

followHim: A Come, Follow Me Podcast with Hank Smith and John Bytheway

EPISODE 2--PART 2: JOSEPH SMITH HISTORY

[Note: For additional information regarding the various First Vision Accounts, please go to:

<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/first-vision-accounts?lang=eng>

Or

<https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/site/accounts-of-the-first-vision>]

INTRODUCTION

Hank Smith

(00:07)

Lead us up to a beautiful clear day, early in the spring of 1820. 200 years ago.

Dr. Steven Harper

(00:14)

So he decides that he's going to act. The answer is not necessarily going to be in the words I'm reading on the page. The answer might be in doing what other people have done before me. The first revelation is if you ask wisdom, ask God, and Joseph says, "I decided I would give that a try." So he's going to act in great faith, right? It requires faith for him to try this out.

Hank Smith

(00:45)

We use this phrase in the Church "have faith." And I like what you're doing is an act of great faith because what we don't realize is when I kneel down at my bedside, that's faith. When I pick up the book to open it and read and ponder, that's faith. And sometimes we don't realize that having faith sometimes we think about, I think, is like the force. Like having faith--I just sit here and have faith. Whereas "act in faith" is a completely different thing.

John Bytheway

(01:10)

I think Elder Bednar was . . . 2008, a talk called "Ask in Faith" and he said, "Joseph's question was not which church is right, his question was which church should I join." It was the idea of action that you're talking about right there.

[<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2008/04/ask-in-faith?lang=eng>]

Dr. Steven Harper

(01:19)

Elder Bednar shaped my thinking on this point and his emphasis on the agency that Joseph is using here. The choice to believe that the testimony of James might be true. It could make a difference if I go into the woods and pray. That's faith. He goes to a private place, and he starts to pray, and he's immediately, "overwhelmed by an actual being from the unseen world, had such astonishing powers to bind my tongue, I couldn't speak." He thought he would be overwhelmed. "It seemed to me for a time as if I were doomed to sudden destruction."

["After I had retired to 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 seized upon by some power which entirely overcame me, and had such an 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" JSH 1:15].

IS ALL LOST?

Dr. Steven Harper

(01:56)

Now, if this were being mapped out on a storyboard, this is the point of the story where the bad guys have closed in, and all is lost. Tom Cruise is just about to drop off the cliff with the time bomb exploding. This is so much better than any of those stories. So much more is at stake here.

Hank Smith

(02:13)

I had a student particularly tell me once. She talked about her depression that she goes through, and she said, "This verse 15 is one of the closest places," she said, "that describes what I experience. I'm seized upon by this power, this depression, it overcomes me."

Dr. Steven Harper

(02:33)

Unseen but very real.

Hank Smith

(02:34)

"I can't talk about it. It has an astonishing influence." She said, "Thick darkness is the way to describe it." I'm not saying that all depression comes from the adversary. Please don't get me

wrong. There are many youth and adults out there who struggle with depression and anxiety. They can identify with that last part of verse 15, "Yeah, I felt something similar in my life. It's unseen, but man it is real." I've always emphasized those three words, for a time, "for a time."

It will end, and he lets us know it will end. He didn't know it at the time it was going to end, but I love those three words "for a time." This is just for a time you're going through this.

“FOR A TIME”

Dr. Steven Harper

(03:16)

I love that, Hank. That's insightful to me. I appreciate that. It makes me want to draw attention to the fact that what we're reading here is Joseph's factual memory, but it's also laced with interpretive memory. The factual memory is the kind he could have had when he walked out of the Grove. "I saw two personages" (JSH 1:17). They said these words, but the interpretive memory is the kind where he can say things like it seemed to me for a time as if I were doomed to sudden destruction.

[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!* (JSH 1:17)]

And he's going to go on later and say, "It seemed like I was Paul before Agrippa" (JSH 1:24). It felt like this. I've often thought then and since. And one of the reasons that the accounts of the Vision vary is because they have different interpretive memory woven into them. Just like you and I do.

SEEKERS DISCERN FACTS

John Bytheway

(04:09)

My students ask me about near-death experiences, and there are some really interesting things in some of those, but I always tell them to separate what they saw with how they interpreted it because that part we may know something more about because of Section 137 or 38 or something, but that's a great way to put it. Factual memory, interpretive memory.

Dr. Steven Harper

(04:33)

That's a Seeker's skill. A Seeker develops the ability to discern the difference between facts that are true no matter what perspective you choose and interpretation of those facts that depend

completely on the perspective that you choose. Maybe the most important thing in these first 26 verses is the first line or two of verse 16. Right. What do you do when the bad guy has closed in, the ultimate bad guy? The stakes are enormously high. Your eternal welfare is at stake, and you're in the dark night of the soul. Thick darkness has gathered around. It seems like you're doomed to sudden destruction.

Dr. Steven Harper
(05:11)

Joseph chose to exert, "All my powers to call upon God to deliver 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, not to something I was imagining, but to a very real power. Just then, God delivered me" (JSH 1:16).

