

Secular and Religious Background

Joseph Smith Jr.'s formal education was limited and sporadic. He received some of his earliest instruction from his parents. His mother, Lucy, explained that her children had been "deprived of school," but that after her family moved from the hills of Vermont to Lebanon, New Hampshire, in 1811, those children "who were old enough attended a school near by."¹

After the family moved to western New York, Joseph Jr. apparently attended school in the Palmyra area. According to his own account, schooling was irregular because of economic pressures on the family: "as it required the exertions of all that were able to render any assistance for the support of the Family therefore we were deprived of the bennifit of an education. Suffice it to say I was mearly instructid in reading, writing and the ground <rules> of Arithmatic which const[it]uted my whole literary acquirements."²

Young Joseph owned a book on arithmetic titled *First Lines in Arithmetic, for the Use of Young Scholars* published in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1818. His name appears in the book: "Joseph Smiths Book[,] January 31st, 1818" also the name of his sister Catherine.³ At a later date Joseph Smith owned *Sacred Geography or a Description of the Places Mentioned in the Old and New Testament* by Thomas T. Smiley. This twelve-page booklet was intended to promote knowledge of the Holy Scriptures and contained three maps of the Holy Land.⁴

Isaac Butts attended school with Smith in the Palmyra area,⁵ as did Christopher M. Stafford, who remembered Joseph as "a dull scholar."⁶ William Stafford's son, John Stafford, recalled, "Joe was quite illiterate. After they began to have school at their house, he improved

¹ Lavina Fielding Anderson, ed., *Lucy's Book: A Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith's Family Memoir* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2001), 300. Joseph Jr. would have been about six years old at the time.

² Joseph Smith, "A History of the life of Joseph Smith Jr.," (1832) MS, 1, CHL; Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith: Autobiographical and Historical Writings* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 1:5. Orson Pratt wrote in 1840: "He could read without much difficulty, and write with a very imperfect hand; and had a very limited understanding of the ground rules of arithmetic." *Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions* (Edinburgh: Printed by Ballantyne and Hughes, 1840), 3.

³ Photocopy of one of the cover pages in the Wilford C. Wood Collection, Wilford C. Wood Museum, Bountiful, Utah.

⁴ Published in Philadelphia and printed for the author by W. P. Bason, Charleston, South Carolina, 1824, in Community of Christ Library-Archives, Independence, Missouri, cited hereafter CCLA. The names "Joseph Smith Jr" and "M J Whitehead" are written in the booklet.

⁵ Statement of Isaac Butt, in *Naked Truths about Mormonism* 1 (Jan. 1888):2, original publication in the Yale University Library.

⁶ Statement of C. M. Stafford, *ibid.*, 1 (April 1888):1. For a listing of books in the Manchester Rental Library, see Robert Paul, "Joseph Smith and the Manchester (New York) Library," *Brigham Young University Studies* 22 (Summer 1982):333-56.

greatly. . . . [T]hey had school in their house, and studied the Bible."⁷ Young Joseph most likely received some training from his father who at one time had been a school teacher.⁸

Another young boy who attending school with Joseph Jr. was Peter S. Morrison. Morrison lived a short time in the Joseph Sr. family home and recalled, "I went to school in school session with Joseph and Hyrum Smith. I well remember that Joseph was considered somewhat of a dull pupil—that is, whenever he took up a book to study he would soon forget all about it and go off into absent-mindedness."⁹

Joseph Jr.'s lack of formal schooling sometimes yielded the erroneous impression that he was illiterate. In the latter part of 1825 while Smith was working in northern Pennsylvania, Isaac Hale, his future father-in-law, remarked that he was "not very well educated."¹⁰ Perhaps in response to such impressions, Smith, though almost twenty years old, enrolled in school in the Bainbridge, New York area while he was working for Josiah Stowell during the winter of 1825-26. While being examined before Justice Albert Neely on March 20, 1826, Smith testified that he had been "going to school."¹¹

Other accounts confirm this. Stowell's son Josiah remembered Joseph as "about 20 years old or there about. I also went to Schoal [School] with him one winter."¹² Asa B. Searles reported that he was a fellow student with Joseph in Bainbridge when his brother, Lemuel Searles, was a teacher there.¹³ Local tradition holds that "Smith, while here, attended school in District No. 9."¹⁴

With opportunities for formal education limited, the Smith family, like others on the frontier, relied on other avenues of instruction and information. One source of wide-ranging information was the newspaper, which the Smiths received weekly in Palmyra. Orsamus Turner, who served a five-year printer's apprenticeship in Palmyra between 1818 and 1822, recalled that young Joseph came to the village to pick up his father's newspaper:

He used to come into the village of Palmyra with little jags of wood, from his backwoods home; sometimes patronizing a village grocery too freely; sometimes

⁷ *Saints' Herald* 28 (June 1, 1881):167. This material comes from the notes of the interviewer, William Kelley. His notes about John Stafford are "Joe was quite illit- [illiterate] until after they began to have school at their house - they had school at their house. and studied their Bible." William H. Kelley Papers, CCLA).

