

## CIRCA SUMMER 1832 HISTORY

*During the first four years of his record keeping (1828–1831), Joseph focused primarily on preserving revelatory texts: the Book of Mormon manuscripts, Joseph Smith’s revision of the Bible, and his own contemporary revelations. Scriptural record keeping overshadowed personal and institutional record keeping. This focus changed in 1832, when Joseph Smith began documenting his personal life—including his role as revelator and church leader—in detail for the first time, both in his history and in the journal he began on 27 November 1832.*

*In the early 1830s, when this history was written, it appears that Joseph Smith had not broadcast the details of his first vision of Deity. Records predating 1832 only hint at Joseph’s earliest manifestation (see D&C 20:5). Initially, Joseph Smith may have considered this vision to be a personal experience tied to his own religious explorations. He was not accustomed to recording personal events, and he did not initially record the vision as he later did the sacred texts at the center of his attention. Only when Joseph expanded his focus to include historical records did he write down a detailed account of the theophany he experienced as a youth. The result was a simple, unpolished account of his first “marvilous experience,” written largely in his own handwriting. The account was not published or widely circulated at the time, though in later years he told the story more frequently.*

At about the age of twelve years, my mind became seriously impressed with regard to the all-important concerns for the welfare of my immortal soul, which led me to searching the scriptures—believing, as I was taught, that they contained the word of God and thus applying myself to them. My intimate acquaintance with those of different denominations led me to marvel exceedingly, for I discovered that they did not adorn 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.

2 Thus, from the age of twelve years to fifteen I pondered many things in my heart concerning the situation of the world of mankind, the contentions and divisions, the wickedness and abominations, and the darkness which pervaded the minds of mankind. My mind became exceedingly distressed, for I

became convicted of my sins, and by searching the scriptures I found that mankind did not come unto the Lord but that they had apostatized from the true and living faith, and there was no society or denomination that was built upon the gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the New Testament. 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, today, and forever, that he was no respecter of persons, for he was God.

3 For I looked upon the sun, the glorious luminary of the earth, and also the moon, rolling in their majesty through the heavens, and also the stars shining in their courses, and the earth also upon which I stood, and the beasts of the field, and the fowls of heaven, and the fish of the waters, and also man walking forth upon the face of the earth in majesty and in the strength of beauty, whose power and intelligence in governing the things which are so exceedingly great and marvelous, even in the likeness of him who created them. And when I considered upon these things, my heart exclaimed, "Well hath the wise man said, 'It is a fool that saith in his heart, there is no God.'" My heart exclaimed, "All, all these bear testimony and

bespeak an omnipotent and omnipresent 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 I considered all these things and that that being seeketh such to worship him as worship him in spirit and in truth.

4 Therefore, I cried unto the Lord for mercy, for there was none else to whom I could go and obtain mercy. And the Lord heard my cry in the wilderness, and while in the attitude of calling upon the Lord, in the sixteenth year of my age, a pillar of light above the brightness of the sun at noonday came down from above and rested upon me. I was filled with the spirit of God, and the Lord opened the heavens upon me and I saw the Lord.

5 And he spake unto me, saying, "Joseph, my son, thy sins are forgiven thee. Go thy way, walk in my statutes, and keep my commandments. Behold, I am the Lord of glory. I was crucified for the world, that all those who believe on my name may have eternal life. Behold, the world lieth in sin at this time, and none doeth good, no, not one. They have turned aside from the gospel and keep not my commandments. They draw near to me with their lips



## JOURNAL, 9-11 November 1835

*In early November 1835, Joseph Smith was visited by a man named Robert Matthews (also known as Joshua "the Jewish minister"), a Christian preacher who converted to Judaism and began claiming that he was the reincarnated apostle Matthias. During their meeting the two began "talking upon the subject of religion" and the Prophet gave Matthews "a relation of the circumstances connected with the coming forth of the book of Mormon." As part of this narrative, Joseph retold his First Vision experience. His description was written down, and Warren Parrish later copied it into Joseph's journal.*

*Unlike his highly personal 1832 history, this retelling of the First Vision by the Prophet was to a total stranger who literally walked into Joseph's house unannounced and asked about his experience. It is therefore understandable that Joseph's conversation on this occasion tended to deal with objective details, rather than intimate feelings. What's more, Joseph drew on biblical language and imagery to describe his vision that would have appealed to a Jewish convert such as Matthews.*

Being wrought up in my mind respecting the subject of religion, and looking at the different systems taught the children of men, I knew not who was right or who was wrong. And considering it of the first importance that I should be right in matters that involve eternal consequences, being thus perplexed in mind I retired to the silent grove and bowed down before the Lord, under a realizing sense that he had said (if the Bible be true), "Ask, and you shall receive; knock, and it shall be opened; seek, and you shall find," and again, "If any man lack wisdom, let him ask of God, who giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not."