Hank Smith
(05:36)

Yeah, verse 16. I'm going to label it the choice because he could quit, right, Steve? He could just lay down and be like, "I'm done, I'm done. Okay, okay. I don't want to know."

THE MOST CONSEQUENTIAL CHOICE

Dr. Steven Harper
(05:46)

Maybe on a smaller scale, but I think I do that all the time. And I often abandon myself. I often choose the easy way out. I often don't do the hard work of making the right choice. Here Joseph makes the right choice. This choice is the opening of the Restoration. He didn't know it then. He wouldn't know it for a long time after that. The Church, in a sense, wouldn't even know it until half a century after the fact when we finally canonized the First Vision. But when we look back, searching our past for the moment. What was the choice that was made that opened the Restoration. It's his choice? That's why I said at the beginning, this is the most consequential choice in history outside of the Savior's Atonement, outside of his choice to offer himself for us.

John Bytheway
(06:35)

I made a note of that. You call it massively consequential. I thought, yeah, massive consequences for the planet. I mean, this is amazing.

Hank Smith
(06:45)

Yeah. The three of us sitting here, that comes from this choice. This whole thing does.

[crosstalk 00:06:49]-

Dr. Steven Harper

(06:49)

Everybody listening to us.

John Bytheway

(06:48)

Yeah.

Dr. Steven Harper

(06:53)

And the fight against it. I mean, there's a huge, huge fight against the First Vision right now, as you all know, and there are casualties being taken. There's a war being waged. Why? Because there's so much at stake.

John Bytheway

(06:57)

It's massively consequential.

Hank Smith

(07:08)

I just had an idea that I would challenge parents, and I think I want to do this with my older teenagers is tell them my story and tell them my the moments of my decision. Like you said, "I didn't know it at the time, but as I look back in my life, there were moments of decision. They were massively consequential in my life, into my future, and to theirs as my children." I think this would be a great opportunity for moms and dads to sit down and say, "Let me tell you about one of my verse 16s where I had a choice to make."

John Bytheway

(07:43)

--a turning point.

Hank Smith

(07:40)

--And how God helped me.

John Bytheway

(07:46)

The moment where I was all in, "I mean exerting all my powers to call upon God," this is when I thought, "I am all in" (JSH 1:16).

Hank Smith

(07:53)

Yeah, because sometimes our kids look at us and go, "You were born with a shirt and tie. You never went through this." I was in the delivery room going, "Everyone gather around. We're

going to read some scripture." That's how my kids sometimes see me because they weren't around when I was in my own little 14-year-old time. Maybe obviously not as profound, but we've all had moments of decision that changed everything for us.

Dr. Steven Harper

(08:17)

If the problem just ramped up in verse 15 and early in 16, this is the resolution. And you can feel it. If you put monitors on people who are paying careful attention as they read this, you could probably see their heart rate change and their blood pressure change. And this resolution just provides the answer to Joseph's problem. He is delivered from the enemy which held him bound, and he sees two personages whose brightness and glory defile description. So we shouldn't expect Joseph in any of his accounts of the Vision to be able to do an adequate job. There's no way.

Dr. Steven Harper

(08:55)

After he first wrote the Vision himself in 1832, the very next thing he wrote in the same book was a letter, and in that letter, he prayed. He just sort of spilled his prayer out on the page. He said, "Lord, deliver me from the narrow prison of paper pen and ink and a crooked broken scattered and imperfect language." How do you write what defies all description? It can't be done.

[\[https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-william-w-phelps-27-november-1832/4\]](https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-william-w-phelps-27-november-1832/4)

Hank Smith

(09:17)

How do you describe the indescribable?

FIRST WORDS OF THE RESTORATION

Dr. Steven Harper

(09:19)

Yeah. So it bugs me a little when people want to hold Joseph Smith to a standard that neither they nor anybody else can probably meet. I love to tell my students and require them to . . . to think about what are the first revealed words of the Restoration. In the 1832 Account, it's, "Joseph, my son, thy sins are forgiven." And in this account, it is, "Joseph, this is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!" (JSH 1:17)

[\[https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/site/accounts-of-the-first-vision\]](https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/site/accounts-of-the-first-vision)

The first revealed words of the Restoration are God calling Joseph by his name.

Hank Smith

(09:51)

He doesn't write the word Joseph in here. We sometimes miss it. We think in the italics, "*This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!*" (JSH 1:17)

I really want everyone to see that Joseph, He knows your name. God knows my name. I think in that first word, he finds out something we all need to find out that God knows who we are.

Dr. Steven Harper

(10:09)

Joseph here thinks he's a literary failure, right? He started off this story by telling us, "Look, I barely had a chance to go to school. Don't hold me to high standards here." But if we were just noticing how powerfully he just juxtaposed the thick darkness with the relief that comes, it couldn't be done better. I don't think. Let's say here, though, that there's a big difference if he's telling the story than if he's writing the story.