⁸ Anderson, *Lucy's Book*, 294, 299.

⁹ "Founder of Church Known by Visitor," *Salt Lake City Herald*, December 31, 1912.

¹⁰ *The Susquehanna Register, and Northern Pennsylvanian* 9 (May 1, 1834):1; also E. D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled* (Painesville [Ohio]: Author, 1834), 263.

¹¹ Charles Marshall, "The Original Prophet. By a Visitor to Salt Lake City," *Fraser's Magazine* 7 (February 1873):229.

¹² Josiah Stowell, Jr., to John S. Fullmer, February 17, 1843, CHL. See Mark Ashurst-McGee, "The Josiah Stowell Jr.—John S. Fullmer Correspondence," *Brigham Young University Studies* 38, no. 3 (1999):108, 113; and Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents* 4:80.

¹³ *History of Lee County [Illinois]* (Chicago: H. H. Hill and Company, Publishers, 1881), 397. Searles "had many a wrestle [with Joseph]; but young Smith was a large, strong fellow and could handle any of the boys."

¹⁴ James H. Smith, *History of Chenango and Madison Counties, New York* (Syracuse, NY: D. Mason & Co., 1880), 154.

find an odd job to do about the store of Seymour Scovell; and once a week he would stroll into the office of the old Palmyra Register, for his father's paper.¹⁵

After they moved to their Manchester farm, the Smith family received the *Wayne Sentinel*, a successor to the *Register* and the *Herald*. A notice giving the subscription cost and the published amount of Joseph Sr.'s delinquent bill suggest that the Smiths received the paper for more than two years. The *Sentinel* cost \$2.00 per year if picked up at the office. The August 11, 1826, issue listed "Joseph Smith" among the delinquent subscribers with the amount due \$5.60.¹⁶

Certainly the Smith family made use of this newspaper. In September 1824 Joseph Sr. placed an advertisement in the *Sentinel* which ran for six weeks. The advertisement concerned a rumor that his oldest son Alvin's buried remains had been disturbed:

To the Public. Whereas reports have been industriously put in circulation, that my son *Alvin* had been removed from the place of his interment and dissected, which reports, every person possessed of human sensibility must know, are peculiarly calculated to harrow up the mind of a parent and deeply wound the feelings of relations—therefore, for the purpose of ascertaining the truth of such reports, I, with some of my neighbors, this morning repaired to the grave, and removing the earth, found the body which had not been disturbed.

This method is taken for the purpose of satisfying the minds of those who may have heard the report, and of informing those who have put it in circulation, that it is earnestly requested they would desist therefrom; and that it is believed by some, that they have been stimulated more by a desire to injure the reputation of certain persons than a philanthropy for the peace and welfare of myself and friends. JOSEPH SMITH.¹⁷

The newspaper ran stories on the Hebrew origin of American Indians, a topic subsequently discussed by Joseph Jr. Mordecai M. Noah, a New York City newspaperman, was interested in gathering Jews onto Grand Island, situated in the Niagara River. Noah had embraced this popular theory, and on October 11, 1825, the *Sentinel* reprinted an address detailing his opinion: "Those who are conversant with the public and private economy of the Indians, are strongly of [the] opinion that they are the lineal descendants of the Israelites, and my own researches go far to confirm me in the same belief." He then lists a number of reasons for his belief:

The Indians worship one Supreme Being as the fountain of life, and the author of all creation. Like the Israelites of old, they are divided into tribes. . . . [T]heir language and dialect are evidently of Hebrew origin. They compute time after the manner of the Israelites. . . . They have their prophets, High Priests, and their sanctum sanctorum. . . . They have their towns and cities of refuge.

¹⁵ O[rsamus]. Turner, *History of the Pioneer Settlement of Phelps and Gorham's Purchase*, 213-14.

¹⁶ *Wayne Sentinel* 1 (October 1823):1, and 3 (August 11, 1826):3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 2 (September 29, 1824):3, emphasis in original. The advertisement is dated September 25, 1824. This notice also appeared in the issues of October 6, 13, 20, 27 and November 3, 1824.

