Joseph Smith's First Vision and a Culture of Spiritual Manifestations

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Chapter One

Joseph Smith's First Vision and a Culture of Spiritual Manifestations

The purpose of this chapter is not to recount and analyze Joseph Smith's First Vision, as others have already attempted that several times. Rather, it is to juxtapose the First Vision with accounts of other visionaries in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and to discuss the religious atmosphere in which these visionaries lived.

In the decades following the Revolutionary War, Americans witnessed arguably the most intense religious revival in American history—the Second Great Awakening. Historians date this religious awakening from approximately 1800 to 1830. This period in American religious history was paramount for several reasons. The country was still reeling from the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812. Families were recovering from the loss of loved ones, men were struggling to earn money to support their families, and the religiosity of average Americans was low compared to other generations. Unlike the First Great Awakening of the 1730s and 1740s, when religious sermons were aimed at churchgoers, the preachers of the Second Great Awakening directed their sermons to nonchurchgoers. Well-known preachers like Charles G. Finney, Lorenzo Dow, and Peter Cartwright traveled throughout the states preaching, converting, and baptizing.

Teachers of all religious groups held street meetings that
often lasted the entire day and extended into the night. These meetings were sometimes called *revivals*. Joseph Smith Jr. remembered that the revivals “commenced with the Methodists, but soon became general among all the sects in that region of country.” “Indeed,” continued Smith, “the whole district of the country seemed affected by it and great multitudes united themselves to the different religious parties. . . . Some were contending for the Methodist faith, some for the Presbyterian, and some for the Baptist.” As people began to join their desired religious sect, “great confusion and bad feeling ensued; priest contending against priest, and convert against convert; so that all their good feelings one for another, if they ever had any, were entirely lost in a strife of words and a contest about opinions.” As a result of these revivals, people began joining religious sects and attending their meetings.

The events of the Second Great Awakening resulted in the founding of many religions and organizations interested in temperance, slavery abolition, and women’s rights. Individuals and families of this generation felt free to worship as they pleased, and any person, regardless of his or her level of education, felt capable of interpreting scripture and teaching fellow Christians. Had this not been the case, Joseph Smith Jr.—an ordinary farmer—would not have been successful in gaining followers. As the well-known historian Gordon Wood observed, Mormonism began at the perfect time. Had someone attempted to found a religion like Mormonism a few generations earlier or later than 1830, it probably would have failed miserably.

The trend of attending religious street meetings and investigating preachers and churches was accompanied by discussions and sermons of revelations, heavenly manifestations, and spiritual gifts. In 1830, Jewish religious zealot Robert Matthews claimed to have received a revelation wherein God appointed him to be a prophet. He subsequently traveled the States and preached the imminent arrival of the millennium, which was common. Preachers and missionaries captivated audiences and stirred
emotions by recounting manifestations and other spiritual gifts that had affected people in their congregations.

The religious culture of both the First and Second Great Awakenings also produced numerous visionaries who published their manifestations in newspapers and pamphlets. Reverend Nicholas Gilman of Durham, New Hampshire, stated in 1742 that visions and heavenly experiences were main topics of conversation among the religious populace, not just professional clergy and theologians. Douglas Winiarski observed that "Methodists, Baptists, and radical sectarians would load their diaries, memoirs, autobiographies, and published writings with numerous references to audible voices, visions, and various kinds of supernatural visitations." Susan Juster, a non-LDS scholar, identified over three hundred individuals who claimed visionary experiences during the generation of Joseph Smith’s parents. Congregationalist minister Charles Chauncy of Boston stated that claims of seeing visions were common.

A few years after Joseph Smith’s First Vision, near the end of the Second Great Awakening, Mormon missionaries were among those who found success in gaining converts. Many of these converts had already accepted the idea of a restoration and had sought for a church that possessed the spiritual gifts common among first-century Christians. Mormon missionaries, similar to other preachers during this era, held street meetings where dozens and sometimes hundreds of people would gather to listen. They preached at length about prophets, apostles, visions, and other spiritual gifts that accompanied the young Church. They often quoted religious figures like Martin Luther and John Wesley, who discussed the significance of spiritual gifts in the latter days. John G. Whittier, a member of the Shaker movement, described Mormon claims of possessing spiritual gifts as follows:

They contrast strongly the miraculous power of the gospel in the apostolic time with the present state of our nominal Christianity. They ask for the signs of divine power; the faith, overcoming all
things, which opened the prison doors of the apostles, gave them power over the elements, which rebuked disease and death itself, and made visible to all the presence of the living God. They ask for any declaration in the Scriptures that this miraculous power of faith was to be confined to the first confessors of Christianity. They speak a language of hope and promise to weak, weary hearts, tossed and troubled, who have wandered from sect to sect, seeking in vain for the primal manifestations of the divine power.\(^8\)