1832 AUTOBIOGRAPHY ACCOUNT

Dr. Steven Harper

(10:39)

The 1832 Autobiography which is like six pages long and two sentences and misplaced modifiers. It's both beautiful, and it's messy. It's kind of a disaster. So that one is handwritten by Joseph, and the first thing he says in it too after he gives a grand introduction to it, he says, "I can't write. I never barely got to go to school. I was only instructed in the ground rules of reading, writing arithmetic. So don't please expect a lot."

[<https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/site/accounts-of-the-first-vision>]

When he writes, it's a painful and difficult thing for him to do. But when he just tells this story, it turns out like this. He can tell it in a way that is powerful and beautiful. I don't mean to diminish the written one he did either. That one's beautiful for its own reasons, but this document we're reading is unbelievably powerful. I want to make sure everybody knows in case there's any question. I believe this with my whole soul. I believe this story is true, and I'm really thrilled that it is because I'm in that story. I'm the person in this story with Joseph. Not as heroic as him, but it's even better for that reason. God rescues anxious teenagers, is what this tells me. He listens to us. He calls us by name. He sends his Only Begotten Son to save us. I love those things. I'm grateful for them.

Hank Smith

(11:57)

I think I've heard you say this before, Steve or one of your contemporaries. Joseph doesn't know where to go to get forgiveness of his sins. I know where to go to get forgiveness of my sins because of him, because of Joseph. So not only does he have to go through the similar process

I have to do, but he has to show me how this works and then how I can do it. So I appreciate him on both accounts. One, he's like me. Two, he's the trailblazer to what I have now because I know where to go.

Dr. Steven Harper

(12:25)

We know that there's some conflict potentially between verses 10 and 18, or at least they can be read that way. In verse 10, Joseph says, "I'd often said to myself, is one of these churches wrong? Who of these parties are right? Are they all wrong together?" If anyone's in. Right. Which isn't, "how shall I know it?" (JSH 1:10)

So he has often said that to himself. Now, verse 18 says that when he sees the two divine beings, he asks them, "Which of the churches is right because at this time it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong and which I should join." J(SH 1:18)

Hank Smith

(13:02)

There's definitely a conflict there with verse 10.

Dr. Steven Harper

(13:06)

There could be. I've read this stuff over and over as you have, and I've read all the other accounts over and over. I was one day reading them at lunchtime outside the Church History Library. It was this beautiful sunny day. I took them out with me. I wanted to see if there was something I was missing. I wanted to listen to Joseph again, and I was prayerful about it, and I read, read, read. I recognized something I'd never seen before that day, and that is that Joseph tries hard in his accounts to distinguish between what's happening in his mind and what's happening in his heart.

Once I saw that, I recognized that his dilemma--his big problem is--that he can't reconcile his head and his heart. How many of us have had that problem? That's really what it is. I mean, even the conflict between Methodism and Presbyterianism is one of mind and heart. So here in verse 10, Joseph says, "I had thought this in my head a thousand times. I had thought maybe they're all wrong. That's a terrible thought." (JSH 1:10)

He doesn't want to conclude that. That would be a terrible conclusion.

THE CREEDS

Dr. Steven Harper

(14:10)

So rather than conclude that, he wants to try to find out for sure. He doesn't want to decide that on his own, so he seeks a revelation--he seeks to know wisdom from God, and in that wisdom, he learns your thought was right. The Christian churches you have to choose from, they're all based on Neoplatonic philosophical creeds that really do a terrible job of describing the nature of God. As a result, they're an abomination to God.

So here God shows up and says, "That's not me. The creeds are not good biographical statements of who God is. I am different and here I am. I'm going to restore the real way of thinking about God through Joseph Smith."

I'm paraphrasing the whole Restoration here in a nutshell. Joseph here says in verse 18 now, "It had never entered into my heart" (JSH 1:18).

John Bytheway

(15:02)

I wasn't convicted in my heart about that. I thought about it, but . . .

Dr. Steven Harper

(15:08)

It's easy to, especially if we're already looking for a way to convict Joseph on cross-examination, right? It's easy to get him right there. "Aha, Joseph! I caught you in a lie."

But if our goal is to listen to him explain himself and if we'll do it over and over, then what you notice is that he's completely consistent on that point. He completely consistently, through all the accounts, paints a dilemma between his head and his heart that he can't himself reconcile without more revelation, without wisdom, and here he gets it.

Hank Smith

(15:42)

One thing I've loved is in verse 8, where he says, "It was impossible for a person as young as I was, so unacquainted with men and things, to come to any certain conclusion who was right and who was wrong." And here, just ten verses later, he's like, "It's not impossible for a person as young as I was," when you add the Lord in the mix. "I came to a very certain conclusion who was right and who was wrong" (JSH 1:8,18).

John Bytheway

(16:04)

Hey, Steve. I want to hear some more about . . . because I think this is so important. I've had my students ask me, "It sounds like Heavenly Father sounds mad," or "It sounds like the Savior sounds mad." Notice what's the abomination. It wasn't the people. There were good-hearted

people. It was the creeds. So give me another sentence or two about what those creeds were and why would those be singled out here in the First Vision. Those creeds are an abomination.

Dr. Steven Harper

(16:31)

I really appreciate the question, John, because none of us in this conversation have any desire to impugn Christians of any denomination.