After concluding his list of evidences, he reflected:

If the tribes could be brought together, could be made sensible of their origin, could be civilized, and restored to their long lost brethren, what joy to our people, what glory to our God, how clearly have the prophecies been fulfilled, how certain our dispersion, how miraculous our preservation, how providential our deliverance.¹⁸

The newspaper also followed contemporary religious events, which clearly affected young Joseph and his family. The Smiths could have read of the visions and revelations of Asa Wild, a religious seeker like Joseph's uncle Jason Mack.¹⁹ The paper published in 1823 Asa's claim that God told him that in seven years "there would scarce a sinner be found on earth" and "that every denomination of professing christians had become extremely corrupt; many of which never had any true faith at all."²⁰

Wild's claim that existing churches were in error would have found sympathetic ears in the Smith family. Even by the time of young Joseph's birth in 1805, both of his parents had come to rely on personal interpretation of the Bible as the primary guides to religious life. A crucial context for the background and education of young Joseph thus becomes the broader religious questing and experiences of his extended family.

The family of Joseph Sr. originally had ties to the Congregational Church. According to records of the Topsfield, Massachusetts, church, his father, Asael, had been baptized as an infant on March 11, 1744. Nearly twenty-eight years later on March 8, 1772, Asael had three of his children baptized: Jesse (about four years old), Priscilla (about two years old), and Joseph (infant).²¹ After Asael's family moved to Tunbridge, Vermont, his son Joseph, at the age of twenty-four, was married to Lucy Mack on January 24, 1796, by Seth Austin, a justice of the peace in Tunbridge.²²

A year later Joseph, along with his father and his brother Jesse, professed belief in the doctrine that all people will be saved. They were among the dozen men who on December 6, 1797, stated that they had "formed our Selves into a Society and wish to be known by the Name or forme of universalists." As a result they also informed the town clerk that they did not want

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 3 (October 11, 1825):1.

¹⁹ Anderson, *Lucy's Book*, 230.

²⁰ *Wayne Sentinel* 1 (October 22, 1823):4. See Elden J. Watson, "The 'Prognostication' of Asa Wild," *Brigham Young University Studies* 37, no. 3 (1997-98):223-30.

²¹ George Francis Dow, in section titled: "Baptismal Records of the Church in Topsfield," *The Historical Collections of the Topsfield Historical Society* 1 (Topsfield, Mass.: Published by the Society, 1895, 2d ed.):15, 37-38. See also Richard L. Anderson, *Joseph Smith's New England Heritage: Influences of Grandfathers Solomon Mack and Asael Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and Provo, Utah: BYU Press, 2003), 246n118, 249n127.

²² Tunbridge Town Records, Book A:129, located in the Tunbridge Town Clerk's Office, Tunbridge, Vermont. Lucy mentions that Austin married them, but this was not included in the 1853 printing of her book (Anderson, *Lucy's Book*, 258).

"to be Charged with any Tax towards the Support of any teacher of any Diferant Denomination."²³

Years later Joseph Sr.'s son William remembered that his father's "faith in the universal restoration doctrin[e], however, often brought him in contact with the advocates of the doctrin[e] of endless misrey [misery]." Because of his "belief in the ultimate and final redem[p]tion of all mankind," William claimed it "brought down upon my father the aprobiem [opprobrium] or slur of Old Jo Smith."²⁴

Although following a different path, Lucy Mack Smith also came to be of independent religious leanings, emphasizing the Bible and personal experience rather than organized religion. While in Tunbridge she attended Methodist meetings. She wrote that she persuaded her husband to attend with her a few times: "But as soon as his Father and brother Jesse heard that we were attending Methodist meeting they were much displeased and his father came to the door one day and threw Tom Pain[e]'s age of reason into the house and angrily bade him read that untill he believed it."²⁵ Thomas Paine's *Age of Reason*, which expounded deism, was widely regarded as an atheistic tract. It taught that true religious knowledge is not revealed or taught by any church but attained by reason and that God, after creating the world according to rational laws, withdrew and no longer interacts with nature or humankind.

Lucy was concerned about her husband's spiritual condition and prayed about him. That night she had a comforting dream in which she saw two trees. She understood that one of the trees was her husband's brother Jesse and the other tree was her husband, who would hear and receive the gospel with his whole heart.²⁶ This belief in visions and dreams formed a significant part of the Smith family's religious life.

