indenture written by him on November 3, 1836. A distinctive feature of Cowdery's handwriting is the sweeping flourish of his terminal "d"s. By courtesy of the Church Historian.

On November 14, 1835, five days after the foregoing narrative, Warren A. Cowdery also recorded the visit of Erastus Holmes of Newbury, Ohio, who inquired of Joseph Smith about the establishment of the Church and was given "a brief relation of his experience while in his youthful days, say from the age of six years up to the time he received the first visitation of Angels which was when he was about 14 years old. He also gave him an account of the revelations he afterward received concerning the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. . . ." <sup>18</sup>

The writing of the manuscript of Joseph Smith's *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, as edited by B. H. Roberts and published in 1902, was begun on June 11, 1839, when Joseph commenced dictating to his clerk James Mulholland. The Prophet's journal containing the 1835 history was turned over and utilized as Book A-1 of the ensuing multivolume work. Evidence in the opening pages of the "History" shows that Mulholland began writing from a record that had been written the previous year. This is obvious from the references in the "History" on page one to the "eighth year since the organization of said Church," <sup>19</sup> and page eight to "this day, being the Second day of May, One thousand Eight hundred and thirty eight." <sup>20</sup> Furthermore, on April 27, 1838, Joseph records spending the day "writing a history of this church from the earliest period of its existence up to this date;" <sup>21</sup> and on May 1-4 he records that "the First Presidency were engaged in writing church History." <sup>22</sup> This last reference compared with the statement on page eight of the history confirms that this was the narrative being written on May 2, 1838.

That the beginning pages of the present manuscript Volume A-1 were incorporated into Joseph Smith's "History" by James Mulholland in 1839 from the account written the previous year, is plain from the following facts: First, the initial 59 pages of the book are in the handwriting of Mulholland, who did not begin writing for Joseph Smith until September 3, 1838. He discontinued writing during the Mis-

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>19</sup>Compare *DHC*, Vol. 1, p. 2.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.

<sup>21</sup>Smith, "History," B-1, p. 791. See also *DHC*, Vol. 3, p. 25.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, B-1, p. 794. *DHC*, Vol. 3, p. 26.



souri incarceration of the Prophet and did not recommence until April 22, 1839.<sup>23</sup> Second, on Tuesday, June 11, 1839, Joseph records: "I commenced dictating my history for my Clerk—James Mulholland to write."<sup>24</sup> Third, Mulholland substantiates Joseph Smith's June 11 entry in his own journal with a note on that day stating that he was "writing &c for Church history."<sup>25</sup>

The following is the well-known account of the First Vision as it is recorded in this "History" by Mulholland in 1839. That he died on November 3, 1939, precludes his having written the account after that date:<sup>26</sup>

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

In this history I will present the various events in relation to this Church in truth and righteousness as they have transpired, or as they at present exist, being now the eighth year since the organisation of said Church. I was born in the year of our Lord One thousand Eight hundred and five, on the twenty third day of December, in the town of Sharon,

Note A 131

Windsor County, State of Vermont. ~~My~~ father Joseph See Note E page 2. adenda. My Father Smith Senior ~~left~~ the State of Vermont and moved to Palmyra, Ontario, (now Wayne) County, in the State of New thereabout.

York when I was in my tenth year. or ~~the~~

In about four years after my father's arrival at Palmyra, he moved with his family into Manchester in the same County of Ontario. His family consisting of eleven souls, namely, My Father Joseph Smith, My Mother Lucy Smith whose name previous to her marriage was Mack, daughter of Solomon Mack, my brothers Alvin (who ~~is now dead~~ died Nov 19th 1823 in the 25 year of his age)

<sup>23</sup>James Mulholland, "Journal" (MS, LDS Historian's Library), under dates indicated.

<sup>24</sup>See footnote 1.

<sup>25</sup>Mulholland, "Journal," June 11, 1839. On several occasions beginning on June 11, he records writing the history of the Church.

<sup>26</sup>Smith, "History," A-1, pp. 1-4. Punctuation and spelling of the original.