Hank Smith

(16:41)

I remember actually hearing this as a missionary that, "Why would I listen to you. You think according to your prophet, I am an abomination. God hates me because of what I believe." I had never even read it that way, but that's how some have used it as almost a weapon against Joseph.

Dr. Steven Harper

(17:01)

The creeds are wrong about who God is. The creeds of Christianity are based on a Greek philosophical idea that ultimately, there is only one thing, and that's God. And everything else has come from God. That means that all of creation is out of nothing that you and I can't become like God. There's not a Heavenly Mother. Exaltation, right? In other words, all of the most beautiful things of the Restoration are impossible if your starting point is the creeds of Christianity.

The God of the creeds is not passable. He's not capable of anything that is human, including relationships or emotions, right? He is without body parts and passions. Well, the God of the First Vision is not like that. He knows Joseph's name. He has a Beloved Son. They can stand next to each other in the air. They can call Joseph by name, and Joseph says in his other accounts, "They filled me with joy unspeakable and for many days, I was filled with love."

[<https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/site/accounts-of-the-first-vision>]

Dr. Steven Harper

(18:14)

When we as latter-day saints are accused of not being Christian, that is true if your definition of Christian is "Someone who believes in the God of the Christian creeds." I emphatically don't. This past Sunday. I spent two hours in an evangelical church in Gainesville, Florida, and then went to a soccer meeting. I loved it. I loved every minute of it. It was edified. There was beautiful truth taught. I've fellowshiped with other Christians. So I don't wish to be misunderstood as somebody who attacks Christianity or other Christians. I just want to say that there is great good news that the Restoration of the gospel fixes what went wrong when our apostles were all gone, and all we had left was some philosophers, and all they had to work with was some Greek philosophical ideas. And what that led to was this idea that God is just one.

Dr. Steven Harper
(19:15)

Therefore, creation couldn't have been by God out of pre-existing materials, including intelligence and element. And therefore, there's not such a thing as agency, the way that the Restored Gospel has it. There's no possibility for exaltation and being with families forever and becoming like God. So all the things I love most about the Restoration are at stake in whether the creeds are right or wrong.

Hank Smith
(19:38)

In Jacob 5, the Lord says, "I see a bunch of fruit on the trees and none of it is good. It doesn't produce what I want. I want exalted children and the creeds cannot produce exalted children." Just in my "Christ and the Everlasting Gospel Class" at BYU, I take my students through the creation of the Nicene Creed. Probably the most important of all the creeds, the most pivotal of all the creeds, and where it kind of goes off the rails. And what it was, it was really an argument between two church fathers. Arius and Alexander had differing views about Christ and his divinity, and it was a fight between the two.

[<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Arianism>]

Hank Smith
(20:14)

So in that Nicene Creed, the first . . . That initial Nicene Creed where it goes off the rails is called anti-Arianism--where Alexander just wanted to beat Arius. It wasn't about scripture. It wasn't about getting the correct view. It was about making sure that Arius is out. Again, we're not anti-Christian by any means, but there is some difficulty in the . . . that creedal history.

John Bytheway
(20:40)

Well, I like the way Steve said it. "We don't view God through the lens of the creeds." And I think just for our listeners, go find Elder Jeffrey R. Holland's talk. I think it's called "The Only True God and Jesus Christ Whom Thou Hast Sent."

[<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2007/10/the-only-true-god-and-jesus-christ-whom-he-hath-sent?lang=eng>]

It is a great Conference-level talk about the creeds--about what they are--about the possibility of . . . I mean, in John, "This is life eternal that they might know the only true God." And not a creed that says he's not knowable, but John says you can know him. "And Jesus Christ whom He has sent." He talks about the creeds a little bit, just briefly, and I think that one word most teenagers won't know creeds. A lot of my students don't know creeds and to say-

Dr. Steven Harper
(21:21)

Except from the Rocky movies.

John Bytheway

(21:23)

Yeah, that's right. So that's what he said in [verse] 19 was an abomination. It was the creed. Stephen Covey, who I just think was from another planet, that guy was so brilliant. He just made this offhand comment once that if you look at the articles of faith, it looks like the Articles of Faith came in the same order in which things were corrupted, and the nature of God is the first Article of Faith. And I thought, "Wow, that's true." The first thing Joseph needed to know that he learned here, "Wow, God is real. He called me by name," and as you said, Steve, "My soul was filled with love, and for many days I could rejoice," from that other account. How interesting that they unfold in an order, the Articles of Faith even.

TELL YOUR STORY

Hank Smith

(22:06)

Kids love to hear stories. Little kids, older kids, they love to hear stories, especially if they're about their parents. I think if you could tell your children a few times where you found out, God knew your name, who you were. To me, that's something that sits in them and has impact.

Dr. Steven Harper

(22:23)

There's a lot of research showing that families where the parents have told their story and the kind that you're talking about, those are stronger families. That was like Joseph Smith's family. His mom told the story.