The religious culture of the First and Second Great Awakening prepared thousands for the Restoration of the Church. Spiritual gifts, visions, dreams, and other heavenly manifestations were common. It is not surprising, then, to learn that Joseph Smith’s parents believed him when he recounted visions and manifestations he had witnessed. After conversing with Joseph Smith on three separate occasions during the night of September 21, 1823, and again the next morning, the angel Moroni commanded Joseph to relate what he had seen and heard to his father. “I returned back to my father in the field,” recalled Joseph, “and rehearsed the whole matter to him. He replied to me, that it was of God, and to go and do as commanded by the messenger.”\(^9\)

Joseph’s father, a skeptic regarding organized Protestant religion, would have been aware of the visionary accounts that had circulated throughout the region. Indeed, Joseph Smith Sr. was a visionary man himself. His wife, Lucy, recorded at least seven of his heavenly manifestations years prior to their son’s First Vision in 1820 (see chapter 2).\(^{10}\)

**Joseph Smith’s First Vision**

Below are accounts of twenty individuals (including Joseph Smith Jr.) who recorded divine manifestations of a similar nature. All twenty visions presented here occurred in the northeastern states region and were recorded sometime between the First Great Awakening and Second Great Awakening (1740s–1830s). The accounts following the discussion of Joseph’s First Vision are presented in chronological order.
Joseph Smith Jr., like scores of his contemporaries, was consumed with finding answers to various questions concerning religion and salvation. "Who of all these parties are right?" Joseph asked himself, "Or are they all wrong together? And if any one of them be right which is it? And how shall I know it?" Joseph answered his own questions when he wrote, "Considering that all could not be right and that God could not be the author of so much confusion, I determined to investigate the subject more fully, believing that if God had a Church it would not be split up into factions, and that if He taught one society to worship one way, and administer in one set of ordinances, He would not teach another principles which were diametrically opposed."

One day while reading the Bible (an unusual activity for a teenage boy), he discovered a passage in the Epistle of James (1:5): "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God." Joseph recalled that the message entered his "heart" with "more power" than he ever felt before. He "reflected on it again and again" until it consumed his every thought. His mother remembered that Joseph "had never read the Bible through in his life: he seemed much less inclined to the perusal of books than any of the rest of our children." If so, who persuaded the young teenager to open the Bible and read it? William Smith, Joseph's younger brother, explained:

There was a joint revival in the neighborhood between the Baptists, Methodists and Presbyterians and they had succeeded in stirring up quite a feeling, and after the meeting the question arose which church should have the converts. Rev. Stockton was the president of the meeting and suggested it was their meeting and under their care and they had a church there and they ought to join the Presbyterians, but as father did not like Rev. Stockton very well, our folks hesitated and the next evening a Rev. Mr. Lane of the Methodists preached a sermon on 'what church shall I join?' And the burden of the discourse was to ask God, using as a text, 'If any man lack wisdom let him ask of God who giveth to all men liberally.' And of course when Joseph went home and was looking over the text he was impressed to do just what the preacher had said.
Joseph later explained that he secluded himself to pray on the Smith family property “in the woods where my father had a clearing” and at the “stump where I had stuck my axe when I had quit work.” Joseph began his prayer, “O Lord, what Church shall I join?”

Orson Hyde reported that Joseph told him that while praying “the adversary . . . filled his mind with doubts and brought to mind all manner of inappropriate images to prevent him from obtaining” answers to his questions. Another account claimed that Joseph’s tongue swelled in his mouth so that he could not speak. He also explained, “I heard a noise behind me like someone walking towards me. . . . the noise of walking seemed to draw nearer, I sprang upon my feet and looked round, but saw no person, or thing that was calculated to produce the noise of walking.” He was seized subsequently upon by an “unseen” force and “thick darkness” gathered around him. Just as he thought he would “sink into despair and . . . destruction,” he saw a vision. “A pillar of fire light above the brightness of the sun at noon day came down from above and rested upon me and I was filled with the Spirit of God and the Lord opened the heavens upon me and I saw the Lord who appeared in the midst of a “pillar of flame, which was spread all around and yet nothing consumed.” Soon after, another personage appeared who exactly resembled the other “in features, and likeness.” He learned that these two heavenly beings were God the Father and Jesus Christ. The most well known account of this manifestation relates succinctly to what Joseph experienced.

I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head above the brightness of the sun, which descended gradually until it fell upon me. It no sooner appeared than I found myself delivered from the enemy which held me bound. When the light rested upon me I saw two personages (whose brightness and glory defy all description) standing above me in the air. One of them spake unto me calling me by name and said (pointing to the other) “This is my beloved Son, Hear him. . . .”
When the lights came on

I asked the personages who stood above me in the light, which of all the sects was right, (for at this time it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong) and which I should join. I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong, and the Personage who addressed me said that all their Creeds were an abomination in his sight, that those professors were all corrupt, that "they draw near to me with their lips but their hearts are far from me. They teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of Godliness but they deny the power thereof."22

Note the following details of Joseph's First Vision while reading accounts of Joseph's contemporaries below: (1) Joseph saw two personages each in the form of a man, (2) Christ literally stood at the Father's right-hand side as a separate and distinct being, (3) the Father and Christ looked alike, (4) the surroundings appeared to be on fire, and (5) an evil influence was present shortly before the vision.