Hyrum, Myself, Samuel-Harrison, William, Don Carloss, and my Sisters Sophonia, Cathrine and Lucy. Sometime in the second year after our removal to Manchester, there was in the place where we lived an unusual excitement on the subject of religion. It commenced with the Methodists, but soon became general among all the sects in that region of country, indeed the whole district of Country seemed affected by it and great multitudes united themselves to the different religious parties, which created no small stir and division among the people, Some crying, "Lo here" and some Lo there. Some were contending for the Methodist faith, Some for the Presbyterian, and some for the Baptist, for notwithstanding the great love which the converts to these different faiths expressed at the time of their conversion, and the great Zeal manifested by the respective Clergy who were active in getting up and promoting this extraordinary scene of religious feeling, in order to have everybody converted as they were pleased to call it, let them join what sect they pleased. Yet when the Converts began to file off some to one party and some to another, it was seen that the seemingly good feelings of both the Priests and the Converts were ~~more~~ ~~pretended~~ more pretended than real, for a scene of great confusion and bad feeling ensued, Priest contending against priest, and convert against convert so that all their good feelings one for another (if they ever had any) were entirely lost in a strife of words and a contest about opinions.

I was at this time in my fifteenth year. My Fathers  
ere

family was proselyted to the Presbyterian faith and four of them joined that Church, Namely, My Mother Lucy, My Brothers Hyrum, Samuel Harrison, and my sister Sophonia.

During this time of great excitement my mind was called up to serious reflection and great uneasiness, but though my feelings were deep and often pungent, still I kept myself aloof from all these parties though I attended

as often  
their several meetings/as occasion would permit. But in process of time my mind became somewhat partial to the Methodist sect, and I felt some desire to be united with them, but so great was the confusion and strife amongst the different denominations that it was impossible for a person young as I was and so unacquainted with men and things to come to any certain conclusion who was right and who was wrong. My mind at different times was greatly excited for the cry and tumult were so great and incessant. The Presbyterians were most decided against the Baptists and Methodists and used all their powers of either reason or sophistry to prove their errors, or at least to make the people think they were in error. On the other hand the Baptists and



the Methodists in their turn were equally zealous in endeavoring to establish their own tenets and disprove all others.

In the midst of this war of words, and tumult of opinions, I often said to myself, what is to be done? Who of all these parties are right? Or are they all wrong together? And if any one of them be right which is it? And how shall I know it? While I was laboring under the extreme difficulties caused by the contests of these parties of religionists, I was one day reading the Epistle of James, First Chapter and fifth verse which reads, "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally and upbraideth not, and it shall be given him. Never did any passage of scripture come with more power to the heart of man than this did at this time to mine. It seemed to enter with great force into every feeling of my heart. I reflected on it again and again, knowing that if any person needed wisdom from God, I did, for how to act I did not know and unless I could get more wisdom than I then had, would never know, for the teachers of religion of the different sects understood the same passage of scripture so differently as to destroy all confidence in settling the question by an appeal to the Bible. At length I came to the conclusion that I must either remain in darkness and confusion or else I must do as James directs, that is, Ask of God. I at last came to the determination to ask of God, concluding that if he gave wisdom to them that lacked wisdom, and would give liberally and not upbraid, I might venture. So in accordance with this my determination to ask of God, I retired to the woods to make the attempt. It was on the morning of a beautiful clear day early in the spring of Eighteen hundred and twenty. It

was the first time in my life that I had<sup>made</sup> such an attempt, for amidst all<sup>my</sup> anxieties I had never as yet made the attempt to pray vocally.

After I had retired into the place where I had previously designed to go, having looked around me and finding myself alone, I kneeled down and began to offer up the desires of my heart to God, I had scarcely done so, when immediately

I was<sup>siezed</sup> upon by some power which entirely overcame me<sup>had</sup> and such astonishing influence over me as to bind my tongue so that I could not speak. Thick darkness gathered around me and it seemed to me for a time as if I were doomed to sudden destruction. But exerting all my powers to call upon God to deliver me out of the power of this enemy which had siezed upon me, and at the very moment when I was ready to sink into despair and abandon myself to destruction, not to an imaginary ruin but to the power of some actual being from

the unseen world who had such a marvelous power as I had never before felt in any being. Just at this moment of great

of  
alarm I saw a pillar^light exactly over my head above the brightness of the sun, which descended ~~gracefully~~ gradually untill it fell upon me. It no sooner appeared than I found myself delivered from the enemy which held me bound. When the light rested upon me I saw two personages (whose brightness and glory defy all description) standing above me in the air. One of them spake unto me calling me by name and said (pointing to the other) "This is my beloved Son, Hear him." My object in going to enquire of the Lord was to know which of all the sects was right, that I might know which to join. No sooner therefore did I get possession of myself so as to be able to speak, than I asked the personages who stood above me in the light, which of all the sects was right, (for at this time it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong) and which I should join. I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong, and the Personage who addressed me said that all their Creeds were an abomination in his sight, that those professors were all corrupt, that they draw near to me with their lips but their hearts are far from me; they teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of Godliness but they deny the power thereof." He again forbade me to join with any of them and many other things did he say unto me which I cannot write at this time. When I came to

