



Photograph of the Sacred Grove by George Edward Anderson, 1907. Courtesy Church History Museum.

# The First Vision and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

*Elder LeGrand R. Curtis Jr.*

I am grateful for the opportunity to be here with you. As was mentioned, I am the Church Historian and Recorder of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In our Church, that position is an ecclesiastical calling. While I oversee the Church History Department—which is filled with trained historians, librarians, archivists, and other professionals—my own training is as a lawyer, and prior to being called to full-time church service as a General Authority, I practiced law for several years. My service as a General Authority has included being in the presidency of the Church’s Africa West Area and in different capacities at Church headquarters, including in the department that supervises the production of curriculum and other programs for our Church members. In this presentation, I will draw on those experiences, and others, to reflect on Joseph Smith’s 1820 vision of God the Father and Jesus Christ, commonly known as the First Vision. I am not an academic by training, but I hope that I can share some things in this academic setting that will help you understand what we view to be the theological implications of the First Vision and how we share the First Vision with others.

For Latter-day Saints, the fundamental theological truth conveyed by the First Vision is that the heavens are open and that those who lack wisdom can inquire of God and receive God’s answers. As individuals, we believe that this is a profound pattern for how we can receive revelation for our own lives. Also, as a community of believers, we place particular importance on the idea of prophets. To understand the role of the First Vision in our church, it is helpful to start in the Bible. The prophet Amos wrote, “Surely the Lord God will do nothing, but he

revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets” (Amos 3:7). What we see throughout the Old Testament is God doing just that: revealing his word through those chosen to be his prophets. It started with God speaking to Adam as recorded in Genesis (Gen. 2:16–17; 3:9–19) and continued right up through Malachi where that last Old Testament prophet delivered “the word of the Lord to Israel” (Mal. 1:1).<sup>1</sup> The revelations that came to Old Testament prophets came from God in different ways at different times. These included dreams (Gen. 28:12–15; 1 Kgs. 3:5; Dan. 7:1); writing on tablets (Ex. 34:4; Deut. 10:4); the spoken word (Ex. 19:19; Deut. 5:24; 1 Sam. 3:1–8), including a “still, small voice” (1 Kgs. 19:12); impressions to the mind or heart (Ex. 4:15; Jer. 4:19); and other ways. But the most significant of those ways is the personal appearance of God to prophets. Jacob proclaimed, “I have seen God face to face” (Gen. 32:30). The Old Testament uses that same “face to face” language to describe some of Moses’s revelatory experiences, including this one: “And the Lord spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend” (Ex. 33:11; see also Num. 14:14 and Deut. 34:10). Moses was not the last Old Testament prophet to have such encounters with God. For example, as a youth, Samuel had the Lord come and talk to him (1 Sam. 3:10–14). Isaiah, Jeremiah, and others had similar experiences (see Isa. 6:1; Jer. 31:3; and Amos 9:1).

These appearances of God to man did not end with Old Testament times. They also took place in the days of the Apostles of the New Testament. There are, of course, the multiple appearances of the Lord Jesus Christ to his Apostles and others shortly after his Resurrection (see Matt. 28:18; Luke 24:13–32, 36–44; and John 20:19, 26–28; 21:1–14). Jesus Christ also appeared to Saul of Tarsus (later called Paul) on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1–6) and multiple times thereafter (Acts 18:9; 22:17–21; 23:11; 1 Cor. 15:8). There are other appearances of God to persons recorded in the New Testament, including the vision where Stephen was filled with the Holy Ghost and saw God “and Jesus standing on the right hand of God” (Acts 7:55–56; see also 1 Cor. 15:6–8 and Rev. 19:11–16).

Thus, the vision that Joseph Smith experienced in 1820 fits into the pattern of God’s dealings with his children as described in the Bible. As members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, we accept the Bible as the word of God. We also accept the truth of the Bible’s prophecies of a general apostasy (Amos 8:11–12; 2 Thes. 2:1–3;

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1. Throughout the book of Malachi, the prophet quotes God saying, “saith the Lord” or similar words. For examples, see Malachi 1:2, 4, 8, 9, 11, 13; 2:8; 3:5, 11–13, 17; 4:1, 3.