Joseph Smith's Contemporaries

Reverend Benjamin Pomeroy

In 1741, Benjamin Pomeroy, minister of the Congregational Church in Hebron, Connecticut, recorded in his diary a vision that a member of his congregation saw while attending a church service. The vision came to the individual while pondering a sermon on Isaiah chapter 40. Pomeroy recorded that the individual fainted and then awoke to find himself at the foot of a mountain. A heavenly personage appeared and escorted the visionary to the gates of heaven where God and Christ were seen sitting on their thrones in all their glory. He also saw "angels bowing and paying their homage and adoration to them." At this incredible sight he felt out of place. Sensing his insecurity, Christ approached and showed him his "name written in Letters of blood." Christ then smiled and commanded him to return to his body where he would be blessed to "withstand all temptation." Instantly, another
vision came and the individual saw “the mouth of hell open.” He
saw Satan standing before him and was told that “he would have
me.” The vision closed shortly thereafter and the individual found
his “body all disordered with the Cramp.”

This vision was similar to Joseph Smith’s First Vision in that
the man saw two separate individuals—God the Father and Jesus
the Christ. He also experienced the presence of Satan who tried
to discourage him, much like Joseph Smith.

Isaiah Pratt

In 1741, just two weeks after the previous vision occurred,
the first minister of the Congregational Church in Westborough,
Massachusetts, Reverend Ebenezer Parkman, witnessed a member
of his congregation enter into a trance. This individual, Isaiah
Pratt, remained in that state for more than twenty-four hours.
When Pratt came out of the trance, he claimed that he had “seen
hell, and seen Christ.” Reverend Parkman related more of what
Pratt saw:

He . . . informed me of his seeing (as he thought) the devil, who
met him as he seemed to be in the way towards heaven, and told
him that there was no room for him there; of his seeing hell,
and hearing the most dreadful noise of roaring and crying; his
seeing heaven, so wondrously happy a place as nobody could tell
but those that were there; and Christ, who looked more pleasant
than ever he had seen any man, and who had a great book before
him, and in turning over the leaves of it, told him that his name
was there, and showed it [to] him; and that he had seen a great
many more things, which were such great things that he could
not speak of them.

Pratt described Christ, in heaven, as a “man” and not as a
mystic being without body, parts, or passions. Pratt, like the pre-
vious visionary, saw Satan, who tried to discourage him, saying
that there was no room for him in heaven. Speaking of this very
theme, Brigham Young taught, “When individuals are blessed
with visions, revelations, and great manifestations, look out, then
the devil is nigh you, and you will be tempted in proportion to
the vision, revelation, or manifestation you have received.” 25

Reverend Daniel Rogers

In 1740-41 Daniel Rogers, the well-known Unitarian minis-
ter of Ipswich, Massachusetts, conducted a preaching tour
throughout the New England states. During the tour he encoun-
tered many people who claimed to have seen visions. He encoun-
tered others who were “Transported to Heaven” who saw the
“Glories of Christ.” He was particularly impressed with the vision
of one “young lad” whose “spirit had been drawn out & carried up
to Heaven where He had a View” of Jesus Christ “in Glory sitting
at the right Hand of God.” He also saw surrounding angels, which
included his deceased grandfather. 26

Joseph Bean

Joseph Bean of Cambridge, Massachusetts, set aside one hour
per night for prayer and meditation. On one particular night in
1741, he was caught up in a vision where he saw the “immaculate
lamb of God hanging upon the Cursed tree . . . with his arms
widely Extended.” A few months later in the spring of 1742, he
beheld another vision. He described seeing “God and Christ at
his right hand and the burning throne with millions of shining
angels in postures of adoration.” Bean also claimed to have seen
his “name in the records of heaven the lamb’s book of life.” 27

Joseph Smith, like Joseph Bean, saw Christ standing at the
right hand of God, as well as a multitude of angelic beings. Bean
described them as appearing to be “burning” and “shining.”
Joseph Smith described the angelic personages as an “eclipse” at
“noon-day” and that he expected the trees to be consumed with
fire.

Benjamin Abbott

In 1772 Benjamin Abbott, a Methodist minister of Pittsgrove
Township, New Jersey, was torn between joining with the Baptists
and Presbyterians. During this time, he recorded several visions of evil spirits as well as of Christ on at least two occasions. During this process of deciding which church to join, Abbott battled feelings of despair and unworthiness that led to many horrific dreams and visions of Satan. One night he dreamt he was transported to hell and tortured by evil spirits. This frightened him immensely and caused him to become more active in prayer. Five weeks later he dreamt that he was taken to heaven where he saw “elegant buildings” and an assembly of personages dressed in “white raiment,” which hung to their feet. He also saw God “sitting upon his throne.” Despite this dream, Abbott continued to struggle with anxiety and depression. He related a life-changing experience that occurred a short while later.