Hank Smith

(22:35)

Now, Steve, I wanted to ask you about something. You've said things like 1832 Autobiography. You've said the term other accounts. There might be someone listening, "What are you talking about?" Just give us a brief overview of, I've heard you call it, the four or five accounts. Just depending on how you define "account."

[<https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/articles/primary-accounts-of-first-vision>]

THE ACCOUNTS OF THE FIRST VISION

Dr. Steven Harper

(22:54)

All right. I'm a little worried about going all the way to Nerdville here.

Hank Smith

(23:04)

This is the time to go to Nerdville. This is it. The only ones who are still with us are the ones who are going, "I want everything. I want to be Steve Harper."

John Bytheway

(23:20)

The only ones who are still with us. Yeah.

Dr. Steven Harper

(23:14))

In the Book of Acts, there are three accounts of Paul's marvelous conversion experience or a couple in the Book of Acts and one later in his letters, I should say, and none of them are alike. None of them match exactly. And some of them have conflicting details. Of course, everybody knows there are four Gospels, but by four different authors. But here we have presumably Paul as our source of these three, the original knowledge. If we can realize that that's not a reason to throw Paul's conversion out, but rather we study those accounts and learn everything we can from them.

[<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/nt/acts/1?lang=eng>]

Dr. Steven Harper

(23:53)

The same thing is true in the Book of Mormon. Right. There are multiple accounts of Alma's conversion.

[Mosiah 26-8: <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/bofm/mosiah/26?lang=eng>

and

Alma 36: <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/bofm/alma/36?lang=eng>]

They all come from him. Sometimes he tells it short, sometimes he tells it long. He tells it for different reasons, and he tells it in different present contexts. Well, that's true for Joseph Smith too. Joseph told his First Vision repeatedly. It got recorded for us at least four times in primary accounts. Primary meaning it was recorded by Joseph or somebody who was working under his direction to record it as he told the story.

Dr. Steven Harper

(24:27)

The earliest of those is twelve years after the Vision in 1832, and the latest one is in 1842. It's what we sometimes call the Wentworth Letter. Between that, there was the one that we know best, the 1838 account. Joseph started it in 1838, then spent the winter in jail at Liberty,

Missouri, then finished it in 1839, and it was published in the Church's newspaper in 1842 and now is in our Pearl of Great Price.

Hank Smith

(24:58)

That's the one we've been reading today.

Dr. Steven Harper

(25:00)

That's the one we're looking at. It got put into the Pearl of Great Price in 1851, and Pearl of Great Price got made into scripture by the saints in the General Conference in 1880. So it's by far the best-known account. It's the most complete one. It's the one Joseph felt most comfortable sending out to the world. The earliest one that we've been referring to, the 1832 Autobiography--he suppressed that. He didn't share it with people. I think he didn't like it. As I told you, it's kind of a rough literary product. I find it beautiful for all of its candor and raw access to Joseph's teenage self. But I think he looked at it and thought, "The last thing I want is my raw teenage self and my terrible grammar out there in front of the whole world to look at."

Dr. Steven Harper

(25:49)

So the things I want most, probably prompted him to say, "Oh, I'm going to throw that in the garbage can and get somebody smarter than me to help me with this writing project," which is what he always did after that. He didn't throw in the garbage can, thankfully.

Hank Smith

(26:02)

But you love the 1832 Account. I've heard you talk about it.

Dr. Steven Harper

(26:09)

Yeah, I love them all. I have four favorite accounts of the First Vision. And besides that, there are five secondary ones. That means somebody who Joseph told the story to--wrote it during his lifetime. A couple of apostles who published it in Europe. Orson Pratt in Scotland and Orson Hyde in Germany on their missions. A journal entry by Levi Richards. A newspaper account by a fellow named David White. A Latter-day Saint named Alexander Neibaur recorded in his journal just a month before Joseph was killed.

John Bytheway

(26:38)

Okay. Four primary accounts, five, what'd you call them secondary accounts?

Dr. Steven Harper

(26:35)

Secondary accounts.

John Bytheway

(26:42)

Okay, awesome. Keep going.

Hank Smith

(26:45)

Four primary--All I got was two written down. 1832, the rough one. 1838-39, the one we have.

Dr. Steven Harper

(26:51)

There are two others, and they are an 1835 journal entry. Joseph was telling a visitor who had come to see him about the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, and he said, "The first thing that happened in that series of events was the first vision." So this is a great example of interpretive memory. You don't know that your First Vision is your First Vision until you've had subsequent visions. You don't call World War I, World War I until after World War II.

John Bytheway

(27:19)

Until after World War II.

Dr. Steven Harper

(27:22)

So Joseph doesn't come home from the Grove and say, "Mom, Dad, I just had my First Vision. When will supper be ready?" So the first time he uses the word first to describe the Vision is in telling this fellow from the East in November of 1835. So 15 years or so after the Vision, he says, "Yeah, the Book of Mormon came forth this way. The first thing that happened is, "I was worried about my soul. I went to the woods to pray. I saw personage, he revealed another personage, and they told me that the churches were not theirs, and they filled me with joy unspeakable, said that I'd been forgiven of my sins."