2 Information was what I most desired at this time, and with a fixed determination to obtain it, I called upon the Lord for the first time in the place above stated. Or in other words, I made a fruitless attempt to pray; my tongue seemed to be swollen in my mouth, so that I could not utter. I heard a noise behind me, like some person walking towards me. I strove again to pray but could not. The noise of walking seemed to draw nearer. I sprung up on my feet and looked around but saw no person or thing that was calculated to produce the noise of walking.

3 I kneeled again. My mouth was opened and my tongue



**“CHURCH HISTORY,” 1 MARCH 1842**  
FROM THE WENTWORTH LETTER

*Written in response to Chicago Democrat editor John Wentworth's request for information about the Latter-day Saints, this account was printed in the Times and Seasons in 1842. Intended for publication to an audience unfamiliar with beliefs of the Church, the account is concise and straightforward. The extent of Joseph Smith's involvement in writing it is not known, but it was published with his signature. This account borrowed language from Orson Pratt's "A[n] Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions."*

When about fourteen years of age, I began to reflect upon the importance of being prepared for a future state, and upon enquiring 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 to all men liberally and upbraideth not, and it shall be given him."

2 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 noonday. 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.

## ORSON PRATT'S ACCOUNT, 1840

*Along with others of the Twelve, Orson Pratt served as a proselytizing missionary to the British Isles from 1840 to 1841. While traveling to his mission, he stopped for a number of weeks in the eastern United States and spent time in the company of Joseph Smith. Pratt attended speeches that Joseph delivered during his stay in the area and accompanied him on a journey from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to Monmouth, New Jersey, in December 1839. He likely heard Joseph recount his early visions, a subject Joseph publicly addressed while in the eastern states. As a member of one of the Latter-day Saints' governing bodies, Pratt had earlier opportunities to hear Joseph Smith speak of his early visionary experiences, but Joseph's lectures on the East Coast may have left those visions fresh in Pratt's mind as he journeyed across the Atlantic.*

*The next year, in Edinburgh, Scotland, Pratt published the pamphlet "A[n] Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions and of the Late Discovery of Ancient American Records," which focused on Joseph Smith's personal history and included the earliest printed account of his first vision of Deity. It proved to be one of the more influential Latter-day Saint tracts to come out of this period. Pratt's work was a principal source for Orson Hyde's German-language pamphlet "Ein Ruf aus der Wüste" [A cry out of the wilderness], the earliest church publication in a language other than English; for John Taylor's "Aux amis de la vérité religieuse" [To friends of religious truth], the first French-language pamphlet; and also for the 1842 account "Church History" published by Joseph Smith in the Times and Seasons.*

When somewhere about fourteen or fifteen years old, [Joseph Smith, Jun.] 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.

2 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 not the author of but one doctrine, and therefore could not acknowledge but one denomination as his church; and that such denomination must be a people, who believe, and teach, that one doctrine, (whatever it may be) and build upon the same. He then reflected upon the immense number of doctrines, now, in the world, which had given rise to many hundreds of different denominations. The great question to be decided in his mind was—if any one of these denominations be the Church of Christ, which one is it?

4 Until he could become satisfied, in relation to this question, he could not rest contented. To trust to the decisions of fallible man, and build his hopes upon the same, without any certainty, and knowledge, of his own, would not satisfy the anxious desires that pervaded his breast. To decide, without any positive and definite evidence, on which he could rely, upon a subject involving the future welfare of his soul, was revolting to his feelings. The only alternative, that seemed

to be left him, was to read the Scriptures, and endeavour to follow their directions. He, accordingly, commenced perusing the sacred pages of the Bible, with sincerity, believing the things that he read.

5 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.

6 This was cheering information to him: tidings that gave him great joy. It was like a light shining forth in a dark place, to guide him to the path in which he should walk. He, now, saw that if he inquired of God, there was, not only, a possibility, but a probability; yea, more, a certainty, that he should obtain a knowledge, which, of all the doctrines, was the doctrine of Christ; and, which, of all the churches, was the church of Christ.

