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A Psycho-historical Study of the First Mormon Family

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# THE SMITHS AND THEIR DREAMS AND VISIONS

By C. Jess Groesbeck

SOME YEARS AGO, STERLING MCMURRIN WAS ASKED about the significance of the First Vision of Joseph Smith. He responded that he could not possibly have a full comprehension of this until environmental influences, family relationships and the early background of Joseph Smith were explored.<sup>1</sup> Recently, Bushman also noted "Mormonism . . . began with one family, the family of Joseph Smith, Sr., and Lucy Mack Smith of Vermont and New York."<sup>2</sup> Bushman then notes that Joseph's culture was predominantly a family culture and that he had little schooling until he was past the age of twenty. He noted that the family had to work on the family farm. There was no evidence that the family attended church until the children were in their teen years. He noted that Joseph was entirely under the influence of his own family and a small circle of acquaintances in the villages of Palmyra and Manchester.

The exploration of the family of Joseph Smith, Sr., is only in its beginnings. Much of this is due to a lack of historical data, but in my opinion what is available has not been explored fully. Therefore, this article will explore the life of Joseph Smith and his family, particularly utilizing the insights of psychiatry, psychoanalysis and anthropology. Although some historians feel that this method, also called psycho-history, has questionable value and is at best an uncertain methodological approach to history, I feel strongly that the combination of psychoanalysis, psychiatry, and anthropology, along with history, will in the end harvest rich and fruitful insights.

Psychoanalysis is a methodology for observing human behavior, as well as a form of psychotherapy and a means for inner

self-development. Psychoanalysis can also be utilized as a tool of historical investigation. But Erik Erikson notes that the psychoanalytic approach to history needs modification when taken out of its usual and familiar place in the consulting room, since the inability to observe the free associations, dreams, and behavior patterns of the live patient is a serious obstacle.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the historical documentation of individuals' lives can reveal much to a psychoanalytic approach, often unknown to them, in terms of self-revelations and understanding of their inner workings.

In this article I do not claim to give final opinions or conclusions about the life of Joseph Smith. My intention is to utilize psycho-historical insights in the investigation of Joseph Smith in an attempt to develop a new paradigm concerning the life of the Mormon prophet. It is hoped that in engendering new paradigms concerning his life, we might move beyond some apparently irreconcilable contradictions in his life that emerge from current viewpoints.

This article will look at the deeply personal inter-family relationships of the Smith family, focusing mainly on Lucy and Joseph, Sr. Through this approach I will show that one of the most important and remarkable tasks Joseph, Jr., performed in his early years, including the time when he had his earliest and most significant visions, was to mediate what were, at times, irreconcilable conflicts within the marriage of Joseph Smith, Sr., and Lucy Mack Smith.

## LUCY'S SEARCH FOR THE TRUE CHURCH

Lucy Mack Smith's family seems to have been prone to physical illness and psychological depression. Lucy describes her mother getting "a fit of sickness" when she, Lucy, was eight years of age.<sup>4</sup> Although her mother recovered, this was an extremely difficult and "low" period. Her mother well could have been depressed and ready to die.

In later years, the death of her sister Lovina had a profound effect on Lucy, most likely because Lovina played the part of a substitute mother. During this time, Lucy was "pensive and

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melancholy," and she thought "that life was not worth possessing." In the midst of her anxiety, she wrote, "I determined to obtain that which I had heard spoken so much from the pulpit—a change of heart."<sup>5</sup>

These words suggest that at least for a brief period, Lucy experienced a severe grief reaction, or possibly an outright clinical depression. What is significant is that she sought a spiritual resolution to her difficulties.

Shortly after this she met and married Joseph Smith, Sr. Apparently things went fairly well in the early years of her marriage, but by 1802, after having several children, she developed consumption (tuberculosis). She grew steadily weaker, and could not even bear having someone speak or whisper in the room. A Methodist exhorter came to see her and asked among other things whether she was ready to die. She feared that she was not because she "knew not the ways of Christ" and felt "a dark and lonesome chasm between [her]self and the Savior," which she "dared not attempt to pass." Then she saw a faint glimmer of light beyond the gloom. She was meditating upon death as the visitor left, and her husband felt that soon she was going to die.

At that point, she apparently went into a visionary state where she pleaded with the Lord to spare her life that she might bring up her children and care for her husband. She made a solemn covenant with God that if he would let her live, she would endeavor to serve him to the best of her abilities. She then heard a voice saying: "Seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you. Let your heart be comforted; ye believe in God, believe also in me."<sup>7</sup> Not long after this, her health began to improve.