One day going to the mill, I felt such a hell in my breast arising from a guilty conscience ... and I was passing through a piece of woods, the devil suddenly suggested to my mind, that as I was one of the reprobates and there was no mercy for me, I had better hang myself and know the worst of it. While I was looking for a suitable place for that purpose, I thought I heard a voice saying “This torment is nothing to hell.” I immediately changed my mind and drove home under the greatest anxiety imaginable, for it appeared to me the devil was behind me in the wagon with his hands just over my head, threatening to take me away both soul and body. I cannot express any feelings at that time, my hair arose on my head through fear. I was afraid to look back, lest I should visibly see him. In this deplorable condition I returned home; when I got into the house I dared not go outside of the door, for fear the devil would take me away. My wife saw that something was the matter with me and enquired what it was, for, said she, “you look like death.” I was constrained to turn from her and weep, for I expected she knew my condition, as she had been a member of the Presbyterian Church for many years, and was a praying woman.

Two nights later, Abbott saw a remarkable vision.

That night I lay alone, expecting to sleep little, but to pray and weep all night; whenever I fell into a slumber, it appeared to me that I saw hell opened ready to receive me, and I just on
the point of dropping in, and devils waiting to seize me. Being thus alarmed, it would arouse me up, crying to the Lord to save me—and thus I passed the whole night in this terrified unhappy condition. Just at the dawning of the day, I fell into a doze more like sleep than any I had during the whole night, in which I dreamed that I saw a river as clear as chryystal [...]. I immediately hastened to the river, and went in, the water running over my head [...]. At that instant I awoke, and saw, by faith, the Lord Jesus Christ standing by me, with his arms extended wide, saying to me, “I died for you.” I then looked up, and by faith I saw the Ancient of Days [...]. Then by faith I saw the Lord Jesus come to me as with a cup in his hand, and he gave it to me, and I took it and drank thereof [...]. The river which I saw, represented to me the river of life proceeding from the throne of God.

Following these experiences, Abbott joined the Methodists, as he found their teachings to be the most correct of all the Christian churches.28

Benjamin Abbott and Joseph Smith both experienced the torment of Satan before seeing God and Christ. This state of demonic torture caused them to call upon God to save them. Abbott, like Joseph Smith, saw God and Christ as two separate personages. Note that Doctrine and Covenants 27:11 designates Adam as the “Ancient of Days;” however, other Christian commentators in previous generations associated God the Father with that title.

Thomas Rankin

In 1773, John Wesley sent Thomas Rankin of Dunbar, Scotland, to America to lead the Methodist Church in New England. For reasons unknown, Rankin experienced depression after his arrival, which became so great that he wished to die. One night while in Philadelphia, a vision opened to him in which he saw evil spirits. “Some may think or suppose [it] was only a dream,” stated Rankin, “but of the contrary of this, I am assured of, as I know I am at this moment a living man. [...]. I clearly saw, my soul doomed to everlasting flames. [...]. Around my bed,
stood with eager looks, a company of damned spirits, ready to conduct my soul to endless torments.” After he saw these evil spirits, he beheld another vision. “In the twinkling of an eye, I beheld the heavens open and part asunder and the appearance of the glorified humanity of the Son of God. I thought I cried aloud, ‘There is the Lord Jesus Christ! There is the Redeemer of lost and undone mankind!’ The next time he preached at a major gathering, he related that “it seemed as if the very house shook with the mighty power and glory of Sinai’s God. . . . As for myself, I scarce knew whether I was in the body or not; and so it was with all my brethren.”

Lorenzo Dow

In the late 1770s, a twelve-year-old boy living in Coventry, Connecticut, claimed to have seen visions. This boy, Lorenzo Dow, later became a key figure in the Second Great Awakening and a well-known minister of the Methodist Church. During his ministry other Methodist leaders became displeased with him because he preached to everyone, not just Methodists. At the age of twelve, he claimed to have seen a vision of the biblical prophet Nathan, who ministered during the reign of King David. The next year, at age thirteen, he was shown a vision of heaven in which he saw “God, Jesus and the angel Gabriel.”