6 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



ORSON HYDE'S ACCOUNT, 1842  
TRANSLATED FROM GERMAN

*Orson Hyde of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles published this account of Joseph Smith's early visions in Frankfurt, Germany, in 1842. He stopped in Germany on his way back to the United States after preaching to Jews throughout Europe and dedicating the Holy Land for the gathering of the remnants of Abraham's scattered posterity. Hyde composed the text in English, relying heavily on Pratt's 1840 "A[n] Interesting Account", and translated it into German for publication under the title "Ein Ruf aus der Wüste", meaning "a cry out of the wilderness."*

When [Joseph Smith, Jun.] had reached his fifteenth year, he began to think seriously about the importance of preparing for a future existence; but it was very difficult for him to decide how he should go about such an important undertaking. He recognized clearly that it would be impossible for him to walk the proper path without being acquainted with it beforehand; and to base his hopes for eternal life on chance or blind uncertainty would have been more than he had ever been inclined to do.

2 He discovered the world of religion working under a flood of errors which by virtue of their contradictory opinions and principles laid the foundation for the rise of such different sects and denominations whose feelings toward each other all too often were poisoned by hate, contention, resentment and anger. He felt that there was

only one truth and that those who understood it correctly, all understood it in the same way. Nature had endowed him with a keen critical intellect and so he looked through the lens of reason and common sense and with pity and contempt upon those systems of religion, which were so opposed to each other and yet were all obviously based on the scriptures.

3 After he had sufficiently convinced himself to his own satisfaction that darkness covered the earth and gross darkness covered the nations, the hope of ever finding a sect or denomination that was in possession of unadulterated truth left him.

4 Consequently he began in an attitude of faith his own investigation of the word of God feeling that it was the best way to arrive at a knowledge of the truth. He had not proceeded very far in this laudable endeavor when his





## INTERVIEW, JOSEPH SMITH BY DAVID NYE WHITE, 29 AUGUST 1843

*In August 1843, David Nye White, editor of the Pittsburgh Weekly Gazette, interviewed Joseph Smith in his home as part of a two-day stop in Nauvoo, Illinois. His news article, "The Prairies, Joe Smith, the Temple, the Mormons, etc." included an account of Joseph Smith's first vision.*

The Lord does reveal himself to me. I know it. He revealed himself to me first when I was about fourteen years old, a mere boy. I will tell you about it.

2 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.

3 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.

4 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?"

5 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."

6 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."

7 The vision then vanished, and when I came to myself, I was sprawling on my back and it was sometime before my strength returned.

8 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.

They thought to put me down, but they haven't succeeded, and they can't do it. When I have proved that I am right, and get all the world subdued under me, I think I shall deserve something.

ALEXANDER NEIBAUR'S JOURNAL, 1844

*On 24 May 1844, German immigrant and church member Alexander Neibaur visited Joseph Smith in his home and heard him relate the circumstances of his earliest visionary experience. Attempts at standardizing punctuation, spelling, and grammar have been made (except for those cases where the intended word is unknown).*

[I] called at Brother Joseph Smith [and] met Mr. Bonnie. cloth drawn over his shoulders, [and] his right arm bear.

2 Brother Joseph told us the first call he had a revival meeting. His mother, brother, and sister got religion. He wanted to get Religion too. [He] wanted to feel and shout like the rest but could feel nothing.

3 [He] opened his Bible [and] the first Passage that struck him was, "If any man lack Wisdom let him ask of God, who giveth to all Men liberally and upbraideth not."

4 [Joseph] went into the wood to pray [and] knelt himself down. His tongue was closet cleavet to his roof—he could utter not a word, but felt easier after a while.

5 [He] saw a fire towards heaven; [it] came near and nearer. [He] saw a personage in the fire: light complexion, blue eyes, a piece of white

6 After a while, another person came to the side of the first. Mr. Smith then asked, "Must I join the Methodist Church?" 7 "No, they are not my People. All have gone astray. There is none that doeth good, no, not one, but this is my Beloved son; harken ye him."

8 The fire drew nigher, rested upon the tree, [and] enveloped him.

9 [illegible] comforted, endeavoured to arise, but felt uncomen feeble.

10 [Joseph] got into the house [and] told the Methodist priest. [The priest] said this was not a age for God to reveal himself in vision, [and that] revelation has ceased with the New Testament.