1 Tim. 4:1–2; 2 Tim. 4:3–4) and then a restoration of God’s true church on the earth (Isa. 29:14; Dan. 2:44; Acts 3:21; Eph. 1:10; Rev. 14:6). For us, Joseph Smith’s First Vision was the beginning of the promised “times of refreshing” and “restitution of all things” prophesied by the Apostle Peter (Acts 3:19, 21).

So, the First Vision is important because it begins this restoration. Later revelations would bring the authority of the priesthood, additional scripture, ordinances (including temple ordinances), doctrinal principles, and much more.<sup>2</sup>

Although the First Vision is just the beginning of the Restoration, it still has important implications for Latter-day Saint theology. First, it shows us that God does hear and answer prayers asked with faith, just as James 1:5 states.<sup>3</sup>

Second, we learn from the First Vision that God is willing to reveal his will to mortals, just as he did in Bible times. Additional revelations lay ahead for Joseph and the Church, but the First Vision shows that just as God spoke face to face with Moses, he can speak face to face with a prophet in modern times.

Third, the First Vision teaches us much about the nature of God. Just as Stephen was shown the distinctness of the three members of the Godhead through his vision, Joseph was allowed to learn the same thing through his vision.<sup>4</sup> Joseph also learned that God is merciful and would forgive the sins of the truly penitent.<sup>5</sup> He learned that such forgiveness is possible because of Christ’s suffering for mankind’s sins.<sup>6</sup>

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2. For example, see Joseph Smith—History 1:72; and Doctrine and Covenants 110; 124:40. The Doctrine and Covenants was first published in 1835 and contains over 130 revelations received by Joseph Smith during his lifetime.

3. James 1:5 states, “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.”

4. Like Stephen, Joseph was filled with the Holy Ghost as he saw God the Father and Jesus Christ as separate, distinct personages. Joseph Smith—History 1:17; “Journal, 1835–1836,” 24, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed March 20, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-1835-1836/25>; Joseph Smith, “Church History,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 9 (March 1, 1842): 707.

5. “History, circa Summer 1832,” 3, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed March 20, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-summer-1832/3>; Orson Pratt, *A[n] Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions, and of the Late Discovery of Ancient American Records* (Edinburgh: Ballantyne and Hughes, 1840), 5.

6. “Revelation, circa Summer 1829 [D&C 19],” 40, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed March 20, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-circa-summer-1829-dc-19/2>; Doctrine and Covenants 19:16–19.

Fourth, through the First Vision, Joseph learned the reality of the prophesied general apostasy and that the fulness of the gospel would be restored.<sup>7</sup> Joseph learned directly from God that he was not to join any of the churches then existing on earth, but instead he was to wait for the promised fulness of the gospel (JS–H 1:19–20). That learning foreshadowed what would become Joseph’s lifework: to be an instrument in God’s hands in accomplishing the restoration of God’s true Church.

The First Vision was the first of many revelations received by Joseph Smith. Those revelations inform what we do in the Church today. On the day that the Church was organized in 1830, Joseph Smith received a revelation that started, “Behold, there shall be a record kept among you” (D&C 21:1). Since that time, Latter-day Saints have taken seriously what we regard as a divine charge to keep a record. In the Church History Department, we do this by collecting materials concerning our history,<sup>8</sup> preserving those materials,<sup>9</sup> and sharing what has been collected and preserved.<sup>10</sup>

So, how does The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints share the First Vision? We do it in a variety of ways. Let me mention eight of them.