Dow’s experience is significant because of his age. He was thirteen years old when he saw both God and Jesus. Joseph Smith was fourteen when he saw God the Father and Jesus for the first time. Joseph Smith, Lorenzo Dow, and others mentioned in this chapter were a few of many teenagers who saw visions during
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this generation. Robert Remini, a non-LDS historian noted that “During the Second Great Awakening many . . . adolescents claimed to have seen and talked with God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ.”31

Caleb Rich

One day in 1778, Caleb Rich, a Baptist from Warwick, Massachusetts, felt “as it were a shock of electricity, my lips quivered, my flesh trembled, and felt a tremor throughout my whole frame.” Rich looked up and saw “Jesus the Christ of God” as “a beautiful personage” of “an unspeakable grace, mercy, meekness, mildness, loving kindness, gentleness, and compassion.” Christ gave him “two small portions of food resembling corn” and said, “Eat sufficiently of it thyself; and of it feed my sheep and lambs, and it will never exhaust, it will be sufficient for thee at all times.”32 Rich saw another vision of an angel, who told him not to join any existing churches, as they were without “apostolic rectitude” (see chapter 2).

Elias Smith

In the 1790s, Baptist minister Elias Smith of Lyme, Connecticut, felt guilty as a result of sin and was extremely depressed over questions concerning religion and salvation. One day while gathering wood, Smith slipped and fell on his back. With his leg trapped under a log he looked into the sky and saw the following:

A light appeared to shine from heaven, not only into my head, but into my heart. . . . My mind seemed to rise in that light to the throne of God and the Lamb, and while thus gloriously led, what appeared to my understanding was expressed in Rev. 14:1: “and I looked, and, lo, a Lamb stood on the mount Sion, and with him an hundred forty and four thousand, having his father’s name
written in their foreheads.” The Lamb once slain appeared to my understanding, and while viewing him, I felt such love to him as I never felt to any thing earthly. My mind was calm and at peace with God through the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world. The view of the Lamb on mount Sion gave me joy unspeakable and full of glory.33

Nathan Culver

Nathan Culver was born into a religious family who eventually helped establish the first Baptist Church in Groton, Connecticut. Culver, believing that neither heaven nor hell existed, began to resent the Bible because of people constantly preaching at him. Culver described himself as being “on the brink of ruin.” In 1791, Culver recorded seeing the following vision:

I went to bed as usual, but slept none ’till late, for trouble of mind. . . . I was risen up in the bed, and was praying to God that if there was any Heaven or Hell I might instantly know it . . . . The same instant I saw a man in the room with a bright shining light around him, which appeared brighter than the sun, shining in his full strength . . . and bid me fear not and follow him . . . . I was carried to the most glorious city, which shone with such brightness that it dazzled my eyes to behold it. Then I was brought to the bar of God’s awful justice, and Christ took his seat on the right-hand of power. . . . It appeared to me that the awful Judge opened a very great book, which contained the names of the righteous and the wicked. . . . Then I heard the . . . Judge pronounce his glorious name Jehovah which caused the Heavens to rejoice and Hell to tremble; and he likewise said, if ever I made game of that Holy Name, I should never have a right there, and the gates should be forever shut against me. . . . It appeared to me that the Judge held over my head a great sword of justice, ready to take vengeance on me. But in the midst of my fears . . . Jesus Christ came and kneeled down between me and the bar of God, and like a Mediator plead my cause in a mist affecting manner, and said, “O Father, I have died for this sinner! And now, O Father, spare this sinner! O Father, I stand between him and the stroke of thy wrath! O Father, why should he die?” And at these words of the Mediator, the justice of God seemed to be silent; and God was well pleased with what Christ had said on my behalf, and Christ
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turned to me with a smiling face, and said, “Your sins are for­
given, and your transgressions I will remember no more.” Then
he shewed me, and bid me look and see the prints of the nails in
his hands; “this,” said he, “I bore for you.”34

Nathan Culver, like Joseph Smith, recorded that his room
gradually got brighter until it was “brighter than the sun” and
that Christ sat at his father’s right-hand side. Perhaps the most
important aspect of this account is that it teaches and expounds
on a key doctrine—justice and mercy. It also provides a magnifi­
cent explanation of two of Christ’s eternal roles, namely, Judge
and Mediator.

Sarah Alley

In February 1798, Sarah Alley of Beekman Town, New York,
claimed to have been taken to heaven in vision. After falling from
a chair, Alley lay lifeless for several hours. While unconscious, she
beheld a vision of heaven.

I left the body, and found a guide ready to take charge of and
conduct me, which I knew to be an angel, and who continued
with me during the vision. He first took me to the borders of that
lake and pit where there is continual weeping and lamentation. I
went so near the side and borders of it that it seemed as if I should
have fallen therein. . . . I was then conducted by my guide to the
place of happiness, where I saw Christ and the holy angels around
him, and abundance of people clothed in white robes, but I could
not distinguish one from another, so as to know them, being not
suffered to enter the kingdom, though I desired the liberty of
going in, my guide telling me I must return quickly to the world,
for I could not have entrance here. He then conducted me back
to my body.35

Sarah Alley recorded that she saw Christ in heaven sur­
rrounded by holy angels and that she “could not distinguish one
from another.” Similarly, Joseph Smith recorded that God the
Father and Jesus Christ “resembled each other in features and
likeness.” Later in life, Joseph saw a vision of the Twelve Apostles
in which they were ushered into the presence of God and “that
they . . . all looked alike." One LDS commentator interpreted this to mean that glorified sons and daughters of God carry similar resemblance like that of a family as well as a similar resemblance in beauty.