In 1802 the Smith family, by then Joseph, Lucy, and their two young sons, Alvin and Hyrum, moved from Tunbridge to Randolph, Vermont. At Randolph Lucy became seriously ill. She promised God that she would serve him if she recovered from her illness. "<I> covenanted with God if he would let me live I would endeavor to get that religion that would enable me to serve him right whether it was in the Bible or where ever it might be found even if it was to be obtained from heaven by prayer and Faith."²⁷ She prayed to God and heard a voice say, "Seek and ye shall find, knock and it shall be opened unto you. Let your heart be comforted, ye believe in God, beleive also in me."²⁸

Lucy later remembered hearing a Presbyterian give a discourse and afterward she "returned saying in my heart there is not on Earth the religion which I seek, I must again turn to

²³ Tunbridge Town Records, Book A:188. See also Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents* 1:633-34 and Larry C. Porter, *A Study of the Origins of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the States of New York and Pennsylvania* (Provo, Utah: Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History and BYU Studies, 2000), 5.

²⁴ William Smith, "Notes Written on `Chambers Life of Joseph Smith.' by William Smith," typescript, 18, CHL.

²⁵ Anderson, *Lucy's Book*, 291. The *Age of Reason* incident is not in the Coray finished manuscript.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 292-94.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 277-78. For additional information on the religious background of Joseph and Lucy Smith, see Dan Vogel, *Religious Seekers and the Advent of Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988), 25-28.

²⁸ Anderson, *Lucy's Book*, 278. See Matt. 7:7, Luke 11:9, and John 14:1.

my bible. Taking Jesus and his disciples for an example I will try to obtain from God that which man cannot give nor take away."²⁹ She followed this course for a number of years, later recovered her health, and "found a minister who was willing to baptize me and leave me free from membership in any church."³⁰

Thus by the time of young Joseph's birth his father had embraced the doctrine that all people will be saved, while his mother avoided joining any church, regarding all churches as devoid of "the religion which I seek." Eventually the Smith family moved from Randolph to Sharon, Vermont, where they rented land from Solomon Mack, Lucy's father, and farmed, and "in the winter he [Joseph Sr.] taught school."³¹ Here their son Joseph was born two days before Christmas on December 23, 1805.

Religion remained an important focus of the Smith family during young Joseph's childhood. In 1811, when he was five years old, his grandfather, Solomon Mack, published *A Narrative of the Life of Solomon Mack*, an account of his life's experiences and religious conversion.³² After its publication, Mack rode on horseback through the surrounding countryside, selling copies of his self-published book. In his narrative, Mack informs readers that until the winter of 1810-11 he gave very little thought to God. In spite of crippling illnesses, he wrote, "I never once thought on the God of my salvation or looked up to him for blessing or protection." He had never read the Bible and "could only recollect some taught parts such as I had heard and laid up for the purpose of ridiculing religious institutions and characters."

But at the age of seventy-six, while incapacitated because of illness, he came under conviction of his sins when he "saw a light about a foot from my face as bright as fire. . . . I thought by this that I had but a few moments to live. . . . I prayed that the Lord would have mercy on my soul and deliver me from this horrible pit of sin." The same appearance of light occurred some nights later, and on another occasion he thought he heard the Lord call him by name. Each time he thought he had but a moment to live.

Finally seeking a sign of his acceptance and pardon by God, he asked to have one night entirely free from pain. He wrote, "And blessed be the Lord, I was entirely free from pain that night." He continued: "And the Lord so shined light into my soul that everything appeared new and beautiful. Oh how I loved my neighbors. How I loved my enemies—I could pray for them. Everything appeared delightful." He found this especially so with regard to the Lord: "The love of Christ is beautiful. There is more satisfaction to be taken in the enjoyment of Christ one day, than in half a century serving our master, the devil."³³

Young Joseph's grandfather was not the only one to tell of seeing lights and encountering God in dreams. At about the same time, his father, according to his mother's later recollections,

²⁹ Ibid., 280.

³⁰ Ibid., 281.

³¹ Ibid., 299, 294. William Smith wrote about his father, "his occupation in early life was that of a school teacher he was a man well letter[e]d in the common branches of our english studies." "Notes Written on `Chambers Life of Joseph Smith,'" 20.

³² Solomon Mack, *A Narrative of the Life of Solomon Mack, Containing an Account of the Many Severe Accidents He Met With during a Long Series of Years, Together with the Extraordinary Manner in Which He Was Converted to the Christian Faith* (Windsor [Vermont]: Printed at the Expense of the Author [1811]). For the text and dating of this work, see Richard L. Anderson, *Joseph Smith's New England Heritage*, 43-73, 201-202n1.