1. Joseph Smith’s 1838 account of the First Vision is included in *The Pearl of Great Price*, one of the three books, in addition to the Bible, that Latter-day Saints accept as holy scripture. The story of the First Vision is

7. Joseph Smith—History 1:33; Pratt, *Several Remarkable Visions*, 5.

8. The Church History Department collects information concerning the history of the Church—with respect to both past happenings and current events. This means that we collect documents, photographs, audiovisual recordings, art, artifacts, reports of Church units and departments, and numerous other items from across the globe. We also record oral histories with members of the Church throughout the world.

9. The Church History Department seeks to follow the best professional practices in preserving historically significant material that documents our history. In addition to preserving the original item, we also digitize and migrate copies to more modern formats.

10. The Church History Department shares the history that we have collected and preserved in various ways. We operate a large library, where materials can be accessed both in person and online. We have a publications division that writes and publishes not only historical pieces but also key document collections such as *The Joseph Smith Papers*. We maintain historic sites where many of the important events of our history took place and where those events are commemorated and interpreted in their historical context. We operate a museum where visitors can learn more about our history through artifacts, exhibits, media, and art. We have a website where historical matters may be explored in depth. We produce videos and podcasts that discuss different aspects of our history. In these many enterprises, we seek to fulfill two standards: First, we strive to do our work in a way that would be pleasing to God and true to the divine commission we believe we have received to be a record-keeping people. And second, we follow the best professional practices of various disciplines from documentary editing to curating museums to digital preservation.

thus studied as scripture, and it is readily available to anyone with access to our Church's books of scripture. The Pearl of Great Price is currently available in sixty-five languages and, like all our scriptures, is available free both online and in the Gospel Library app.

2. In the early days of the Church, missionaries typically introduced the restored gospel by telling about the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. The publication of the Book of Mormon has remained important, but over time emphasis has also been given to the First Vision. In the second half of the nineteenth century, as agnosticism and atheism spread across the Western world, teaching about the First Vision increased in importance. It was viewed as an important part of our ministry that we testify that God had personally appeared to a modern prophet.<sup>11</sup> The First Vision was included in some tracts used by missionaries early on, including some written by Apostles Orson Hyde and Orson Pratt during Joseph Smith's life. Around 1910, the 1838 recitation of the First Vision was published as a stand-alone pamphlet that was distributed in several of the Church's missions.<sup>12</sup> Potential converts to the Church are told the story of the First Vision, and many proclaim that their conversion to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints began with the spiritual feelings they encountered when they first heard or read about the First Vision. Full-time missionaries share the story with millions of people, in their own language, every year. That is often done the first time someone encounters the missionaries.

As a young missionary in Italy, I shared this account over and over, both by reciting the experience and by giving a copy of the Joseph Smith pamphlet to those we taught. I have feelings of sacredness as I remember standing in piazzas or sitting in people's homes and telling them about the First Vision. Italian after Italian felt the power of that event. During the years that I spent in West Africa, I found that the First Vision was also important to the conversion of the Church members there. For example, in 1964 a Ghanaian by the name of Joseph William "Billy" Johnson was given some Latter-day Saint literature, including the Joseph Smith pamphlet. Johnson wrote, "I read the testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith, and I believed that testimony. I believed it was

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11. James B. Allen, "Emergence of a Fundamental: The Expanding Role of Joseph Smith's First Vision in Mormon Religious Thought," *Journal of Mormon History* 7 (1980): 43–61.

12. *The Prophet Joseph Smith Tells His Own Story: A Brief History of the Early Visions of the Prophet and the Rise and Progress of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (New York: Eastern States Mission, circa 1910).

a great message for the whole world.”<sup>13</sup> Billy Johnson sought to have Latter-day Saint missionaries sent to Ghana, but none came until 1978. While he waited, Billy Johnson spread the Latter-day Saint message and helped establish many congregations of believers who followed the principles he found in the Joseph Smith pamphlet and other literature of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He was baptized, with many others, in 1978 on the first day that Latter-day Saint baptisms were performed in Ghana. He became a leader of the Church in Ghana and was a devoted member of the Church until his death in 2012.<sup>14</sup> In 1984, another Ghanaian, Freebody Mensah, was first exposed to the Latter-day Saint faith by two pamphlets, including *The Joseph Smith Story*. He wrote, “I was spellbound after reading, and could not sleep the whole night.” The next morning, he went back to the member of the Church who had given him the pamphlets and asked for more information. He was baptized a month later and, over his life, has served in important leadership positions in the Church.<sup>15</sup>