From then on Lucy became preoccupied with the subject of religion. She began to fulfill her covenant with the Lord by doing Christian service and she sought, as well, to find the true religion or the true church. Although soon after this experience she was baptized, she joined no denomination. Her anxiety about being in the true church became a very profound and significant issue for her, the meaning of life and death. She became quite perfectionistic in this quest and it became the most powerful

influence in her family. The outcome of Lucy's visionary experience directed her toward the burning question of what was the true church, finding the true church, and resolving her life conflicts around those issues.

#### JOSEPH SMITH, SR.'S, FINANCIAL WOES

While Lucy was preoccupied with a religious search, her husband, Joseph Smith, Sr., had other concerns. He sought to recover a financial loss which began in 1802 when he and Lucy moved to Randolph, Connecticut, to enter the mercantile business of selling ginseng.<sup>8</sup> Apparently, the ginseng root was selling at a high price in China as a remedy for plague, and Joseph, Sr., invested in this root and obtained a quantity to ship. He was offered three thousand dollars for his ginseng, but he refused the offer, claiming that the price was only two-thirds of the ginseng's real value. In the ensuing weeks, he lost his profits and costs by sending his herb to China, eventually being cheated out of any returns at all. Once, when the



man who took it from him was somewhat drunk, he exhibited a large amount of silver and gold and said, "There, sir, are the proceeds of Mr. Smith's ginseng!"<sup>9</sup>

The financial loss had far-reaching consequences for the entire family. Indebtedness became virtually their perpetual state. They moved seven times in fourteen years with debts continually plaguing them. Even Lucy lost one thousand dollars that she had saved.

Joseph, Sr., was only marginally able to support his family. The fact that they "were on the poor rolls" in the state of Vermont suggests a condition of economic destitution.<sup>10</sup> It is striking that by the time they arrived in Palmyra in 1816, first Alvin, and later Joseph, Jr., and Hyrum were essentially supporting the family. Alvin and Joseph seemed specifically set apart to compensate for the failure of their father.

The extant history of Joseph, Sr., suggests that he lived a very difficult life filled with suffering. He may well have suffered a clinical depression that hampered his ability to function. Psychologically, in his depression, bitterness, and economic destitution,

he probably never got over the loss from the ginseng root incident where “he was cheated out of his gold and silver.” From then on, it was as though he were a dreamer who detached himself from reality, becoming preoccupied and fascinated with money digging, probably in an attempt to recover a loss he could never fully accept. Through money digging, he expected to become rich and to find the security he had always wanted for his family.

In this state, Joseph, Sr., appears to have habitually and chronically abused alcohol, which must have had a shattering effect on the family. Although the extent of Joseph, Sr.’s, drinking has been a matter of debate, Richard Bushman notes that:

The vicissitudes of life seem to have weighed heavily on Joseph, Sr. In a patriarchal blessing given to Hyrum, Dec. 9, 1834, Joseph, Sr., commended Hyrum for the respect he paid his father despite difficulties: “Though he has been out of the way through wine, thou hast never forsaken him nor laughed him to scorn.” [(Hyrum Smith Papers, Church Archives.)] Since there is no evidence of intemperance after the organization of the church, Joseph, Sr., likely referred to a time before 1826 when Hyrum married and left home.<sup>11</sup>

Years later, in an 1884 interview Lorenzo Saunders referred to Joseph, Sr.’s, drinking, saying, “The old man [referring to Joseph Smith, Sr.] would always tell yarns. He would go to a turkey shoot, get tight and then put spells on people’s guns and tell them they would not be able to shoot.”<sup>12</sup> In the same decade, in an interview in the *Saints’ Herald*, William Kelley noted that Joseph, Sr., and Joseph Smith, Jr., sometimes drank together, most likely cider.<sup>13</sup>

Mormon historian Marvin Hill notes that Joseph, Sr.’s, drinking was seldom talked about and may be one of the reasons why he seems to be left in the shadows, historically.<sup>14</sup> Certainly, Lucy Mack Smith did not want to bring out the family skeletons in her history. It is noteworthy that when Joseph, Sr., was baptized, Joseph, Jr., cried deeply. There was a great deal of pent-up emotion. While this could be interpreted on the surface as just overwhelming joy at his father joining the Church, it could also reflect his great relief at seeing his father overcome the state he had been in, emotionally and spiritually.