³³ Solomon Mack, *A Narrative of the Life of Solomon Mack*, 11, 20, 22-24.

was having similar experiences: "My husband's mind became much excited upon the subject of religion; yet he would not subscribe to any particular system of faith, but contended for the ancient order, as established by our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, and his Apostles."³⁴

In April 1811, a month after William was born, Joseph Sr. had what Lucy termed his first vision. In this vision he saw a field and the attendant spirit said, "this field is the world which lies ina[n]imate & dumb as to the things pertaining to the true religion or the order of Heavenly things; all is darkness."³⁵ As the result of this vision, he, like his wife Lucy, came to the opinion that all churches were in darkness. Lucy wrote that her husband "seemed more confirmed than ever, in the opinion that there was no order or class of religionists that knew any more concerning the Kingdom of God, than those of the world, or such as made no profession of religion whatever."³⁶

Joseph Sr. had other visions intermittently during young Joseph's childhood. In May 1818 his father had his sixth vision. In this vision he saw himself on judgment day traveling toward "the meeting house" upon which crowds of people were converging. He was told he had arrived too late and the door was shut. "I soon felt that I was perishing and began to pray but my flesh continued to wither on my bones." An angel appeared and asked him if he had done everything necessary to be admitted. The messenger reminded him, "Justice must have its demands and then mercy <has its> claims." Upon hearing this, it entered his mind "to ask God in the name of Jesus and I cried out in the agony of my soul, Oh, Lord, I beseech Thee in the name of Jesus Christ to forgive my sins. I then felt strengthened and My flesh began to be restored. The angel then said, you must plead the merits of Jesus for he is an advocate with [the] Father and a mediator between God and man. I now was made quite whole, and the door was opened and upon entering I awoke."³⁷

Perhaps as the result of such visions, Joseph Sr. seems to have consistently avoided organized religion. After he attended one meeting during the 1824-25 revival, Lucy remembered her husband refused to attend further meetings.³⁸

William recalled that his father had morning and evening prayers: "I well remember father used to carry his spectacles in his vest pocked [pocket] . . . and when us boys saw him feel for his specks, we knew that was a signal to get ready for prayer."³⁹ William told about his father's instructions to the family:

My father's religious customs often become earksome or tiresome to me, while in my younger days as I made no profession of Christ[i]anity. Still I was called upon to listen to pray[e]rs boath night and morning. My father's favourit evening humn runs thus:

The day is past and gone
The evening shades appear

³⁴ Anderson, *Lucy's Book*, 294.

³⁵ Lucy Mack Smith, manuscript draft. Variant reading in Anderson, *Lucy's Book*, 295.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 296.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 324-25.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 358.

³⁹ *Zion's Ensign* 5 (January 13, 1894):6; *Deseret Evening News* 27 (January 20, 1894); and *Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star* 56 (February 26, 1894):133.

O may we all remember well
The night of death draws near.

Again and again this was hymn sung while upon the bending knees. My parents, father and mother, pour[e]d out their souls to God the doner of all blessings, to keep and g[u]ard their children and keep them from sin and from all evil works.⁴⁰

In 1834 Joseph Sr. told of his efforts to provide a religious education for his children, emphasizing the comfort he found in his visionary experiences:

I have not always set that example before my family that I ought: I have not been diligent in teaching them the commandments of the Lord, but have rather manifested a light and trifling mind: But in all this I have never denied the Lord. Notwithstanding all this my folly, which has been a cause of grief to my family, the Lord has often visited me in visions and in dreams, and has brought me, with my family, through many afflictions, and I this day thank his holy name.⁴¹

The Smith family was not unique in this emphasis on visionary experience as the basis of enlightenment.⁴² This was evidence of the working of the Holy Spirit of God in the life of the individual and a prominent part of the revivalistic religious experience. The assurance of forgiveness often came in the form of a vision.

This visionary forgiveness came to youthful seekers as well as more mature ones. In 1816 Elias Smith (no relation), a clergyman and journalist, published his account of a very similar experience. For some time as a youth in his early teens he felt a deep sense of being lost:

My mind was greatly distressed by considering myself a sinner, justly condemned to die. . . . Every wrong ever committed, whether in thought, word, or deed, appeared before me, and things which before appeared small, now rose like mountains between me and my Creator. It appeared to me that I was a criminal brought to the bar, and proved guilty, and deserving death, without one plea in his own behalf.

With such thoughts pressing on his mind, this youth slipped while carrying a piece of timber. He was pinned on the ground next to a log:

While in this situation, a light appeared to shine from heaven, not only into my head, but into my heart. This was something very strange to me, and what I had

⁴⁰ William Smith, "Notes Written on `Chambers Life of Joseph Smith,'" 18. The hymn, written by John Leland, a Baptist minister, was published in the first LDS hymnal. See *A Collection of Sacred Hymns* (Kirtland, Ohio: F. G. Williams & Co., 1835 [1836]), 62-63.