Africans are not the only people to be impacted powerfully by Joseph Smith’s recitation of his vision. For example, Argentinian Rubén V. Alliaud described his first encounter with the First Vision in these words: “All my life I have been a very rational person, who needs to analyze everything in logical terms and in all directions. However, I remember very well the first time I read about the First Vision. When I finished, there was no place for doubt. It was true, it was all true! Surprisingly there were no other questions or concerns. . . . The knowledge of the First Vision impacted my life in such a way that it changed the course of it forever. I was never the same.”<sup>16</sup> Rubén Alliaud is now serving as a General Authority Seventy in the Church.

Arthur Henry King, a British scholar who converted to the Church and later taught at Brigham Young University, described his first encounter with Joseph’s First Vision narrative as follows:

When I was first brought to read Joseph Smith’s story, I was deeply impressed. I wasn’t inclined to be impressed. As a stylistician, I have spent my life being disinclined to be impressed. So when I read his

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13. E. Dale LeBaron, “Steadfast African Pioneer,” *Ensign* 29 (December 1999), 45.

14. Elizabeth Maki, “A People Prepared: West African Pioneers Preached the Gospel before Missionaries,” *Pioneers in Every Land*, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, April 21, 2013, <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/ghana-pioneer-jwb-johnson>.

15. Freebody Acquah Mensah, Biographical Information, January 11, 2013. In possession of author.

16. Email from Rubén V. Alliaud to author.

story, I thought to myself, this is an extraordinary thing. This is an astonishingly matter-of-fact and cool account. This man is not trying to persuade me of anything. He doesn't feel the need to. He is stating what happened to him, and he is stating it, not enthusiastically, but in quite a matter-of-fact way. He is not trying to make me cry or feel ecstatic. That struck me, and that began to build my testimony, for I could see that this man was telling the truth.<sup>17</sup>

3. Although the 1838 narrative that Joseph Smith dictated as part of an official history of the Church is the most comprehensive and well-known recitation of his 1820 vision, it is not the only one. Joseph Smith related the vision at different times to different audiences. Beginning with Fawn Brodie's biography of Joseph Smith in 1945, some have interpreted the variations in the accounts as evidence that Joseph embellished his experience over time, or that he manufactured the experience later in his life to bolster his religious authority.<sup>18</sup>

However, many scholars acknowledge the variations in the accounts but tend to interpret them differently than Brodie did. These scholars understand that the accounts differ but do not interpret the differences as evidence that the vision did not happen when and how Joseph Smith said it did. Richard Bushman and Stephen Prothero, for example, have both noted that they expect different accounts of the same experience given over many years to different audiences for different purposes to differ in details and emphasis. I attribute the differences in the accounts partly to Joseph Smith's inability to adequately describe his experience, which is something he mentioned and lamented repeatedly. I believe that the accounts, taken as a whole, are harmonious, and that the differences are expected rather than a cause to suspect that Joseph did not experience a vision of divine beings.<sup>19</sup>

So, one of the ways that we share the story of the First Vision is by publishing these different accounts. Several articles about these different accounts have appeared in Church publications over the years.<sup>20</sup> In

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17. Arthur Henry King, *Arm the Children: Faith's Response to a Violent World* (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies, 1998), 288.

18. See Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945).

19. Stephen R. Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003), 171; Richard L. Bushman, "The First Vision Story Revived," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 4, no. 1 (1969): 83. My thanks to Steven C. Harper for sharing these thoughts as I prepared this paper.