Dr. Steven Harper

(27:59)

It's a beautiful, fast-moving account. It bears evidence that Joseph was more comfortable telling the story when he was orally doing it than when he was trying to be the writer himself. What I'm talking about now is what we call the 1835 Account, the journal entry, and the best place to get at these is at the Church's Gospel Topics essay titled First Vision Accounts, which has links to all these. So the best place to get at the raw documents themselves is josephsmithpapers.org, and that'll be second or third on your list if you Google First Vision Accounts. And folks should also know these are available in their Gospel Library app, in the Church History part: First Vision.

[<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/first-vision-accounts?lang=eng>

Or

<https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/site/accounts-of-the-first-vision>

Or

<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/pages/mobileapps?lang=eng>

Hank Smith

(28:37)

Absolutely, yeah. Very transparent. Then what's the fourth?

Dr. Steven Harper

(28:43)

In 1842, which is what we call the Wentworth Letter. This is a letter to a newspaper editor from Chicago who wrote Joseph saying, "Hey, a buddy of mine is writing a history of New Hampshire, and we want to tell your story. It was New Hampshire where Joseph was a kid--had his leg surgery. Joseph was becoming interesting and curious . . . curiosity. So, a good way to sell books would be to include stuff like that and wanted to tell his story. That was a breath of fresh air to Joseph. One major reason there are differences in the accounts is that Joseph's present circumstances when he told the story had a big influence on how the story got told.

Dr. Steven Harper

(29:23)

So you'll notice in the one we read in the Pearl of Great Price that it is defensive, and this comes after the worst year of Joseph's life: Liberty Jail, Extermination Order, Exile from Missouri. All that. Then you write your history. The way you're going to write it is, "owing to the many reports, put in circulation by evil dispose and designing people."

I'm going to tell you the truth. I'm going to tell you the truth of hot persecution and bitter persecution. And I've been persecuted since I was an infant. And it all started a few days after the First Vision when that minister told me was all of the devil.

Hank Smith

(29:55)

That makes perfect sense. He says, "I knew it. I knew that God knew it and I could not deny it." I'm not going to. Or he says, "They did, in reality, speak to me," because you could tell people are saying, you made it up. It's in reality. It's defensive.

Dr. Steven Harper

(30:12)

Some people can read it and say, "Boy, Joseph was pretty uptight that day." Well, yeah, he was. He'd just been through the crappiest year of his life. And people were hating him and driving him, and his family, and his people. Robbing them of their property, tarring and feathering them, incarcerating them in jail, et cetera because of his testimony of the Restored Gospel. So he could either cave in and say, "Oh, it's all a fake." Or he could be defensive and resolute. In the face of that persecution, that worst year of his life, he decided to be resolute. And that's why that one has the tone that it has.

Dr. Steven Harper

(30:50)

It may even contribute to, "Oh, their creeds are an abomination. Their professors are all corrupt." In the 1842 Account, where he's writing to a newspaper editor, who's actually asking for Joseph to tell his own story, Joseph paraphrases the father and the son saying, "They told me that all the churches were believing in incorrect doctrines and that none of them was his church."

John Bytheway

(31:02)

A little softer.

Dr. Steven Harper

(31:12)

Same story but definitely a different tone to it, softer. Maybe even unconsciously so. I don't know how much Joseph thought. I should be really defensive and sound like I'm spitting venom or if that's just the way it happened because of the year of his life.

Hank Smith

(31:29)

This last year, 2020, I've been a little more defensive about just in my explanations of things, just because it's been a hard year. I mean, wouldn't it be great as a missionary. I use this quote probably every class that I teach is, "It's good to be faithful. It's better to be faithful and competent." And as a missionary, when someone says, "Well, Joseph Smith, duh, duh, duh, duh, duh." To be able to say, "Let me tell you a little bit about when he wrote that, what he was going through. Let me show you a different account where he's not so defensive." It's a tool for conversion. It's a tool for explaining.

Dr. Steven Harper

(32:06)

I think so too. To make the multiple accounts of the First Vision, a weapon against Joseph and the Vision, you have to be willing to make some assumptions. And if people will just test their assumptions, all of a sudden, it becomes a much less potent weapon. Why would I assume there shouldn't be multiple accounts of something so spectacular? I mean, there are of Paul's conversion--of Alma's. Why not Joseph's? Yeah, but they're different. Why wouldn't they be? Why would I assume they would be? Joseph didn't write him down for a long time. Why would I assume that he would? This is a guy who tells me the first time he puts his pen to paper, in both of his autobiographies, he tells me, "I don't write. I'm not well educated. It's a miracle I'm writing this at all."

Not that it took me so long. So when we test our assumptions, we find that really they're nothing more than what we imagine history should be like instead of listening to somebody who was actually there. The only eyewitness in the Grove tells us what it really was like.

INTERROGATE YOUR ASSUMPTIONS

Hank Smith

(33:08)

If I'm going to criticize Joseph, "Well, you should have written it down." He might turn to me and say, "How much have you written down?" "Well, I'm not the same. I'm not the prophet." Sometimes we think of people in history as if they know the future like, "Well, now, I've got to go and do because we're going to end up in Salt Lake with the Conference Center and the Jazz so I've got to get all this going."