A clinical interpretation of the data suggests Joseph, Sr., hoped to escape his economic woes and depression through money digging and alcohol—to always “to find a treasure.” This view suggests a basis for Joseph, Sr.’s, conflicts with Lucy and later with the rest of the family. It also contradicts the view articulated by Bushman and Anderson that the family was without stress.<sup>15</sup>

It is felt that the emotional state of Joseph, Sr., had a significant impact not only on Lucy’s own religious quest, but also on her attempts to save him spiritually. Around the same time as the ginseng root experience Lucy became pregnant and developed tuberculosis (the actual sequence is unclear), compounding the potential for stress. Having been demoralized herself, she sought to rescue her depressed husband, and failed.

#### LUCY’S DREAM

Lucy continued to search for the true church after 1800,

when the Smiths were living in Tunbridge, Connecticut. She urged her husband to go with her to the Methodist church. He did, initially, but after strong pressure from his father and brother he pulled away, stubbornly remaining apart from any church. Because of this, Lucy “was considerably hurt.”<sup>16</sup> She must have felt especially traumatized because not only did her husband refuse to go to meetings himself, he also went along with his father and brother who insisted that Lucy should not attend. This was a powerful limitation on her freedom to exercise her own religious desires.

As she grappled with her husband’s stubbornness, Lucy retired to a grove to pray and when she returned she had a dream.<sup>17</sup> She saw a beautiful meadow with two beautiful trees and a pure, clean stream of water. One tree was very beautiful, well proportioned with majestic beauty and great height. As she gazed upon it in admiration, it shone like burnished gold. The branches slowly waved in a gentle breeze. As the wind increased, the branches became animated and lively, expressing the motions of joy and happiness. This brought extreme joy to her. On the opposite side, there was another tree standing as a pillar of marble. No matter how strong the wind blew, not a leaf stirred. It was obstinate and stiff.

As she awoke, she understood the interpretation of the dream. The first tree immediately reminded her of her husband, and the pillar of his brother, Jesse, who was stubborn and unyielding. Lucy blamed Jesse for resisting the fullness of the gospel and refusing to join a church. This interpretation apparently helped reconcile her to her husband’s position, putting the blame for Joseph, Sr.’s, irreligion on his brother. This was her way of struggling to find that which was most positive about her husband.

An alternate interpretation of the dream would be that both trees represented different sides of Joseph, Sr.’s, personality. The one clearly represented the potentially ideal side, the side that was eager to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ, and, as she saw it, be flexible and joyously responsive; the other was his immovable, rigid and stubborn side that led to some of the emotional disturbances suggested by his depression, his chronic inability to work productively and sustain his family, and his chronic abuse of alcohol.

A final interpretation of the dream can be derived from an interactional perspective. The dream can be seen as a composite statement of the interpersonal perceptions of Joseph, Sr., and Lucy. In a sense, the two trees apply equally to each of them; each felt that although they were flexible, the other was rigid. Conversely, each may have felt unconsciously that they were the stubborn party, while their spouse was more flexible.

Nevertheless, the chief significance of this dream was that she was hurt because her husband would not go to the Methodist church with her, which caused an emotional split between them. An overriding theme that emerges from Lucy Mack’s autobiography is perfectionism and moralism surrounding a religious quest that was part of an attempt to save and heal her husband. This was a task that later fell to other family members.

The split that occurred at this time is a theme that pervades

their marriage from then on. This split becomes pronounced with a crisis that emerged in the early 1820's which influenced some of the major events in the genesis of Mormonism.

#### THE DREAMS OF JOSEPH SMITH, SR.

In selling ginseng to make his fortune, Joseph, Sr., hoped to gain gold and silver, but when his treasure slipped away he became a loser. His resultant depression and alcohol abuse were conditions that contributed to the family's itinerant, struggling economic life. In a compensatory way, he sought in money digging to literally regain his treasure, the loss of which he never accepted. One of the hallmarks of depression is an inability to accept loss and separation from that which one has experienced as an object of affection.

Apparently, Joseph, Sr.'s, father had similar problems. Asael Smith lived a desperate life in economic bondage and was described as one who was "quiet and was known to feel sadness."<sup>18</sup> He, too, experienced great discouragement and unbelief. This repeated description suggests the presence of chronic depression. He was religiously independent and could not believe the religious creeds and churches of his day, a view which would have a significant impact on his son and grandson.

