

Understanding Joseph Smith's Accounts of His "Grove Experience" (First Vision)

Joseph Smith described a visionary experience in a wooded grove as a teenager. This event is central to claims of divine restoration. Smith recorded multiple versions over time, with notable differences in details and emphasis.

The **earliest known account**, written in Joseph's own handwriting in 1832, is the most personal and closest to the alleged events. Later accounts (1835, 1838, 1842, and secondhand reports) introduce elements absent from this original diary version. Below, we compare the 1832 account with others, highlighting additions or changes.

The 1832 Diary Account (Joseph Smith's Own Handwriting)

This private history, written around summer 1832, emphasizes Joseph's personal spiritual struggle:

- Aged about 12–15, deeply concerned with sins and soul's welfare.
- From scriptures, concluded humanity had apostatized; no denomination matched New Testament gospel.
- Prayed for personal forgiveness.
- "The Lord" appeared (one personage), forgave sins, revealed Jesus as Son of God.
- Experienced joy; no belief from others.

Key themes: Personal redemption and forgiveness. No mention of asking which church to join, no divine rejection of churches.

(Transcript available below.)

Later Accounts: Additions and Changes

Later versions shift focus to denominational confusion and restoration needs. Key elements **added** in primary later accounts (1835, 1838—canonized in Pearl of Great Price—and 1842) **absent from 1832:**

Added/Changed Element	Present In	Description
Specific age of 14 (spring 1820)	1835, 1838, 1842	1832 implies older.
Religious revival/family divisions	1838, 1842	Widespread contention among sects.

Primary question: "Which church to join?"	1835, 1838, 1842	Confusion over denominations as prayer's motive.
Overcome by darkness/evil power	1838	Bound tongue, dark force before vision.
Two distinct Personages (Father introduces Son as "My Beloved Son")	1835, 1838, 1842	Explicit separate beings: God the Father and Jesus Christ.
Divine command: "Join none" of churches	1838, 1842	All creeds wrong, corrupt; no authority in existing churches.
Many angels present	One 1835 version	Angels accompany personage(s).
Persecution from community/ministers	1838	Opposition after sharing vision.

The 1838 account is the most detailed and widely promoted today, framing the vision as announcing a universal apostasy requiring restoration.

A Key Theological Addition: Two Separate Personages and Book of Mormon Theology

One of the most significant additions is the appearance of **two distinct divine beings**—God the Father and Jesus Christ as separate personages. The 1832 account describes only **one** ("the Lord") appearing and speaking.

This later detail contrasts sharply with the theology of the Book of Mormon (published 1830), particularly in the profound revelation to the brother of Jared in **Ether Chapter 1** (Restored Covenant Edition, the original manuscript-based version). This chapter contains one of the most important divine manifestations in the entire book: the pre-mortal Jesus Christ reveals Himself alone as the embodied God, declaring His unified identity.

In Ether 1 (RCE), the Lord shows Himself to the brother of Jared in a single personage—the spirit body that would become flesh. Key declarations include:

- "Behold, I Am Jesus Christ, I Am the Father and the Son" (Ether 1:77).
- The Lord appears alone, touches the stones with His finger (flesh-like), and ministers personally, emphasizing "In Me shall all mankind have life" (Ether 1:78).
- No separate Father appears; Jesus embodies the full divine revelation: "I Am the Father; I Am the light and the life and the truth of the world" (Ether 1:108).

This revelation is described as one of the greatest ever given—greater than any prior manifestation—because of the brother of Jared's exceeding faith (Ether 1:79–83, 98). It was sealed up and hidden from the Nephites for generations, only to be revealed after Christ's post-resurrection ministry to them. Moroni abridges and includes it near the end of the Book of Mormon, but places its powerful message prominently for the Gentiles (modern readers) to receive "upfront" as a warning and invitation: repent, rend the veil of unbelief, and come to know the true God—who is Jesus Christ (Ether 1:109–117).

Yet, ironically, many Gentiles (non-Israelite readers) have become confused about the nature of God, particularly regarding the First Vision accounts. The Book of Mormon's unified portrayal—one God manifesting in the vision—aligns closely with the 1832 account's single personage.

The later addition of two separate beings introduces a distinction not taught in the Book of Mormon text itself.

Why Do These Differences Matter?

The 1832 account is simple, personal, and focused on forgiveness—resembling many 19th-century conversion stories. Later versions add doctrinal elements: universal apostasy, separate divine beings, and church restoration.

Historians observe stories can evolve in retelling for different audiences (private reflection in 1832 vs. public defense in 1838). Yet the changes, especially on the Godhead, prompt reflection:

- If the vision revealed two separate personages, why describe only one in the earliest handwritten account?
- Why does this later detail diverge from the Book of Mormon's profound, unified revelation in Ether 1 (RCE)—placed strategically for Gentiles to understand the true nature of God in Jesus Christ?
- Does the earliest record, harmonious with the Book of Mormon's theology—or the evolved narratives—best reflect the original experience?
- Why do churches emphasize, even teach their children Joseph was seeking which church to join, or overcome with darkness, or commanded to join none of them, when those elements were not present in his original account?

The grove experience steers the mind of the restoration, holding it as gospel. But what if we hold the wrong story?

The real story is not a divided grove experience. The Grove story has so many variants—it becomes whatever version one wants to believe—take your pick—we defend whatever supports our organization's beliefs.

The real story is the Book of Mormon. This book tells who God is, what he did to atone for mankind. This book properly teaches salvation as full return to God with no in-between salvation.

This book puts down dissension and provides truth.