20. For example, see James B. Allen, "Eight Contemporary Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision; What Do We Learn from Them?" *Improvement Era* 73, no. 4 (1970):

addition, about five years ago, the Church published a series of essays known as the Gospel Topics Essays that provide additional context to various historical and doctrinal issues. One of these essays, entitled “First Vision Accounts,” addresses the multiple accounts of the First Vision. The differences between the accounts and the basic consistency are discussed.

This essay has been published in many languages and has been read hundreds of thousands of times. It contains links to all known accounts of the First Vision so that Latter-day Saints and others can read for themselves the words of the accounts. In addition, various writers have produced harmonies and other writings concerning these different firsthand accounts and several descriptions recorded by Joseph’s contemporaries.<sup>21</sup>

4. Many other publications of the Church have also told the story of the First Vision. In 2018, the Church published the first volume of a new narrative history of the Church entitled *Saints: The Story of the Church of Jesus Christ in the Latter Days*. The goal of the *Saints* project is to write an accessible multivolume history that can be read by Latter-day Saint adults and teenagers around the world. The books are translated into fourteen languages and are available either in inexpensive paperback printings or as free ebooks or audio books on the internet. We frankly have been stunned by the success of the book; over 500,000 print copies have been sold, 30 percent in non-English languages, and we believe that over one million people have read volume 1 in digital formats (in our Church’s Gospel Library app, our largest content channel, the 46 chapters in volume 1 have been viewed more than 110 million times).

Chapter 2 of this first volume tells about the First Vision, using details from the different accounts. Here is how the incident is described in *Saints*:

Joseph rose early on a spring morning in 1820 and set out for the woods near his home. The day was clear and beautiful, and sunlight filtered through the branches overhead. He wanted to be alone when he prayed,

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4–13; and Richard L. Anderson, “Joseph Smith’s Testimony of the First Vision,” *Ensign* 26 (April 1996): 10–21.

21. For example, see Milton V. Backman Jr., *Joseph Smith’s First Vision: The First Vision in Its Historical Context* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1971); Steven C. Harper, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision: A Guide to the Historical Accounts* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012); and Dean C. Jessee, “The Earliest Accounts of Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844*, ed. John W. Welch, 2d ed. (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017), 1–35.

and he knew a quiet spot in the woods where he had recently been clearing trees. He had left his ax there, wedged in a stump.

Finding the place, Joseph looked around to make sure he was by himself. He was anxious about praying out loud and did not want to be interrupted. Satisfied he was alone, Joseph knelt on the cool earth and began to share the desires of his heart with God. He asked for mercy and forgiveness and for wisdom to find answers to his questions. "O Lord," he prayed, "what church shall I join?" As he prayed, his tongue seemed to swell until he could not speak. He heard footsteps behind him but saw no one when he turned around. He tried to pray again, but the footsteps grew louder, as if someone was coming for him. He sprang to his feet and spun around, but still he saw no one. Suddenly, an unseen power seized him. He tried to speak again, but his tongue was still bound. A thick darkness closed in around him until he could no longer see the sunlight. Doubts and awful images flashed across his mind, confusing and distracting him. He felt as if some terrible being, real and immensely powerful, wanted to destroy him.

Exerting all his strength, Joseph called once more to God. His tongue loosened, and he pleaded for deliverance. But he found himself sinking into despair, overwhelmed by the unbearable darkness and ready to abandon himself to destruction. At that moment, a pillar of light appeared over his head. It descended slowly and seemed to set the woods on fire. As the light rested on him, Joseph felt the unseen power release its hold. The Spirit of God took its place, filling him with peace and unspeakable joy. Peering into the light, Joseph saw God the Father standing above him in the air. His face was brighter and more glorious than anything Joseph had ever seen. God called him by name and pointed to another being who appeared beside Him. "This is My Beloved Son," He said. "Hear Him!" Joseph looked into the face of Jesus Christ. It was as bright and glorious as the Father's.

"Joseph," the Savior said, "thy sins are forgiven." His burden lifted, Joseph repeated his question: "What church shall I join?"