Except for his wife's account, little is known about Joseph Smith, Sr. Lucy said he had seven important visions or dreams in his life, although she only recorded five of them. They are remarkable for the insights they lend in understanding Joseph, Sr., as well as other members of the family and the conflicts with which they struggled.

In the first dream of Joseph, Sr., which he had in 1811, he was traveling in an open, barren field and could see nothing except dead and fallen timber.<sup>19</sup> There was no vestige of life. The scene was dreary with a death-like silence. Joseph had an attendant spirit by his side, who told him that this field was the world and it was lying dumb in regard to true religion and the plan of salvation. He was told to travel on.

So far, the state of affairs reflected in the dream is a good description of the psychological state of Joseph, Sr., the dreamer. Some aspects of the dream are typical of dreams from people with serious depressions, which suggests that he was in a depressed state. Notably, he too was searching for spiritual peace by trying to find the true religion. This could reflect the intense disagreement between him and his wife over what he should do.

Finally, in the dream he found a box. A spirit told him that if he ate the contents they "would make you wise, and give you wisdom and understanding." He picked the box up and attempted to eat, but at that point all manner of beasts and animals appeared, threatened him and making it impossible to go on. He was compelled to drop the box and flee for his life.

This dream has an almost classic form. The dreamer, alone, lost and forsaken, is seeking a treasure. He finds it in a special box and faces a task that involves eating. Eating is often associated with depressed states in a very fundamental way. In depression, loss is a core element, usually related to current deprivation and early-life deprivation experiences. It is said in psychiatry that

"the best treatment for depression is to feed the person, emotionally and literally."<sup>20</sup> One could say that Joseph, Sr., needed to eat to be cured; thus, his dream was pointing in therapeutic directions.

In Joseph, Sr.'s, attempt to eat, threatening animals kept him away from the food. At one level, the images of animals might reflect the instinctual layer of unconscious life. Thus, his instincts are disturbed and are stopping him from "getting the food for his spiritual quest." This could reflect his problem with alcohol, which was interfering with satisfying his spiritual needs. Here, the animals are guardians of the treasure and will not let someone partake who is unworthy. The treasure is the spiritual wisdom Joseph, Sr., needs to attain salvation and wholeness to regain his self respect. As the dream ends, however, the dreamer is unsuccessful, which is certainly reflective of Joseph Smith, Sr.'s, everyday life.

In short, this dream seems to mean that if Joseph, Sr., could get control and master his instincts, he would be able to find the wisdom necessary to resolve the problem of his spiritual desolation and find the true religion of Jesus Christ. Another dimension of the symbol of eating is that through eating, one breaks down raw materials and metabolizes them, making them ready for digestion and ultimately using the nutrients for higher purposes. All of this suggests that Joseph Smith, Sr., had a vision relating to the spiritual needs of he and his wife, but he could not complete the tasks necessary to fulfill them.

In 1811 the Smiths moved to Lebanon, New Hampshire, where Joseph, Sr., had a second vision which also seems to have been brought forth by a religious conflict within himself as well as between him and Lucy. Like the first one, the vision began with him in a desolate field which then became a desolate world.<sup>21</sup> Again, a guide was beside him, but the road was broad and barren. In the middle of the vision, Joseph, Sr., quotes to himself a passage from Matthew: "Broad is the road, and wide is the gate that leads to death, and many there be that walk therein; but narrow is the way, and straight is the gate that leads to everlasting life, and few there be that go in thereat." He then followed a narrow path which led to a beautiful stream of water. He went to the source and found a valley in which stood a tree such as he had never seen before. It was a beautiful tree with lovely branches which bore special fruit, as white or whiter than snow. As he began to eat, the fruit was delicious beyond description. At that point he said, "I cannot eat alone, I must bring my wife and children, that they may partake with me." Accordingly, he brought his family, which consisted of his wife and seven children, and they all ate and praised God for his blessing. Here again is the theme of eating and finding satisfaction (this time the motif is something from God that is white and beautiful and of great nourishment). The implication of depression and the longing to be orally fulfilled is paramount; Joseph, Sr., finds his spiritual food.

The dream continues with a spacious building standing opposite the valley. It is full of doors and windows filled with people

finely dressed. With great disrespect and contempt they scornfully point fingers at Joseph, Sr., and his family. At that point, he learns the significance of the fruit. It is the pure love of God shed abroad in the hearts of all those who love him and keep his commandments.