⁴¹ Remarks made by Joseph Smith Sr., on December 9, 1834, and recorded in Patriarchal Blessing Book, 1:1, CHL. See Mark L. McConkie, *The Father of the Prophet: Stories and Insights from the Life of Joseph Smith, Sr.* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1993), 75-76.

⁴² See for example, Richard L. Bushman, "The Visionary World of Joseph Smith," *Brigham Young University Studies* 37, no. 1 (1997-98):183-204.

never experienced before. My mind seemed to rise in that light to the throne of God and the Lamb. . . . 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.⁴³

A few years later, Billy Hibbard, a gospel minister, published his spiritual vision. Writing about it in 1825, he described an event that took place about 1782 when he was nearly twelve years old. He saw himself as a helpless, hopeless sinner:

I found to my unspeakable grief and dismay, that I was altogether unholy in my nature; my sins had corrupted every part, so that there was nothing in me that was good; I was a complete sink of sin and iniquity; I looked to see if there was no way to escape, if God could not be just and have mercy on me: but no . . . all my hopes of obtaining mercy and getting to Heaven at last, are gone, and gone forever!

Hibbard continued in this depressing state of guilt for some days, hoping to find pardon for his sins. Then on a Sunday while reading about the sufferings of Christ, he "had an impression to go in secret and pray":

When I came to the place of prayer, had kneeled down, and closed my eyes, with my hands uplifted 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 until death and this shall be thy place of rest."

After thus seeing both the Father and the Son in vision, Hibbard felt the burden of his guilt suddenly lifted:

I never had seen Jesus Christ before, nor heard his voice, nor ever had a sense of his intercession at the right hand of God for me till now; and now I could see the justice of God in shewing mercy to me for the sake of his Son Jesus Christ; and not only to me, but to all that would come to him forsaking their sins, and believing that his death and suffering were the only satisfactory sacrifice for sin.

Finally he described the ecstasy of the visionary experience:

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! Beholding the glory of God by faith, was a rapturous sight. . . . I opened my eyes therefore, while still on my knees; and behold all nature was praising God. The sun and firmament, the trees, birds,

⁴³ Elias Smith, *The Life, Conversion, Preaching, Travels, and Sufferings of Elias Smith* (Portsmouth, N. H.: Printed by Beck & Foster, 1816), 1:56, 59.

and beasts, all appeared stamped with the glory of God. I leaped from my kneeling posture, clapped my hands, and cried, Glory! Glory! Glory! Heaven and earth is full of thy glory.⁴⁴

Another youth, Eleazer Sherman, of Middleborough, Massachusetts, described a similar deliverance from the guilt of sin. On January 10, 1815, at the age of nineteen, he concluded that "misery and despair must be my lot forever":

I sunk down in tears, and sorrow overwhelmed my sinking soul. While in this distress, I heard as it were a soft and pleasant voice saying to me, Behold the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world: And then was presented to my mental view the dear Saviour, from his birth to his death. He seemed one of the most innocent looking persons ever beheld by mortal eyes.

After appearing on his throne of mercy, the Savior seemed to ask the young man to surrender his life to him. "As soon as I had given up all," he wrote, "I found peace, and the glory of God filled my soul."⁴⁵

The seventh and last vision of Joseph Sr. occurred, according to his wife, while he was living in Palmyra in 1819 or 1820.⁴⁶ It was about this time that young Joseph would say that he experienced his first vision. The earliest account of that vision survives from 1832 in Joseph Jr.'s own hand. He begins his narration by pointing out that his parents "spared no pains to instructing me in <the> christian religion." He then described his youthful religious questing:

At about the age of twelve years my mind become seriously imprest [impressed] with regard to the all important [important] concerns for the welfare of my immortal Soul, which led me to searching the scriptures, believeing as I was taught, that they contained the word of God. Thus applying myself to them and my intimate acquaintance with those of differant denominations led me to marvel exce[e]dingly, for I discovered that <they did not> adorn their profession by a holy walk and Godly conversation agreeable to what I found contained in that sacred depository, this was a grief to my Soul. Thus from the age of twelve years to fifteen I pondered many things in my heart . . . my mind become exce[e]dingly distressed for I become convicted of my sins and by searching the scriptures I found that <mankind> did not come unto the Lord but that they had apostatised from the true and liveing faith and there was no society or denomination that built upon the gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the new testament.

However, he continued, "I learned in the scriptures that God was the same yesterday, to day and forever." By observing the wonders of nature, Joseph confirmed for himself "well hath the wise man said <it is a> fool <that> saith in his heart there is no God." Thus by considering

⁴⁴ B. Hibbard, *Memoirs of the Life and Travels of B. Hibbard* (New York: Printed for and Published by the Author, 1825), 22-24.