**Hannah Coy**

In September 1798, nine-year-old Hannah Coy of Jericho, Vermont, was taken to heaven in vision. After the vision closed she related to her mother the following details:

> Oh! My dear mama, I have seen him; he is in heaven, and there I saw Jesus Christ on the right hand of God his Father, and he is all the time pleading for poor sinners, and shewing his wounded hands and where he was nailed to the cross for poor sinners, and I saw thousands of Saints and angels round the throne, singing glory to God and Jesus Christ. . . . Christ showed me the book of life, and said my name was in it, and that he died to save me and all that would love him. He then took me to the place, mama, that you have told me of so often, which is the world of hell, and there I saw the dreadful distress of multitudes of poor souls in misery . . . there I saw the devil, and a dreadful looking creature he is . . . and he tried with all his might to get hold of me, to pull me into that dreadful place, but Christ prevented him. . . . He then told me to return back, and to tell my father and mother what I had seen, and to tell my father that he must carry me to our minister, and I must tell the minister all that I had seen, and that he must come to my daddy's and preach the gospel.

**Nathan Barlow**

Like Nathan Culver, Nathan Barlow of Freetown, Maine, doubted whether a place called hell existed and if it was as horrible as his ministers had taught. On January 8, 1801, after attending a religious meeting where the subject of heaven and hell was discussed, Barlow saw a vision.

> About the close of day light I was taken all at once with a strange kind of feeling, and laid me down: I began to grow stiff and to lose the power of moving by degrees . . . I am very clear that I did not fall asleep, nether was I sleepy, it being just dark;
then there came the appearance of a man, with a glorious countenance, who told me he was Christ, and took me by the hand seemingly, and carried me away as quick as a flash of lightning (my spirit I mean, for I was sensible at the time that I had left my body behind, and had no feeling of weight, but light as air.) I was carried to the place of torment, and was hovering over it, and fearful of sinking into it; but Christ told me I should not fall into it. . . . I also saw the Devil in the midst of them; he seemed to be chained there, and in the greatest misery of them all . . . Oh the groans that filled my astonished soul. . . . I floated about over this dreadful pit like a feather carried by a small breeze of wind, Christ being with me, and holding me by the hand. . . . I was then carried to the entrance of heaven, but not suffered to enter there: I saw God, and the Saints in glory: they looked very smiling, and appeared perfectly happy; their faces were all toward God; and they were singing praises to him in a most melodious manner. . . . Christ gave me a charge to publish what I had seen and heard, in a meeting that was to be in the neighborhood at such a time; and he told me that it would be a fuller meeting than usual, and that most of my relations would be there. I said to this purpose, that I was ignorant and fearful, and could not relate it: He told me to begin, and he would be with me, and put words in my mouth. . . . And now I do, in the most solemn manner, call Almighty God to witness, that I have no design to impose on any one, but have given a true relation of what I have seen and heard, which I certify by signing my name with my own hand. (Signed) Nathan Barlow. 39

Norris Stearns

In 1815, Norris Stearns published, in Greenfield, Massachusetts, a vision he had seen that was similar to the 1820 vision of Joseph Smith. In his vision, which came during a time of inward struggle regarding the meaning in life and religion, Stearns saw God the Father and Jesus Christ. He was told that a “greater work” of God would “soon be made manifest” and that the angel with the “everlasting gospel” would come “to do his work” (for the remainder of the account, not included below, see chapter 2).
At length, as I lay apparently upon the brink of eternal woe, seeing nothing but death before me, suddenly there came a sweet flow of the love of God to my soul, which gradually increased. At the same time, there appeared a small gleam of light in the room, *above the brightness of the sun*, then at his meridian, which grew brighter and brighter: As this light and love increased, my sins began to separate, and the Mountain removed towards the east. At length, being in an ecstasy of joy, I turned to the other side of the bed, (whether in the body or out I cannot tell, God knoweth) *there I saw two spirits*, which I knew at the first sight. But if I had the tongue of an Angel I could not describe their glory, for they brought the joys of heaven with them. *One was God, my Maker, almost in bodily shape like a man. His face was, as it were a flame of Fire, and his body, as it had been a Pillar and a Cloud.* In looking steadfastly to discern features, I could see none, but a small glimpse would appear in some other place. *Below him stood Jesus Christ my Redeemer, in perfect shape like a man—His face was not ablaze, but had the countenance of fire, being bright and shining. His Father's will appeared to be his! All was condescension, peace, and love!*⁶⁰

This account is so similar to Joseph Smith's that it would be difficult to differentiate between them if one was only semifamiliar with Joseph's First Vision accounts. Stearns recorded that he was seized upon by Satan and that he was on “the brink of eternal woe.” He explained that the vision “gradually increased” until it appeared “above the brightness of the sun.” Stearns also claimed, as did Joseph Smith, Benjamin Abbott, and others, that he saw “two” separate personages “in perfect shape like a man.” This is significant because many Protestant churches taught, and continue to teach, that God the Father and Jesus Christ are one entity. Surely Norris Stearns, Joseph Smith, and Benjamin Abbott knew that; therefore, claiming to have seen God and Christ as two separate personages would seem very strange, which strengthens the validity of their claims.