my  
myself again I found myself lying on^back looking up

B Note P 132

into Heaven. ^Some few days after I had this vision I happened to be in company with one of the Methodist Preachers who was very active in the before mentioned religious excitement and conversing with him on the subject of religion I took occasion to give him an account of the vision which I had had. I was greatly surprised at his behavior, he treated my communication not only lightly but with great contempt, saying it was all of the Devil, that there was no such thing as visions of revelations in these days, that all such things had ceased with the Apostles and that there never would be any more of them. I soon found however that my telling the story had excited a great deal of prejudice against me among professors of religion and was the cause of great persecution which continued to increase and though I was an obscure boy

or thereabouts  
only between fourteen and fifteen years of age^and my circumstances in life such as to make a boy of no consequence in the world, Yet men of high standing would take notice sufficiently to excite the public mind against me and create



a hot persecution, and this was common<sup>among</sup> all the sects: all united to persecute me. It has often caused me serious reflection both then and since, how very strange it was that an obscure boy of a little over fourteen years of age and one too who was doomed to the necessity of obtaining a scanty maintainance by his daily labor should be thought a character of sufficient importance to attract the attention of the great ones of the most popular sects of the day so as to create in them a spirit of the bitterest persecution and reviling. But strange or not, so it was, and was often cause of great sorrow to myself. However it was nevertheless a fact, that I had had a Vision. I have thought since that I felt much like Paul ~~did~~ when he made his defence before King Aggrippa and related the account of the vision he had when he saw a light and heard a voice, but still there were but few who beleived him, some said he was dishonest, others said he was mad, and he was ridiculed and reviled, But all this did not destroy the reality of his vision. He had seen a vision he

<sup>all</sup> knew he had, and the persecution under Heaven could not make it otherwise, and though they should persecute him unto death yet he knew and would know to his latest breath that he had both seen a light and heard a voice speaking unto him and all the world could not make him think or believe otherwise. So it was with me, I had actually seen a light and in the midst of that light I saw two personages,

and they did in reality speak<sup>un</sup>to me, or one of them did, And though I was hated and persecuted for saying that I had seen a vision, yet it was true and while they were persecuting me reviling me and speaking all manner of evil against me falsely for so saying, I was led to say in my heart,

<sup>me</sup> why persecute for telling the truth? I have actually seen a vision, "and who am I that I can withstand God" or why does the world think to make me deny what I have actually seen, for I had seen a vision, I knew it, and I knew that God knew it, and I could not deny it, neither dare I do it, at

<sup>I</sup> least I knew that by so doing would offend God and come under condemnation. I had now got my mind satisfied so far as the Sectarian world was concerned, that it was not my duty to join with any of them, but continue as I was untill further directed, ~~for~~ I had found the testimony of James to be true, that a man who lacked wisdom might ask of God, and obtain and not be upbraided. . . .<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup>Three notes are inserted into the text of this account containing information added by Joseph Smith subsequent to the beginning of this "History." The first of these, designated "Note A," contains an account of the removal of the

Abner C. Kimball      John Taylor      Hyrum Clarke  
 Brigham Young      Wilford Woodruff      John Scott  
 William Smith      George A. Smith      John Snider  
 John C. Page      Theodore Tuley      Samuel Mullian.

And I feel great pleasure in being able to state that I know them  
 to be men of truth and virtue: That I know them to be men called  
 of the Lord and sent forth by him to preach this gospel of the Kingdom in  
 the world as a witness unto all nations, and then shall the end come.

I therefore exhort my Friends and relatives to hear them.

"To ~~try~~ <sup>improve</sup> all things, and hold fast that which is good."

Not to condemn nor reject these men unheard; but to try them by the  
 criterion which the saviour has given: "A good tree bringeth forth good  
 fruit." And also by John's criterion. "He that abideth in the doctrines  
 of Christ, hath both the Father and the Son." And for my own part I  
 thank the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, that He has given  
 me grace to hear, believe, and know for myself, that the doctrines  
 which these men preach, and the ordinances they observe are of God,  
 and given unto men by the revelation of our Lord and Saviour Jesus  
 Christ in these last days. — James Mulholland



