

Joseph Smith's First Vision – A Study Guide

By Eugene Bodrero

In his [closing remarks](#) for the October 2019 general conference, church President Nelson suggested that we prepare for the spring session "by reading afresh Joseph Smith's account of the First Vision as recorded in the Pearl of Great Price." This is the best known account of the experience of the young Joseph and one that we should all be familiar with. There are also several other accounts that are similarly valuable.

At the invitation of my bishop, I was asked to prepare a fifth-Sunday School lesson for the ward with the intention to introduce members to the several accounts of Joseph Smith's first vision. Using more formal language, Joseph's experience would be classified as an epiphany (divine manifestation) or theophany (a visible manifestation of deity).

The study guide is divided into three sections: Introduction, First Vision Accounts, and Conclusion. Links are provided to online sources. The citations are relatively informal, but should be sufficient. Please contact me if the links don't work for you or you have questions.

Section 1 – Introduction

Before diving into the target subject, it may be helpful to provide some context.

For early Church converts, Joseph's personal epiphany as a young man was not well known. The message of missionary work focused on the restoration of Christ's church including apostles, prophets, signs, and visions; essentially a return to Biblical fundamentalism.

Beginning in 1880, when Joseph Smith History was canonized in the Pearl of Great Price, the "first vision" took its place as a foundational story for members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It is now a principle missionary message and has come to mark the beginning of the latter-day saint restoration.

Doctrine v History

One of the lessons that I like to teach is about the differences between doctrine, principle, and practice. In brief, there are some elements of our faith that we expect to change and others we regard as "eternal doctrine." Church policies, while sometimes described as "inspired," are necessarily volatile when compared to doctrine. Our group membership is largely defined by our assent to Church doctrine and respect for the policies.

History often runs parallel to doctrine, adding meaning and context. Generally, history is considered subjective; influenced by the teller. However, history can take on a different role when it is declared sacred.

The foundational stories of the restoration are sacred to the latter-day saint church. As such, they occupy a unique place that is often nearer to doctrine than history. Once canonized, a particular version of Joseph Smith's first vision became sacralized. This may lead some to disregard other credible accounts and the value they have to offer.

Memories of Stories

Once considered the gold standard of truth, we now recognize that eye witness accounts aren't as reliable as we once thought. We know that memory is heavily influenced by the immediate circumstances of the teller, reconstructed with each retelling and adapting to the audience (Reference [1](#), [2](#)).

The more time that has passed between an event and the retelling, the less detail we remember (Reference [3](#)). Each telling also influences the retelling. As time passes, the words of our experience may become the experience.

Our stories are also told in a way that will be meaningful and credible to the audience at hand. Elements are included or excluded, emphasized or minimized in order to fit the time available, the interest of those present, and limitations of the medium.

So, does that make our stories unreliable? It depends. Historians judge the credibility of stories on several criteria. First hand accounts (primary sources) that are documented near the time of an event have high credibility. Second hand accounts are generally less credible. Accounts that are recorded years later are approached with much more skepticism. Correlation of various accounts, whether primary or secondary, can add confidence and context to particular details and build a more reliable picture of actual events.

By leveraging the several accounts of Joseph Smith's vision, we can get a better feel for what he may have experienced and what it meant to him.

One more point.

Adult Development

We all recognize that children's brains are actively developing; the way they interact with the world changes rapidly. In the last few decades, much research has been done regarding adult development. What was once thought to be static is now known to be dynamic. We don't "arrive" at adulthood. Instead our view of the world continues to change.

This adult development affects the way we interact with our faith (Podcast [1](#)). The stories that we found engaging and satisfying as a young adult may look different in our later years. As an example of our different perspectives, this study guide itself will be meaningful to some readers and not to others. This difference in development is (or should be) normal and expected.

The above points are important to keep in mind as we look at a few of the epiphany stories recorded during Joseph Smith's life.

Section 2 – First Vision Accounts

There are at least five first vision accounts that Joseph Smith either record during his life time or caused to be recorded. The principle ones are dated to 1832, 1835, 1839, and 1842.

The Joseph Smith Papers project consolidates descriptions and links to several of the references on a single web page entitled "[Primary Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision of Deity](#)".

Rather than reproduce the content, please access the accounts directly through the links provided to the Joseph Smith Papers Project.

1829 Account

While typically not included, [D&C 20:5-7](#) may actually be the first epiphany reference. This section gives a brief summary of the "rise of the Church." Joseph Smith tells us that "God ministered unto him by an holy angel, whose countenance was as lightning, and whose garments were pure and white above all other whiteness" And, "that he had received a remission of his sins...."

This is not often regarded as a "first vision" story because it is not explicitly presented as such. It may also conflate several visionary experiences. Nevertheless, it alludes to an experience with an angel and personal forgiveness through divine manifestation. These elements are found in several of the later epiphany accounts and represent what would have been a common Christian conversion experience.

1832 Account

<https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-summer-1832/1>

This is the only account written by Joseph Smith. He was 27 years old at the time and remembering an event about 11 years prior (1821), when he was 16 years old. Using the revival language of the time, the elements of D&C 20 are expanded upon and given context.

Based on the relative nearness in time to the vision and Joseph's direct recording of the history, the credibility of this account ranks well when compared to later accounts that were recorded and composed by others.