He is then told to bring the rest of his children because all were not there. Although there is no specific statement about which children were missing, the account says he went out to get two small children. They all rejoiced and ate more fruit than ever, even taking double handfuls. Joseph, Sr., was then told the spacious building represented Babylon and its scorn, and those who despised the true saints of God for their humility.

This dream has a number of implications. In a compensatory way, the dream pointed to the destitute circumstances in which Joseph Smith, Sr., found himself, both economically and socially, in 1811. In addition, it probably compensated for the scorn which came from those about him, including neighbors and perhaps even family members. The statement in the patriarchal blessing given to Hyrum that “he did not scorn his father when he was out of the way with wine,” suggests that perhaps other children *did* laugh and make fun of their father. The scornful children might have been represented by the two small children apart from the rest of the family in the dream.

This dream would have given solace to Joseph, Sr., in the depths of his depression. Compared to the first vision where he was prevented from eating from the box to gain wisdom, in this vision he accomplishes that task and partakes of the food that is beautiful, white and “gives great nourishment.” In a sense, this dream *potentially* suggests his mastery of his problems. (Unfortunately, it wasn’t until much later in his life, and with the aid of his children, particularly Joseph, Jr., that he was emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually able to control his instincts and struggles.) At another level, it justified his own firm commitment to seek the answers to spiritual questions on his own personal road, rather than following the admonitions of Lucy and others to find the true church in an external group.

Initially the dream probably had little impact on the Smiths. Certainly, neither Joseph, Sr., nor Lucy found a spiritual solution to their religious problems. More importantly, the dream was probably used to justify Joseph, Sr.’s, interest in magic and money digging, through which he hoped to resolve their temporal difficulties and, indirectly, their spiritual concerns.

Even though this dream did not directly change Joseph, Sr.’s, life, it suggests the potential of healing through vision or trance. Joseph, Sr.’s, dream also suggests a clear potential for transforming himself, curing his depression through the eating and nourishing process, and at the same time fulfilling spiritual longings in his religious quest for himself, for his wife, and for his family.

Joseph, Sr.’s, second dream is almost identical to Lehi’s dream in the Book of Mormon (1 Nephi 8). Several writers, including Hill and Bushman, have suggested that perhaps when Lucy wrote or recalled this dream of Joseph, Sr., she was influenced by the remarkable experience of Lehi in the Book of Mormon which was available to her at the time she wrote her autobiography in 1844. I suggest she did this unconsciously because the actual life event

she was really referring to was the separation and pain of being apart from the world with “scorned fingers pointed at them” at the time Alvin died. She recounted the dream of her husband almost in the words of Lehi to deny the pain and suffering that they actually felt, and with the outcome of the vision vindicating them. This suggests that ultimately the father’s vision was correct and right, even though it pointed to a more individual and less popular path. In the end, the Smith family found the fruit of the tree of life, while those in the building pointing fingers of scorn were left out.

Interestingly, in both the second dream of Joseph, Sr., and Lehi’s vision, there is a split among the children in the family. Lehi’s split could coincide with the split that was going on in 1824, when Lucy took some of the children with her while Joseph and perhaps others went with the father. Later, of course, they were all united when the true church was restored by Joseph in 1830.

On the other hand, if Lucy’s recollection of her husband’s dream was correct, then one can conclude that the Book of Mormon story of Lehi has a strong correlation with the dream of Joseph, Sr. This would suggest that in translating the Book of Mormon Joseph, Jr., may have recalled that experience of his father in telling Lehi’s story. Here, the Book of Mormon would be viewed as a symbolic expression of significant events in the conscious and unconscious life of Joseph Smith, Jr. It would be considered to be a vehicle to tell an ancient or valuable universal story; i.e., how a rejected family finds deity in spite of persecution from without and conflict and loss from within.

In a sense by recording her husband’s dream the way she did, Lucy confirms that she was wrong in 1828 when she joined the Methodist church, leaving her husband and some of the boys, including Joseph, Jr., in not joining a church. She also confirms that ultimately her husband was correct—that at that time there was no true church.

Joseph, Sr., had his third experience—now called a dream instead of a vision—around 1819 or 1820 after the family had moved to Palmyra.<sup>22</sup> Again, it was a dream of desolation. Again, his guide was with him. Joseph, Sr., found he was very sick and lame that he thought he could walk no farther. He was urged on, and at that point he went to a certain garden where he was told he would come to a gate. In this garden, he beheld the most beautiful flowers. On each side of the center of the garden were six richly carved wooden images each the size of a man. As he walked by each image, it turned and bowed to him. Limping along, he finally made it to the end. After going by all of the images, he was healed. He asked the guide the meaning of this, but awoke before receiving an answer.