passage of Scripture as differently as destiny all confidence in settling the question by an appeal to the Bible. At length I came to the conclusion that I must either remain in darkness and confusion or else I must do as James directs, that is, Ask of God. I at last came to the determination to ask of God, concluding that if he gave wisdom to them that lacked wisdom, and would give liberally and not upbraid, I might venture. So, in accordance with this my determination to ask of God, I retired to the woods to make the attempt. It was on the morning of a beautiful clear day early in the spring of Eighteen hundred and twenty. It was the first time in my life that I had made such an attempt, for amidst all my anxieties I had never as yet made the attempt to pray boldly. After I had retired into the place where I had previously designed to go, having looked around me and finding myself alone, I knelt down and began to offer up the desires of my heart to God, I had scarcely done so, when immediately I was <sup>seized</sup> upon by some power which entirely overcame me and such astonishing influence over me, as to bind my tongue that I could not speak. Thick darkness gathered around me and it seemed to me as if I were doomed to sudden destruction. But exerting all my powers to call upon the Lord to liber me out of the power of this enemy which had seized upon me, and at the very moment when I was ready to sink into despair and abandon myself to destruction, I felt an extraordinary power but to the power of some actual being from the unseen world who had a marvelous power as I had never before felt in any being. Just at this moment I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head above the high tops of the sun, which seemed to grow gradually until it fell upon me. At no sooner appeared than I felt myself delivered from the enemy which held me bound. When the light rested upon me I saw two personages (whose brightness and glory defy all description) standing above me. One of them spake unto me calling me by name and said, in a low and gentle voice, "Thou art my beloved Son, hear him". My object in going into the woods was to know which of all the sects was right, that I might know the truth. I did not get possession of my self so as to be able to speak, but I asked the persons who stood above me in the light, which of the sects was right, (for at this time it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong, and which I should join. I was assured that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong, and I saw a personage who said to me that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight, that those who were the corrupt, that they draw near to me with their lips but their hearts are far from me, they teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of godliness but denying the power thereof." He again forbade me to join with them and said, "Thou shalt not do so." He then said unto me which I cannot write at this time. When I came to myself I found myself lying on my back looking up into Heaven. It is a few days since that this vision I happened to be in company with one of the <sup>2132</sup> most devout of the people who was active in the aforementioned religious excitement and conversation. In the course of religion I took occasion to give him an account of the vision which I had seen. I was greatly surprised at his behavior, he treated my communications very lightly, but with great contempt, saying it was all of the devil, that the whole thing was a vision or revelation in his days, that at such times he had seen many things.



In summary, a study of the writing of Joseph Smith's history indicates that while the official account of his First Vision was not compiled until relatively late in his life, the apparent time-lag between the vision and the recording of the event is more presumed than real. Considering the youth of the Prophet, the frontier conditions in which he lived, his lack of academic training, the absence of any formal directive to motivate him to write, and the antagonistic reception he received upon first relating the experience, it is not strange that he failed to preserve an account of his First Vision during the decade between 1820 and 1830. However, once directed by an 1830 revelation to keep a history, Joseph acted with all the dispatch that time-consuming responsibilities and frustrating difficulties would allow. This seems particularly evident when these factors are viewed within the framework of the surviving fragmentary beginnings of the history, and the mass of historical data preserved by the Prophet during the final fourteen years of his life. On three known occasions, prior to 1839 when Joseph Smith undertook the official chronicle of the events of his life, he presented his First Vision narrative as an integral part of the effort to keep a history.

---

Smith family from Vermont to New York prior to the beginning of Joseph's public ministry, which may explain why it was not included in the printed "History." "Note B" reads as follows, and is contained in our present printed text: "When the light had departed I had no strength, but soon recovering in some degree. I went home, & as I leaned up to the fire piece Mother enquired what the matter was. I replied never mind all is well.—I am well enough off. I then told my Mother I have learned for myself that Presbyterianism is not True.—It seems as though the adversary was aware at a very early period of my life that I was destined to prove a disturbance & annoyer of his Kingdom, or else why should the powers of Darkness combine against me, why the oppression & persecution that arose against me, almost in my infancy?" "History," A-1, pp. 132-133. "Note C," which appears later in the text, contains Joseph's qualification of his statement that he had been led into "divers temptations," wherein he asserts that "in making this confession no one need suppose me guilty of any great or malignant sins. . . ." *Ibid.*, p. 133. Since none of these insertions appear in the first published account of this "History" in the *Times and Seasons* in 1842, but the last two are included in the present printed text, critics have regarded this as an example of text tampering. It is doubtful from the content of the notes that they could have originated from anyone other than Joseph Smith. More important, however, is the fact that all three of them appear in Book A-1 in Willard Richards' handwriting. Since his tenure as scribe on the "History" did not begin until December 1841 and was concluded in March 1844, it is plain that these three insertions were included during Joseph's supervision of the "History."