When President Uchtdorf said, "Doubt your doubts before you doubt your faith," in my mind, he might... I could take that as analyze your assumptions.

[<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2013/10/come-join-with-us?lang=eng>]

Dr. Steven Harper

(33:38)

Interrogate your assumptions. First of all, identify them. Don't confuse assumptions with facts. Facts--I tell my students--facts are something that everyone . . . that's verifiable no matter what perspective you choose. An assumption is something that just depends entirely on the perspective you choose. First of all, people need to identify their assumptions and then interrogate them and see if they're really sound. Can they withstand careful scrutiny?

Hank Smith

(34:06)

I always go to Luke 24, where the two apostles say, "Well, we thought he was the Messiah, but he wasn't because such and such didn't happen." That's all based on--

[<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/nt/luke/24?lang=eng>]

Dr. Steven Harper

(34:15)

--Assumptions.

Hank Smith

(34:16)

. . . assumptions, right? And the Lord responds with, "You fools." That is a terrible assumption. And he corrects their assumptions, and they take it. So I've often told my students and others saying, "Take your assumptions to the Lord and let Him correct them." He probably will say, "That's a bad assumption." One woman said to me once, she said, "Don't you think if the Church were true, it would be bigger?" And I said, "Why would you think that?" And she said, "Well, wouldn't you assume that if the Church were true, it would be bigger?" And I said, "Well, not really. In the scriptures, I've seen Nephi say, 'I saw the saints of God, they were few.' The

scriptures don't really give that assumption. Where did you get it?" She really just said, she just kind of told me, "I would just figured."

Dr. Steven Harper
(35:00)

If you base your faith on assumptions, it will be easily overturned because your assumptions are nothing more than what you imagine. They have no basis in revelation, history, et cetera. And note, Hank, you said "if," right? That assumption started with an if.

Hank Smith
(35:18)
If--yeah.

Dr. Steven Harper
(35:19)

I call that Hypothetical History--a dreadful way to do history. "If this, then wouldn't that be?" No, not necessarily.

Hank Smith
(35:27)

I think I've heard you say before, "Well if I had the First Vision, I would go home and immediately tell my family." Would you? Would Joseph? Why would you expect Joseph to hurry-- go home and tell his family? I'd be scared to tell anyone, right? I'd probably keep things close to the vest going that people are going to think I'm nuts.

Dr. Steven Harper
(35:45)

The Bible tells us that "Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:19)

[\[https://biblehub.com/luke/2-19.htm\]](https://biblehub.com/luke/2-19.htm)

I think Joseph tells the Methodist minister excitedly and gets totally rejected (JSH 1:21). And then I think he clams up and doesn't tell anybody else for a good while.

John Bytheway
(36:00)

It breaks my heart to think of Joseph in Liberty [Jail] in 1838, thinking, "Everybody is suffering because of this." And that's the time you're saying, "Okay, never mind. Made it all up." Right.

Dr. Steven Harper
(36:15)
Yeah.

John Bytheway

(36:16)

We talked about a First Vision, but so many of Joseph's visions later were shared visions. I just think that's amazing and so validating that, "Hey, Sidney. You were there. Oliver, you were there." And you now have a burden to share what you've seen as well.

Hank Smith

(36:33)

I just feel like I'm getting to know him, and I feel for him. He said Moroni told him that his name would be known for good and evil" (JSH 1:33).

And Steve, you said there's a war against the First Vision. But I want to be on the other side. I want to be the one speaking the good. I want to publicly announce it. "I'm standing by this guy!"

John Bytheway

(36:54)

I'm so glad. I'm so glad there's another account where he adds a detail of "my soul was filled with love and for many days I could rejoice." I love that. I love the account where he says, "I thought the forest would be consumed talking about the brightness and the..." Thank you for those extra details, especially the part of being filled with love because that just makes sense to me. You're in the presence of God. He calls you by name. What is that going to do to you to have this glorious being look at you and call you by name? I think it happened to Moses too. "Now, I know that man is nothing. I never suppose that." I love that those extra details are available.

TESTIMONY OF DR. STEVEN HARPER

Hank Smith

(37:34)

If someone said, "Hey, I found another account of Alma's conversion story written by him," I'd be, "Wait, what? What else can I learn about it?" I wouldn't go, "Well, he didn't tell that the same." I'd be so excited about it. Steve, to finish, I think it really helps Latter-day Saints. At least it helps me to hear people who are as educated as you, and I think education has its place, educated who you know everything that the people who hate Joseph Smith. You know everything, and I want to know how you feel about Joseph and what how you feel about the Restoration?

Dr. Steven Harper

(38:10)

Well, I think the word I that I associate with this question is *marvel*. I marvel at Joseph. I marvel at what the Lord did through Joseph. Some people think this sort of love for Joseph Smith. I honestly could not care less about Joseph Smith if all he was an upstate farmer in New York. There were a hundred others there by the same name at the same time. I'm not even kidding about that. Why are we not talking about them? Because they didn't have a First Vision. They

didn't translate the Book of Mormon. How in the world is Joseph Smith different than them, right?