This third dream began with the dreamer in a desolate state, being sick and lame. Joseph, Sr.’s, lameness could have been his depression and his inability to support his family. The theme of illness and healing is again prominent. It is noteworthy that Lucy, just prior to describing this dream, states that after they had come to Palmyra, they were “much reduced,” but “not from indolence.”

It was "on account of the many reverses of fortune." She described being "surrounded by embarrassment." Still, she "tried to be happy within the society of her husband." She described her children and herself as being "under the affection of a tender companion and father, my husband."<sup>23</sup> Lucy's words belie more than what they manifestly say. In my opinion, she was trying to defend her husband against accusations of indolence for his inability to support the family.

Joseph, Sr.'s, dream may also have had a connection with young Joseph, Jr. During the years prior to the dream, Joseph, Jr., had suffered an illness that had left him lame for three years. (From a psychoanalytic perspective, perhaps Joseph's refusal of alcohol in the familiar story of his operation represented his opposition to his father's drinking.) In a certain sense this dream, like the dream of the biblical Joseph, contained a precognitive or at least a prognostic statement concerning the future leader of the family. There is a striking reminiscence with the biblical Joseph's dreams where the grain stalks and the sun and moon bow before him, indicating his future role as family leader. Family members often have dreams for others by representing themselves in the dream when, in fact, the dream refers to another family member.

In the sixth dream (1819 or 1820), Joseph, Sr., was again traveling alone and was much fatigued.<sup>24</sup> "It seemed to me that I was going to meeting, that it was the day of judgment, and that I was going to be judged." When he came to the meeting house, he saw multitudes pressing toward the door with great anxiety to get in. He felt that he had no need to hurry, that he would get there in time. However, when he arrived the door was shut and he knocked for admission. The porter informed him that he had come too late. He felt troubled and prayed earnestly for admission.

Then he thought his flesh would perish; as he continued to pray, flesh withered from his bones and he went into a state of total despair. The porter asked him if he had done all that was necessary in order to receive admission. He replied that he had done all in his power, and the porter said that justice must be satisfied, and after that mercy will have its claims. At that point, Joseph, Sr., called upon God in the name of Jesus Christ and cried out in agony of soul, "Oh Lord God, I beseech thee in the name of Jesus Christ, to forgive my sins." He felt considerably strengthened, and a porter or angel indicated that it was necessary to plead for the merits of Jesus. At that point, Joseph, Sr., felt quite well, the doors opened, he entered, and upon entering he awoke.

This dream suggests Joseph, Sr., was in a forlorn, desolate, and most of all, sinful state; yet he still expects entrance into heaven. However, he was shut out and left in a state of anxiety. At that point he underwent the withering of his flesh down to his very bones. In having this experience, one can "see himself as he really is, his essence." Seeing one's skeleton would be equivalent to attaining deep self-knowledge, even though it may be painful. It is like facing a judgment before deity.

As Bushman notes, this dream closely parallels the actual experience of an unbaptized visitor at a revival meeting.<sup>25</sup> Cer-

tainly, it reflects the chronic depression Joseph, Sr., felt with its attendant sense of unworthiness, as well as his paradoxical expectation of easy entry into the kingdom of heaven. He underwent suffering, but then he gained redemption through his pleading.

In Joseph Smith, Sr.'s, seventh and final important dream he met a man with a "peddler's budget on his back," who addressed Joseph, Sr., "Sir, will you trade with me to-day." The man stated, "I have called upon you seven times, I have traded with you each time, and I have always found you strictly honest in your dealings." He was then told that this would be the last time he would ever call upon Joseph, Sr., and that there was "one thing which you lack in order to secure your salvation." Joseph stated, "I earnestly desired to know what it was that I still lacked. I requested him to write the same upon paper. He said that he would do so. I sprang to get some paper, but in my excitement, I awoke."<sup>26</sup>

This dream suggests that in spite of all his efforts, Joseph, Sr., had not yet found spiritual satisfaction. Revivalism was increasingly prominent around Palmyra in 1819 and it must have heightened his anxiety. This may have been a significant topic of conversation for the family.