"Join none of them," the Savior told him. "They teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof."

The Lord told Joseph that the world was steeped in sin. "None doeth good," He explained. "They have turned aside from the gospel and keep not my commandments." Sacred truths had been lost or corrupted, but He promised to reveal the fullness of His gospel to Joseph in the future.

As the Savior spoke, Joseph saw hosts of angels, and the light around them blazed brighter than the noonday sun. "Behold, and lo, I come quickly," the Lord said, "clothed in the glory of My Father."

Joseph expected the woods to be devoured by the brilliance, but the trees burned like Moses's bush and were not consumed.

When the light faded, Joseph found himself lying on his back, looking up into heaven. The pillar of light had departed, and his guilt and confusion were gone. Feelings of divine love filled his heart. God the Father and Jesus Christ had spoken to him, and he had learned for himself how to find truth and forgiveness.<sup>22</sup>

5. As mentioned previously, *Saints* is a narrative history. It is designed for general readers. By following the footnotes, readers can access the original sources online. Some of the footnotes point to the Joseph Smith Papers, a multivolume compilation of primary documents related to Joseph Smith. On the Joseph Smith Papers website, readers can view primary sources side by side with the transcriptions of documents related to the life of Joseph Smith, including those linked to the First Vision. The print volumes of the Joseph Smith Papers contain all four firsthand accounts of the theophany, while the website also includes five secondary accounts written during Joseph's lifetime.<sup>23</sup> The primary accounts are accessed by tens of thousands of individuals every year on the website. They are, by far, the most popular documents on the site. This is partly because they are linked to other Church sites, such as the Gospel Topics Essays and *Saints*. As you can see, we are going to great lengths to make all documents related to the First Vision accessible.

In addition to the documents found in the written volumes and online, supplemental materials include lesson plans for high school and college classes covering topics like "Joseph Smith's Early Visions and Frontier Revivalism."<sup>24</sup> The website also features videos with scholars discussing the First Vision.<sup>25</sup> A podcast was released a few weeks ago by the Joseph Smith Papers featuring historians who explore the historical context of Joseph's day and various aspects of the First Vision in six episodes.

6. Some of the footnotes in *Saints* take readers to short essays on various topics mentioned in *Saints*. Several of these essays relate to the First Vision. These can be found in "Church History Topics" in the Church

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22. *Saints: The Story of the Church of Jesus Christ in the Latter Days*, vol. 1, *The Standard of Truth, 1815–1846* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018), 14–16.

23. "Primary Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision of Deity," Joseph Smith Papers, accessed March 20, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/site/accounts-of-the-first-vision>.

24. See "Joseph Smith's Early Visions and Frontier Revivalism," Joseph Smith Papers, accessed March 20, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/articles/early-visions-and-frontier-revivalism>.

25. Available at <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/media/videos>.

History section of ChurchofJesusChrist.org and the Church's Gospel Library app. These essays cover such topics as "Awakenings and Revivals," "Christian Churches in Joseph Smith's Day," "Joseph Smith's First Vision Accounts," "Palmyra and Manchester," "Religious Beliefs in Joseph Smith's Day," and "Sacred Grove and Smith Family Farm."<sup>26</sup> These short essays provide general context to better orient readers to time and place as specific events relate to Latter-day Saint history. Each essay contains a bibliography that is intended to help the reader explore topics further by citing the best available secondary sources. Of course, not many readers are able to participate in graduate seminars taught by Professor Marsden or Professor Taves, but readers can investigate our topic on "Christian Churches in Joseph Smith's Day," and if they are interested in more information, they will be directed to a reading list including Nathan Hatch's *Democratization of American Christianity*, Jon Butler's *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, and John Wigger's *Taking Heaven by Storm*. I would even hope that Professor Wigger may have seen a small uptick in book sales from curious readers of our Church History Topics!