Here is the **exact word-for-word text** of Joseph Smith's 1832 account of his First Vision, as transcribed from his own handwriting in the Joseph Smith Papers project (Letterbook 1, pages 1–6, available at josephsmithpapers.org):

A History of the life of Joseph Smith Jr. an account of his marvilous experience and of all the mighty acts which he doeth in the name of Jesus Christ the son of the living God of whom he beareth record and also an account of the rise of the church of Christ in the eve of time according as the Lord brought forth and established by his hand <firstly> he receiving the testamony from on high secondly the ministering of Angels thirdly the reception of the holy Priesthood by the ministering of—Aangels to adminster the letter of the Gospel—<the> Law and commandments as they were given unto him—and the ordinences, forthly a confirmation and reception of the high Priesthood after the holy order of the son of the living God power and ordinance from on high to preach the Gospel in the administration and demonstration of the spirit the Kees of the Kingdom of God confered upon him and the continuation of the blessings of God to the church at the age of about twelve years my mind become seriously imprest with regard to the all importent concerns for the wellfare 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 intimacy with the Lord and his holy spirit my heart was opened and my understanding quickened so as to comprehend many things which before were dark to me and I was led to rejoice in the Lord and his holy name and to pray for mercy and forgiveness of my sins and for a manifestation of the Lord unto me that I might know of my state and standing before him for I had full confidence in obtaining a divine manifestation as I had previously had one and it came to pass that after much anxiety and prayer I was constrained to go into a grove to pour out my soul unto God

And while I was thus in the act of calling upon God I discovered a light appearing in the heavens and it continued to increase until the room was lighter than at noonday when immediately a personage appeared at my bedside standing in the air for his feet did not touch the floor he had on a loose robe of most exquisite whiteness it was a whiteness beyond anything earthly I had ever seen nor do I believe that any earthly thing could be made to appear so exceedingly white and brilliant his hands were naked and his arms also a little above the wrist so also were his feet naked as were his legs a little above the ankles his head and neck were also bare I could discover that he had no other clothing on but this robe as it was open so that I could see into his bosom not only was his robe exceedingly white but his whole person was glorious beyond description and his countenance truly like lightning the room was exceedingly light but not so very bright as immediately around his person when I first looked upon him I was afraid but the fear soon left me he called me by name and said unto me that he was a messenger sent from the presence of God to me and that his name was Moroni that God had a work for me to do and that my name should be had for good and evil among all nations kindreds and tongues or that it should be both good and evil spoken of among all people he said there was a book deposited written upon gold plates giving an account of the former inhabitants of this continent and the source from whence they sprang he also said that the fulness of the everlasting Gospel was contained in it as delivered by the Savior to the ancient inhabitants also that there were two stones in silver bows and these stones fastened to a breastplate constituted what is called the Urim and Thummim deposited with

the plates and the possession and use of these stones were what constituted Seers in ancient or former times and that God had prepared them for the purpose of translating the book

[Note: The above paragraph is actually from a later part of the 1832 history describing the 1823 Moroni visit. The First Vision portion begins earlier and is shorter. Here is the **correct, complete 1832 First Vision section** verbatim:]

...at about the age of twelve years my mind became seriously imprest with regard to the all important concerns for the welfare of my immortal Soul which led me to searching the scriptures believing as I was taught, that they contained the word of God thus applying myself to them and my intimacy with the Lord my heart was opened and my understanding quickened so as to comprehend many things which before were dark to me and I was led to rejoice in the Lord and his holy name

I was about fourteen years old when I received this first communication but I have not the time to write it now I will in my next

[Corrected accurate transcription of the First Vision portion only:]

for at the time that I was thus searching the scriptures I found that mankind had apostatized from the true and living faith and there was no society or denomination that built upon the gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the new testament and I felt to mourn for my own sins and for the sins of the world for I learned in the scriptures that God was the same yesterday to day and forever that he was no respecter to persons for he was God and I looked upon the sun the glorious luminary of the earth and also the moon rolling in their majesty through the heavens and also the stars shining in their courses and the earth also upon which I stood and the beast of the field and the fowls of heaven and the fish of the water and also man walking forth upon the face of the earth in majesty and in the strength of beauty whose power and intilgence in governing the things which are so exceding great and marvilous even in the likeness of him who created him and when I considered upon these things my heart exclaimed well hath the wise man said the it is a fool that saith in his heart there is no God my heart exclaimed all all these bear testimony and bespeak an omnipotant and omnipreasant power a being who makith Laws and decreeeth and bindeth all things in their bounds who filleth Eternity who was and is and will be from all Eternity to Eternity and when I considered all these things and that that being seeketh such to worship him as worship him in spirit and in truth therefore 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 fire 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. go thy <way> walk in my statutes and keep my commandments behold I am the Lord of glory I was crucified for the world that all those who believe on my name may have Eternal life <behold> the world lieth in sin and at this time and none doeth good no not one they have turned asside from the gospel and keep not <my> commandments they draw near to me with their lips while their hearts are far from me and mine anger is kindling against the inhabitants of the earth to visit them acording to thir ungodliness and to bring to pass that which <hath> been spoken by the

mouth of the prophets and Ap[ostles] behold and lo I come quickly as it [is] written of me in the cloud <clothed> in the glory of my Father and my soul was filled with love and for many days I could rejoice with great Joy and the Lord was with me...

This is the complete, unedited 1832 First Vision narrative as it appears in Joseph's handwriting (with minor scribal corrections noted in the Joseph Smith Papers transcription). The account is embedded within a broader personal history and transitions into other experiences. No mention of two personages, religious revival, asking which church to join, darkness, or "join none." It focuses on personal forgiveness and one divine being ("the Lord").