This dream is reminiscent of the archetypal pattern in history of the hero who seeks the treasure, almost finds it, and then loses out at the last moment. In the hero story of Gilgamesh, he finds the plant of immortality, only to lose it on his way home when he falls asleep and a snake takes it from him.<sup>27</sup>

#### ALVIN AS A TEMPORARY SOLUTION TO THE FAMILY CONFLICT

The problems not only within Lucy and Joseph, Sr., but also between the two created a situation that needed help. After 1818 Alvin, it seems, was the remedy to his parents' personal difficulties. He led the way in shouldering responsibility, first by building the log house, and attempting to pay for the farm. Here Joseph, Sr.'s, problems stand out. The description that Joseph, Jr., gave of Alvin is revealing:

He was the oldest member of my father's family. He lived without spot from the time he was a child. From the time of his birth, he never knew mirth. He was candid and sober and never would play. He minded his mother and father in toiling all day. He was one of the soberest men and when he died, an angel of the Lord visited him in his last moments.<sup>28</sup>

This certainly could imply that Alvin may have been burdened with his parents' depression, particularly that of his father. He tried to do so much for them, stepping in and doing what his father apparently could not or would not do.

The pattern in the Smith family is a common one. In families where there is serious illness in one or both parents, often one child in particular is called and marked out (often unconsciously) to become the healer, reconciler, and carrier of the burdens that

cannot be borne by the parents. This is a nearly universal theme in the study of the dynamics of family systems. In the Smith family, Alvin was chosen.

In November 1823, Alvin became very ill with bilious colic. He was treated with Calomel, a mercury compound. A ball of it lodged in his stomach and caused death within three days.<sup>29</sup> Prior to his death, Alvin called the family to his bedside and “revealed his tender and affectionate spirit, telling Joseph to be good and to be faithful in attempting to obtain the record or the plates.”<sup>30</sup> By now, Joseph, Jr., had had a singular experience on 21 September 1823 in his attempt to get the plates. Alvin died and left great pangs of sorrow in the bosom of young Joseph, as well as in the rest of the family.

The tragedy of Alvin’s death cannot be overemphasized. Clearly, he was the mediator, the one who attempted to heal the rift between his father and the mother, particularly regarding his father’s intense involvement in magic and treasure seeking and his mother’s primary interest in organized religion. Both parents, of course, were seeking spiritual solutions to their lives’ problems, but in different and conflicting modes.

A further blow came to the family when a minister apparently claimed that Alvin had gone to hell because he was not baptized.<sup>31</sup> Lucy may well have felt that this was true, and feared that all the family were going to hell because they were not members of a church. Shortly after that, Lucy took Hyrum, Samuel, and Sophronia and joined the Presbyterian church. Joseph, Sr., and Joseph, Jr., did not. Now the split in the family was more pronounced than ever before.

As the family mourned, complications ensued. Someone had apparently been playing on the family’s grief and suggested that Alvin’s remains had been exhumed. On 25 September 1824, Joseph, Sr., published a statement to discredit reports that Alvin’s body had been exhumed and dissected.

Joseph, Sr., was so angry with the minister who claimed that Alvin had gone to hell that he refused to become involved in church activity, although Lucy did. The family went into deeper depression. The load that Alvin had been carrying now had to be passed on, this time to Joseph, Jr., and Hyrum. They were left to build the family house, which went slowly without their father’s participation and leadership.

Over the next two years the strain increased. There were threats of lawsuits if they did not meet their financial obligations. One instance, Joseph, Sr., and Joseph, Jr., were away digging for money and Lucy and Hyrum were left to face the creditors and try to save the house. Where was the father at this time? This incident highlights the lack of responsibility and leadership taken by Joseph, Sr., which Lucy had to assume.<sup>32</sup> When he did return and needed to borrow money to save the farm, Joseph, Sr., sent Lucy to get it from a Quaker friend.

By 1825, the farm was lost, and Lucy became quite depressed.<sup>33</sup>

#### DIFFERING ACCOUNTS OF THE FIRST VISION

The remarkable visionary and religious experiences of

young Joseph need re-examination in the light of these tensions within the family, particularly in their connection with his father. The apparent discrepancies between the different accounts of the First Vision may reflect Joseph, Jr.’s, changing psychological state.

In the 1838 account, the one canonized by the Church, both the Father and the Son appear, the main theme is to find the true church, and it mentions the time as one of many religious revivals.

In the 1832 account of the First Vision only Christ appears, and the main theme is young Joseph’s attempt to get remission from his sins. There is no mention of revivals whatsoever.