The following are some questions to consider when studying the 1832 account. Similar questions are applicable to the other versions.

- What was the state of the church and events leading up to the summer of 1832?
(See Saints, Vol 1, ch 12-14)
- Why does Joseph feel his personal experience should be included in the Church history?
- How might these events have affected Joseph Smith's personal story and recollection?
- In this account, what motivates Joseph Smith to initially approach God?
- How does the account reflect the motivations and perspectives of a young teen?
- What role does the Bible play in Joseph's search?
- What was Joseph Smith seeking?
- What did "the Lord" tell Joseph Smith?
- What was the result?

1835 Account

<https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-1835-1836/24>

On 09 November 1835, in response to a "curious visitor" in Kirtland, Joseph Smith relates some of his experiences and circumstances leading to the foundation of the Church. This account is dictated to, or recorded by, Warren Parrish.

In this account, Joseph gives his age as 14 (1819) at the time of his epiphany. As we might expect, some of the details are different from the 1832 record.

- What was the state of the Church at this time? (See Saints, Vol 1, Ch 19-20)
- How is the motivating question in this account different from the 1832 version? What might be the reason for this?
- What value does the inclusion of opposing forces add to the story?
- What does the content of this version reveal about the circumstances and relationship between Joseph Smith and the visitor?
- What was the result of the Joseph Smith's prayer?
- Was his motivating question answered in the vision?

1839 Account (aka 1838 Account)

<https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-june-1839-circa-1841-draft-2/2>

Joseph Smith is about 34 years old at the time that this history is recorded, giving a separation of 18 to 20 years from the first vision. Formally, this version would fall into the classification of a theophany, a visible manifestation of deity.

The 1839 account was created as part of a formal history of the Church and is much longer and more detailed than any extant accounts. The author is unknown, but Joseph Smith is presumed to have participated in the effort. After various drafts and edits, it was included in the Pearl of Great Price in 1880.

- What was the state of the church when this history was created? (See Saints, Vo 1, Ch 31-35)
- What were the personal circumstances of Joseph Smith at this time?
- How might these circumstances have influenced this version?
- In this version, what are Joseph's motivations for approaching God in prayer?
- How does the vision experience differ from the previous accounts?
- Joseph Smith references the experience of Paul. Paul gives three accounts of his experience: [Acts 9:1-19](#) and [Acts 22:6-16](#) and [Act 26:9,12-18](#). How do these various accounts reflect on the several versions that Joseph Smith gave of his own experience?
- The 1839 account states: "So it was with me, I had actualy seen a light and in the midst of that light I saw two personages, and they did in reality speak < un >to me, or one of them did" (<https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-june-1839-circa-1841-draft-2/4>)

This last phrase, "or one of them did," is not included in the JSH version (see [verse 25](#)). How does this simple thought make room for our own experience and understanding?

1842 Account

<https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/church-history-1-march-1842/1>

Written at the request of John Wentworth, editor of the Chicago Democrat, this account was later printed in March 1842 in the Times and Seasons. Like the other formal histories, it is not know how much was written or dictated by Joseph Smith. W.W. Phelps had a free hand in publishing under Joseph's name and others may have been given the same privilege (Podcast [2](#)).

- How does the language of this version compare to the one written by Joseph in 1832?
- This account describes a unique motivation at the age of 14. How does it differ from previous versions?
- What role does the Bible play in this version? How does it compare to how the Bible is used in the 1832 account?
- What is the result of Joseph's prayer?

Section 3 – Conclusion

In addition to the sources linked above, there are other primary and secondary accounts of Joseph Smith's vision.

When studying the Gospels, it is tempting to harmonize the stories; we want them to all say the same thing. Study programs often interleave readings from each of the Gospel writers in order to create a cohesive and chronological story. But, they were each written by different authors, at different times, to different audiences. Mark is dynamic, course, and fast-paced, featuring a practical and assertive Jesus. In contrast, John's gospel, which was written much later, presents a very high Christology, establishing the divinity of Jesus from the first verse. Like portraits painted by different artist, each Gospel account has its own characteristics and presents a unique perspective on the life of Jesus.

The canonized 1839 account is the most well know to Latter-day Saints, but the other accounts have their place and value in our history. Like the Gospels, the questions asked, the context described, and the resulting vision show a pattern and progression. They also reflect the circumstances in which each story is told.

So, which one is "true?" In some way they all are. Each story carries its own lessons.

Like the proverbial story of someone raising a pointing figure, the object to which it is directed deserves our attention, not the person, nor the finger. Joseph Smith's experience in the silent grove was Joseph's, not ours.

In the end, the most important question asked in the 1832 account is the same that we should ask: What is *my* standing before God?

Further Study

There are many scholarly, apologetic, and devotional works that explore Joseph Smith's first vision. In addition to those linked above, the following are some that I have used.

[Gospel Topics Essay: First Vision Accounts](#)

Joseph Smith's First Vision - A Guide to the Historical Accounts by Steven C. Harper

[The First Vision: A Joseph Smith Papers Podcast](#)

Rough Stone Rolling by Richard L. Bushman

FairMormon: [Joseph Smith's various accounts of the First Vision](#)

[Joseph Smith's First Vision in Historical Context: How a Historical Narrative became Theological](#) by Gregory A. Prince, Journal of Mormon History, 41(4), 74-94.