⁴⁵ Eleazer Sherman, *The Narrative of Eleazer Sherman* (Providence, R. I.: H. H. Brown, 1830), 1:20-21.

⁴⁶ Anderson, *Lucy's Book*, 330.

both the Bible and creation he concluded: "All, all these bear testimony and bespeak an omnipotent and omnipresent power, a being who maketh Laws and decreeth and bindeth all things in their bounds, who filleth Eternity, who was and is and will be from all Eternity to Eternity." Thus convinced that the God of the Bible existed, but no denomination any longer taught the New Testament gospel, he continued praying:

I cried unto the Lord for mercy for there was none else to whom I could go and obtain mercy and the Lord heard my cry in the wilderness and while in <the> attitude of calling upon the Lord <in the 16th year of my age> a pillar of light above the brightness of the sun at noon day come 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 and he spake unto me saying, Joseph <my son> thy sins are forgiven thee. . . . behold I am the Lord of glory, I was crucified for the world.⁴⁷

Several observations can be drawn from this earliest written narration of Smith's teenage religious experience. First, like his mother, he found the Bible a reliable guide and his interpretation of it the only correct one. Second, like his parents before him, he realized that no church any longer had the truth; everyone else had apostatized. Finally, like his parents and many others of that period, he felt a conviction of his sins and found forgiveness through a direct vision of the Savior granting him pardon.

Orsamus Turner, the young apprentice working at the Palmyra *Register* newspaper office, noted young Joseph's presence at a Methodist camp meeting. He recalled that "after catching a spark of Methodism in the camp meeting, away down in the woods, on the Vienna road, he [Smith] was a very passable exhorter in evening meetings."⁴⁸ The reference to "camp meeting" alludes to a campground site used by Methodists at that time. This camp was about a mile outside the village of Palmyra, "away down in the woods" on the road running southeast to Vienna. At this site in 1822, Methodists built their first house of worship.

The Methodist work in Palmyra was still only a "class meeting" on the circuit at this time. It was not until July 3, 1821 that the Methodist Society of Palmyra was incorporated as a church "by the name of the first Methodist Episcopal Church of Palmyra."⁴⁹ Four days later, on

⁴⁷ "A History of the life of Joseph Smith Jr.," 1-2, CHL, and Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:5-6. In June 1830 there was a brief reference to Joseph's experience of forgiveness recorded in the Book of Commandments: "For, after that it truly was manifested unto this first elder [Joseph Smith], that he had received a remission of his sins, he was entangled again in the vanities of the world" (BC 24:6). Joseph saw this experience in 1832 as his call to start into the ministry. In this 1832 recollection he wrote that he was in his sixteenth year of age (1821) when he received forgiveness.

⁴⁸ O[rsamus]. Turner, *History of the Pioneer Settlement of Phelps and Gorham's Purchase*, 214, 400. See also Calvin N. Smith, "Joseph Smith as a Public Speaker," *Improvement Era* 69 (April 1966):277.

⁴⁹ See Miscellaneous Records, Book C:385-86, in the County Clerk's Office, Ontario County, Canandaigua.

July 7, 1821, Durfee Chase deeded to the Methodist Church his property on Vienna Road.⁵⁰ It was not until 1822 that they were able to begin construction of a meeting house.⁵¹

In the Methodist style of worship, a sermon was preached in which points were drawn from a given text or passage from the Bible. After the message, an exhortation was usually given by another speaker who would reemphasize the points made in the preacher's exposition and plead with the people to take seriously the message they had just heard. The Methodist structure provided for the licensing of official exhorters by the District Conference.⁵² However, in more informal situations, such as camp meetings and evening services (where the liturgical format used at the morning worship was dispensed with), even those as young as twelve or thirteen could rise and give exhortations.⁵³ Since Turner completed his apprenticeship and left Palmyra in the summer of 1822, his words provide a valuable insight into Joseph's religious activities before his seventeenth birthday.

Joseph did not become a licensed exhorter because such persons had to be members in full standing with the denomination. However, Pomeroy Tucker, another early resident of Palmyra, remarked concerning Joseph, "At one time he joined the probationary class of the Methodist church in Palmyra, and made some active demonstrations of engagedness . . . [but] he soon withdrew from the class."⁵⁴ Formal church membership would have required Joseph's meeting with the class leader "at least six months on trial."⁵⁵

Joseph attended a debating club in Palmyra Village, and Orsamus Turner recalled the following:

Joseph had a little ambition; and some very laudable aspirations; the mother's intellect occasionally shone out in him feebly, especially when he used to help us solve some portentous questions of moral or political ethics, in our juvenile debating club, which we moved down to the old red school house on Durfee

⁵⁰ See Deeds of Ontario County, Book G:345, Ontario County Records Center and Archives, Canandaigua.