Dr. Steven Harper
(38:55)

If we were to ask him, he'd say, "I was an obscure boy. I wasn't different than them. I was no one of consequence." But in hindsight, he knew, and we know that he was, right? He asked of God in great faith, and God opened the heavens on him, not just for him, but for all of us, right? There were a lot of other people in his time and place and before and since who have had just as sincere a heart, just as deep of faith, and just as desirous to know God's will for them and whether God loved them or not. And Joseph's answer is their answer too. It's my answer too.

Dr. Steven Harper
(39:37)

I love him because the Lord loved him and opened the heavens upon him, and he loved the Lord. I love Joseph Smith because he didn't back out in those most difficult times of his life. And as you both know, he said later in his life, "If I didn't know better, I would back out. This is hard. But I can't back out. He said, "I have no doubt of the truth." Well, there have been other people who've had no doubt of the truth and backed out, and that tells you something about this kid that God hand-picked. He does not back out when the going gets unbelievably tough.

Dr. Steven Harper
(40:22)

So the best thing to me about Joseph Smith is he undaunted. You cannot keep him down. You will have to kill him, but you won't be able to do that until his work is done. In 1838, he learned by revelation that the Lord would make sure he lived at least five more years. I joked earlier about a Tom Cruise movie where you set the time bomb ticking and all that at the end. Joseph Smith's life is more interesting and exciting than that and so much more consequential. He had a ticking clock by January 1838, and he knew that he had to get the priesthood keys implemented. Israel is beginning to be gathered.

Dr. Steven Harper
(41:07)

The Saints endowed and sealed and all of those ordinances into the hands of the Apostles and their wives before he could be killed. And he did that. He barely did it. And once he got that work done, he said, "They can kill me now. In fact, it'll be a relief. I feel as light as a cork."

[\[https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/teachings-joseph-smith/chapter-46?lang=eng\]](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/teachings-joseph-smith/chapter-46?lang=eng)

He said the day he finished that work and he was back to that native, cheery temperament. But the most intense times of Joseph's life, that native cheery temperament was suppressed by his anxieties, his worries, his workload, the pressures that were on him.

Dr. Steven Harper

(41:49)

I love that he was willing to shoulder that load, the load of the Restoration. I don't care a lick for Joseph Smith, the farmer. I love Joseph Smith, the prophet. Anybody listening to this can tell I don't think of him as perfect. If he were perfect, I'd be so much less interested in him. I couldn't relate to him. The magic of him for me is that he's like me in a sense. He has the same teenage concerns, and he shows me the way to find a resolution to them. Joseph Smith reveals Christ.

Dr. Steven Harper

(42:25)

He revealed Christ in the Book of Mormon more powerfully and potently than anybody had ever done before. He revealed Christ more powerfully and potently through his revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants than anybody had ever done before. He revealed the plan of salvation more clearly and completely than anyone had ever done before, and he didn't have as much education as I did when I graduated from the Sixth Grade.

Dr. Steven Harper

(42:41)

He translated the Book of Mormon in a single spring between the 7th day of April and the last day of June 1829. Everybody who watched him do it marveled and knew that he did it by the gift and power of God. People since have decided that he didn't write--that he did it in this way or that way or somebody else did it--not him. Every shred of evidence in the historical record says that he did it in a single spring, dictating it almost entirely to Oliver Cowdery, who wrote it as Joseph dictated it by the gift and power of God.

Dr. Steven Harper

(43:23)

So these are the reasons why I have faith in him, why I love him. We could point out all kinds of flaws. We could point out all kinds of controversies and complexities. I'm not ignorant of those things, and I'm not denying those things, but what I want people to make sure they understand is what he did, and that can be boiled down best by saying the first revealed words of the Restoration are, "Joseph, my son, thy sins are forgiven thee." I hear that as, "Steven, my son, your sins can be forgiven you," on the exact same terms and conditions. And so can everyone else's.

Dr. Steven Harper

(44:04)

Who else solves the soteriological problem of Christianity, where there are three truths that are irreconcilable. God loves his children. Salvation is available through willing acceptance of the Atonement of Christ, and many, many, many people live and die and never hear of Christ or accept. That's only a problem because of the Apostasy because in about the Fourth Century of the Christian Era, philosophers made death the deadline that determined salvation.

Dr. Steven Harper

(44:34)

Joseph Smith obliterated that with . . . well, the Lord did through him. Right. And there are others. Right. The problem of suffering. Who else gives us a better resolution to the problem of suffering than the Lord does through Joseph Smith? So anyway, you can tell that I'm excited about this, and the first Vision is the beginning of it all. And I'm really thrilled that we're studying this year the work the Savior did through that kid that he called in the spring of 1820.

John Bytheway
(45:03)

I think this has been great. I'm so fired up. Thank you, Steve.

Dr. Steven Harper

Thank you, both. I really appreciate what you're doing.

Hank Smith

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