The focus of the 1832 account, the forgiveness of sins, turns more to the internal and constant struggles of Joseph’s father. In addition, considering Joseph, Sr.’s, difficulty with alcohol and the destitution of the family—which must have engendered great feelings of rage, anger, and a sense of loss—along with the loss of Alvin, there was a strong need for a more painful repression and disowning of this dimension of young Joseph’s life.

The similarity of the 1832 account of the First Vision with Joseph, Sr.’s, 1819 sixth dream suggests young Joseph’s strong identification with his father. This dream could also be an expression of Joseph’s attempt to heal his father, experiencing his own father’s sins as though they were his own.

I suggest that the earlier conflict with his father, the loss of Alvin, and particularly the emphasis upon having one’s sins forgiven, were things that could be left behind when Joseph finally obtained his official calling as a prophet. By 1838 the issue of defining and legitimizing the true church in the context of a church organization, of which Joseph was now the president, became a much more germane issue. Finding the true church would tend to vindicate his father and would relegate Joseph, Sr.’s, particular problem of unworthiness to a secondary concern. Since there was no true church on earth, this would tend to justify his continuing in such a lowly state, while struggling with sin, depression and ineffectiveness.

In the 1838 account, which emphasizes the restoration of the true church, Joseph in essence fulfills his mother’s dreams and visionary longing for the true church.

It is important to note that in the 1832 account of the First Vision, the focus is on the Son, who offers forgiveness of sins to Joseph; whereas in the 1838 account, the appearance of the Father is primary in introducing the Son to give the message of the true church. It is almost as though the second aspect emphasized in the later account enthrones the father in a compensatory way as the significant and supreme figure. If one were to apply the First Vision personally to Joseph Smith and his father, one might say that initially the lowly son has to find a way of forgiveness, but once that is done and he has borne and worked out the burdens of the father, the lowly, lost, depressed father can return in his more glorified, exalted, and rightful state as the father who presides over the son.

Perhaps the disparities between the 1832 and the 1838 accounts of the First Vision were caused by fusing and condensing the events of 1820 (when the First Vision took place) with the events of 1823-24 (when Alvin died and religious

revivals were widespread). In doing this, Joseph, Jr., utilized a displacement mechanism at an unconscious level so he would not have to re-experience too directly or strongly the painful loss of Alvin. Indeed, psychoanalysis has shown that the mind operates on several levels simultaneously and unconsciously. A particular mental operation called condensation assuages painful memories by fusing them with others more acceptable or pleasant.

Let it not be concluded, though, that the accounts of the First Vision are just fabricated to buttress the ongoing personal struggles of Joseph Smith, Jr. As Milton Backman has pointed out, in some versions of the vision certain aspects merely could have been emphasized over others.<sup>34</sup> This in no way indicates that all of the aspects of the vision were not experienced in the actual event. In no way would it invalidate the vision in its complexity and intricacy as a psychic datum, answering the needs of Joseph Smith in a personal way.

In the end, through his visions and the subsequent establishment of a new religion, Joseph, Jr., saved his father from his problem with alcohol, his depressions, his economic woes, and perhaps most importantly from his spiritual struggles in sin. He was also able to save his mother; he found for her the true Church which she was seeking and the fulfillment to her early spiritual experiences. In addition, he helped reconcile her with his father, saving their marriage, so that they could become an intact and complete family. Beyond that, he saved his whole family, while resolving his own spiritual crisis.

The wider scope of history shows that the First Vision of Joseph Smith, Jr., was more than just a response to a personal set of family problems, or even to his own personal problems. This vision came at a particular crisis in his life that reached far beyond himself and his own father, but even into his ancestors. As we have seen, one might postulate that depression, struggle and loss, spiritually, emotionally and otherwise, plagued the Smith and Mack families for several generations.

The First Vision of Joseph Smith represented a remarkable, compensatory collective response from the archetypal level of the psyche in which multiple, significant problems were resolved for Joseph himself, his father, for his mother and other members of his family, for his forefathers, and finally for many others in his generation.

Going beyond that, the struggle of the Smith family virtually typifies the experience of a growing number of people on the new frontier of America who felt oppressed, lost, and unable to be saved. They, like the Smiths, felt locked in a Christianity filled with fear, damnation, and predestination; it was a vicious circle from which no one could escape.

Although some claim that others had revelations similar to Joseph Smith's, the important point is that Joseph Smith was the person at the particular time and the particular place who worked through a particular crisis that was universal to himself, to his own family's ancestors and those perhaps of a whole generation. His resolution became a watershed for a whole generation by which they could find a new mode of spiritual life and a new relationship to God.

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