⁵¹ See Palmyra *Herald* 2 (June 19, 1822):2.

⁵² *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: J. Emory and B. Waugh, 1828), 28, 43, 45, 64, 74, 80. For background on the Methodist Class, see David Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting: Its Origins and Significance* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 1987). Members of the class were to "bear one another's burdens" (94) and "there was no prerequisite for Methodist membership other than a desire for salvation, the societies were open to all, regardless of their spiritual state" (108).

⁵³ *Doctrine and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 71.

⁵⁴ Pomeroy Tucker, *Origin, Rise and Progress of Mormonism*, 18.

⁵⁵ *Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 80.

⁵⁶ Turner, *History of Phelps and Gorham's Purchase*, 214. This statement by Turner is cited in John Henry Evans, *Joseph Smith, An American Prophet* (New York: Macmillan, 1933), 32. The *Western Farmer* 1 (January 23, 1822):3, Palmyra, contained the following: "NOTICE. The young people of the village of Palmyra and its vicinity are requested to attend a Debating school at the school house near Mr. Billings' on Friday next." Notice dated January 19, 1822.

street, to get rid of the annoyance of critics that used to drop in upon us in the village.⁵⁶

Joseph Jr. was involved with the local Methodist class and wrote about his "intimate acquaintance" with persons in different denominations during his youth. By the time he was approaching nineteen, during the 1824-25 revival meetings, he was somewhat partial toward the Methodists but felt little need for organized religion. He later wrote in his 1838-39 account:

During this time of great excitement my mind was called up to serious reflection and great uneasiness; but though my feelings were deep and often poignant, still I kept myself aloof from all these parties, though I attended their several meetings as occasion would permit.⁵⁷

His mother recalled, "Joseph never said many words upon any subject but always seemed to reflect more deeply than common persons of his age upon everything of a religious nature."⁵⁸

According to his later colleague Oliver Cowdery, Joseph was impressed by the revival preaching of Reverend George Lane. As mentioned in Chapter 2, Lane was the Methodist presiding elder of the Ontario District from July 1824 until January 1825. Cowdery wrote, "Much good instruction was always drawn from his [Lane's] discourses on the scriptures, and in common with others, our brother's [Joseph Smith's] mind became awakened."⁵⁹ Joseph would have been eighteen years old when he heard Lane preaching.

After the family discussed "the subject of the diversity of churches," Lucy Smith recalled that Joseph saw an angel who revealed to him the gold plates:

After we ceased conversation, he went to bed & was pondering in his mind which of the churches were the true one > but he had not laid there long till >he saw> a bright <light> enter the room where he lay. He looked up and saw an angel of the Lord <standing> by him. The angel spoke, I perceive that you are enquiring in your mind which is the true church. There is not a true church on Earth. No, not one, <and> has not been since Peter took the Keys <of the Melchisedec priesthood after the order of God> into the Kingdom of Heaven. The churches that are now upon the Earth are all man made churches.⁶⁰

Lucy Smith later remembered "listening in breathless anxiety to the <religious> teachings" of her son Joseph, "for Joseph was less inclined to the study of books than any child we had but much more given to reflection and deep study."⁶¹ These teachings would have been the theological expositions resulting from Joseph's deep study expressed within the Smith family.

⁵⁷ Manuscript History, Book A-1:2; Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith* 1:270.

⁵⁸ Anderson, *Lucy's Book*, 335; not in Coray revised manuscript.

⁵⁹ *Messenger and Advocate* 1 (December 1834):42.

⁶⁰ Anderson, *Lucy's Book*, 335; not in Coray revised manuscript.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 344.

Joseph Smith's childhood vision, as his 1832 narrative describes, of Christ's appearing and granting him forgiveness for his sins was similar to those of other young people of his day. The later 1838-39 version of his first vision introduces a revival before his vision and creates a chronologically implausible picture.

From what we can learn about the religious background of the Smith family, Joseph Jr.'s parents taught religious values to their children. Though his father did not regularly attend church, he did sing and pray with his family. Joseph's religious instruction included hearing minister's sermons, revival homilies, private family worship, and personal Bible study. Joseph was not uninformed, ignorant, or illiterate.

While the Smith family held Christian beliefs, they also believed in treasures supernaturally buried in the earth which could be obtained only through magical rituals. It is to the well-documented period of what Joseph Jr. called "glass looking" that we turn our attention in the next chapter.