*Charles G. Finney*

In 1821, Charles G. Finney of Adams, New York, perhaps
"the most prominent revivalist of the day," went into the woods to pray and ask God to forgive his sins. Later that day while sitting in his office, the Savior appeared to him. "I met the Lord Jesus Christ face to face. . . . I saw him as I would see any other man," recorded Finney; "it seemed to me a reality that he stood before me, and I fell down at his feet and poured out my soul to him." 41

Finney, like many other individuals mentioned in this chapter, described seeing the Lord as he would see any "man." His experience was similar to that of Moses as described in Exodus 33:11: "And the Lord spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend." Many Christians believe that God does not have a resurrected body but acknowledge that Christ was resurrected and possesses a body of flesh and bones as described in Luke 24:37–39. Following Jesus's resurrection, he appeared to his Apostles. "But they were terrified and affrighted, and supposed that they had seen a spirit." Christ, seeing that they were "troubled" said, "Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself: handle me, and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones as ye see me have." Since the Bible teaches about Christ's resurrected body of flesh and bones, it seems confusing that some of these Christian groups would teach that Christ and God the Father are one entity.

All the confusion regarding the nature of God is clarified through the Prophet Joseph Smith who saw, in the First Vision, God the Father and Jesus Christ standing before him in the form of two men. The Lord revealed to Joseph Smith in 1843 that "The
Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man’s; the Son also” (D&C 130:22). Joseph Smith taught on another occasion, “That which is without body, parts and passions is nothing. There is no other God in heaven but that God who has flesh and bones.”

**Asa Wild**

In 1823, Asa Wild, a Methodist from West Fairlee, Vermont, was told by the Lord in vision that no true church presently existed on the earth and that he was preparing a group of people to restore his Church (see the full account in chapter 2).

**Francis G. Bishop**

In 1825, sixteen-year-old Francis G. Bishop of Greece, New York, heard sermons of Charles G. Finney (previously mentioned) and became enthused about Christianity. One day while engaged in prayer, a wall with a doorway appeared before him. He saw three personages who walked by the doorway and smiled at him. Suddenly a fourth person appeared who Bishop knew was the “Ancient of Days” of whom he had “read in the Prophecy of Daniel.” This visionary experience influenced Bishop immensely throughout his life and in 1832 he came in contact with the Mormons and joined the Church.

**Billy Hibbard**

In the late 1700s during the Revolutionary War, a young boy named Billy Hibbard had a dream that motivated him to turn to God. In this dream he saw his uncles and his father fighting in the war. Hibbard prayed in his dream that the Lord would keep them safe. Throughout his teenage and young adult years he clung to the scriptures and teachings of Christ. He eventually became a minister for the Methodist Church, and throughout the early years of the 1820s, he resided in Boston and New York. One Sabbath day while reading the Bible, he felt the urge to pray. While walking to a remote spot, Hibbard conjured up feelings of
WHEN THE LIGHTS CAME ON

despair and convinced himself that praying for his own needs was selfish. He described his experience as follows:

I came to the place of prayer, and kneeled down and closed my eyes, with my hands lifted toward the heavens, I saw Jesus Christ at the right hand of God looking down upon me, and God the Father looking upon him. The look of Jesus on me removed the burden of my sins, while he spoke these words, “Be faithful unto death and this shall be thy place of rest” . . . the love of God in Christ and of Christ in God, so completely overcame me, that I was all in tears, crying, Glory! Glory! Glory! . . . all nature was praising God. The sun and firmament, the trees, birds, and beasts, all appeared stamped with the glory of God. I leaped from my kneeling posture, clapped my hands, and cried, Glory! Glory! Glory!44

John Murdock

In 1827, John Murdock, a Campbellite from Kortwright, New York, saw a vision of Jesus Christ that motivated him to search for a church to join. Specifically, he sought for one that possessed the ordinances of salvation.