7. The Church operates a museum where the story of the Church is experienced through artifacts, documents, textiles, and art. We also use multimedia displays in the museum to share Church history. In the museum, our permanent exhibit highlights the First Vision, including an art glass window depicting the Father and the Son appearing to Joseph Smith. Visitors are able to watch a seven-minute video depiction of the vision that immerses viewers in a theater experience surrounded by a wide curved screen with surround sound.<sup>27</sup> This is designed to be more than a film; it provides a sensory experience with 204 channels of surround sound featuring ambient sounds recorded in the Sacred Grove. The cinematography takes viewers into the grove with young Joseph, and they witness the events as recorded in the various accounts of the First Vision. As visitors exit the theater, they are able to read the text of the different accounts in an interactive display. I should note that we recognize it is impossible to capture a sacred religious experience through either a narrative history or a film. Joseph Smith said his vision defied all description, and it is impossible to truly depict a theophany in film.

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26. Organized alphabetically at Church History Topics, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed March 20, 2020, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/history/topics/adam-ondi-ahman?lang=eng>.

27. "Ask of God: Joseph Smith's First Vision," <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/media-library/video/2017-01-0100-ask-of-god-joseph-smiths-first-vision>.

To get the full effect of the 240-degree screen and surround sound, you will need to come to the museum, but it can also be viewed in the Gospel Media section of [ChurchofJesusChrist.org](http://ChurchofJesusChrist.org).

8. In describing the Church History Museum experience, I used the phrase “Sacred Grove.” As you probably know, this is the term that members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints use for the grove of trees in Upstate New York where we believe the First Vision took place. The wooded area and the adjacent Smith farm are among the numerous historic sites the Church owns and maintains. Joseph Smith’s family lived on the farm at the time of the First Vision. His family left the farm a few years later, gathered with the main body of the Church in Ohio, and then went on to other places. In 1905, Joseph F. Smith, Joseph Smith’s nephew and then President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, visited the farm and the grove. Starting with that visit, Church leaders began considering the possibility of purchasing the property. In 1907, George Albert Smith, an Apostle and another relative of Joseph Smith, acted as agent on behalf of the Church to purchase the farm, grove, and other land for \$20,000. On the day of the purchase, Elder Smith recorded, “The property is in good condition and is a beautiful farm. I[t] is where the Father and the Son appeared to Joseph the Prophet.”<sup>28</sup>

Once the Church obtained the land, members and missionaries began visiting the site in greater numbers. Religious services and other meetings came to be held in these woods. A small clearing was developed in the center of the grove with benches, a pulpit, and, eventually, a sound system. Over time, it was determined that the Sacred Grove could serve its purpose better if it was not used as a meeting place but was rather preserved as a place where people could come and reflect about the sacred experience of God the Father and Jesus Christ appearing to the Prophet Joseph Smith. The meeting benches, pulpit, and sound system were removed from the grove to restore authenticity to the site. Meetings now take place outside of the grove rather than in it. Efforts were and are made to help the grove look and feel, as much as possible, as it would have looked and felt in 1820 when the First Vision took place. Foresters help with this important work. We do not know the precise spot where Joseph knelt to pray, but we consider the entire area to be sacred. Visitors frequent the grove and can walk on designated paths through the area or sit on benches adjacent to the paths.

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28. George Albert Smith, journal, June 10, 1907, Church History Library.

The farm portion of this property includes a few buildings. The log home in which the family lived at the time of the First Vision has been reconstructed on its original foundation. The frame home that the family later built on the farm has also been restored. Both homes are furnished with period pieces and are open for free tours. Volunteers at the site provide visitors with historical information about the Smith family and the First Vision.

Of course, there are many other ways that the First Vision is shared and remembered. Countless talks and articles have discussed and explored this remarkable vision over the years. Songs have been composed and movies have been made concerning it. Many artistic renderings have been created, including woodcarvings and stained glass windows that adorn some of our buildings.

The First Vision remains an important part of our Church's history. Millions of people around the globe have been impacted for good by it as it has been shared by Joseph Smith and the church that was restored through him. I am one of those millions.

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