One day I was engaged in meditation, and a vision passed before my mind. It appeared to me as if the judgment had sat, and the Lord was on his throne, and called the people to him one at a time and questioned them respecting their conduct in this life; and it appeared as if they answered truly for they durst not answer otherwise; for the judge knew all that was in them, and I thought that I was about the third person called, and the first question put to me was if I had commemorated the death and sufferings of the Savior, by obeying the ordinances, at which I was aroused as from sleep being insensible of the vision, and of my situation, till I found myself convicted of a lack of duty. I immediately began to look for a society that I might receive the ordinances with.45

Conclusion

As presented in this chapter and shown in the accompanying chart, the manifestations of these individuals are similar, in some way, to the first visionary experience of Joseph Smith. These
accounts teach many truths concerning visions, angels, the nature of God, the nature of Christ, and revelation in modern times. Furthermore, these visions add validity to the Prophet Joseph's claims. They do not imply that Joseph Smith was just another face in the crowd of visionaries. They suggest, rather, that the Lord opened the heavens to the inhabitants of this earth in order to prepare the world, and specifically to prepare a nation, to receive the Restoration.

Also note that not all of these manifestations are equal in scope and meaning; not all of them included all of the elements present in Joseph Smith's vision. These manifestations were granted to various individuals for different purposes. Specifically, the numerous visionaries mentioned in this chapter, as well as in chapter 2, did not claim that their heavenly manifestations had prepared them to oversee the great work in the last days of restoring Christ's Church. While it is true that a few of them attempted to start a religion (for example, Elias Smith and John Noyes; see chapter 2) or claimed to be a prophet (for example, Norris Stearns and Robert Matthews; see above and chapter 2), none of them claimed, like Joseph Smith, that frequent manifestations from heaven prepared them, and gave them authority, to carry out the task of restoring Christ's primitive Church to the earth. These visionaries were informed of the Restoration, were instructed to abandon all Christian sects and search the scriptures, or were charged to share their manifestations with others; however, none of them came close to claiming or accomplishing that which Joseph Smith claimed and accomplished. Further evidence of this is discussed in chapter 2, where it is presented that practitioners of certain restoration churches felt that something was still missing in their religious movement (for example, Sidney Rigdon and Newel and Elizabeth Whitney). Where did they eventually turn? They turned to Joseph Smith and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.
### Common Themes of the Twenty Visions

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**Key**

1. Saw God and/or Jesus Christ
2. Saw God & Christ as men
3. Vision came due to prayer or trial
4. Specific instruction related
5. Told no true church existed
6. Under 15 years of age
7. Evil influence present prior to the vision
Endnotes

Chapter 1


5. Ibid., 26.


10. Joseph Sr. and Lucy would have also been aware of Asael Smith’s prediction. Asael, the grandfather of Joseph Smith Jr., felt that there would be a prophet raised up in his family. Concerning this matter, the Prophet Joseph wrote, “My grandfather, Asael Smith, long ago predicted that there would be a prophet raised up in his family, and
my grandmother was fully satisfied that it was fulfilled in me. My grandfather Asael died in East Stockholm, St. Lawrence county, New York, after having received the Book of Mormon, and read it nearly through; and he declared that I was the very Prophet that he had long known would come in his family" (History of the Church, 2:443).


12. History of the Church, 4:536.


15. It was mentioned that Joseph Smith Sr. did not particularly like Rev. Benjamin Stockton of the Presbyterian Church. This same man told the congregation during Alvin’s funeral sermon that he “had gone to hell, for Alvin was not a church member.” Interview with William Smith by E. C. Briggs and J. W. Peterson, published in the Deseret News, 20 January 1894; see also Lavina F. Anderson, ed., Lucy's Book: A Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith's Family Memoir (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2001), 332.

16. Personal Writings of Joseph Smith, 1:443, 444.


19. History of the Church, 1:5.


21. Times and Seasons, (November 1841–October 1842), 3, no. 9 (March 1, 1842), 706–7; spelling and punctuation changed for readability.


24. Ibid., 7.


27. Ibid., 18; emphasis added.


35. Sarah Alley, *Account of a Trance or Vision of Sarah Alley, of Beekman Town, Dutchess County, State of New-York, Which happened on First-Day Evening, the Twenty-fifth of Second Month 1798, taken from her own Mouth, the Twenty-Seventh of the same Month, in the Hearing of divers Persons* (Philadelphia: n.p.), 1807.


38. *A Wonderful Account of a Little Girl of nine years old, Who lives in the Town of Jericho, in the State of Vermont; by the Name of Hannah Coy* (Windsor, VT: n.p., 1800); emphasis added; see also Ann Kirschner, *Early American Studies*, 198, 203, 207.

39. Nathan Barlow, *A Vision Seen By Nathan Barlow, of Freetown (Called so by the Inhabitants) Adjacent to the North End of Harlem, in the County of Kennebec, District of Maine*. January 8, 1801 (Greenfield, MA: n.p., 1802); emphasis added.

40. *The Religious Experience of Norris Stearns, Written by Divine Command, Shewing the Marvellous Dealings of God to His Soul, and the Miraculous Manner in which He Was Delivered from the Jaws of Death and Hell; and His Soul Set at Liberty, Likewise His Appointment to the Ministry; and Commission from on High, to Preach the Gospel to Every Creature* (Greenfield, MA: 1815); emphasis added.


**Chapter 2**

