



LIBERTY IN HARMONY

❧❧❧
*The Story of
Joseph Smith
in Pennsylvania*

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FORREST R. HANSEN

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*Sweet, happy place, called Harmony.
Strangers must say, when they pass by,
The Founder they approve;
Who from a forest wild did raise
A seat where men may spend their days
In friendship, peace, and love.¹*

-
- ¹. Written August 2, 1789, by Samuel Stanton, one of the first settlers of Harmony, Pennsylvania. These few lines of poetry portray Samuel Stanton's vision of building the town of Harmony on the Susquehanna River. Emily C. Blackman, *History of Susquehanna County, Pennsylvania, from a Period Preceding Settlement to Recent Times* (Philadelphia: Claxton, Remsen & Haffelfinger, 1873), 88.

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CHAPTER 1

VISITS FROM HEAVENLY MESSENGERS



*The Lord appears to William Penn;
God and Jesus Christ appear to Joseph Smith.*

WILLIAM IN CHIGWELL AND OXFORD

IN LONDON, ENGLAND, OVERLOOKING THE TOWER OF LONDON, SITS AN ancient Anglican church called All Hallows Barking, which some say is the oldest church in the city of London, built in AD 676.²⁸ On October 23, 1644, William Penn was baptized as an infant at All Hallows Barking.²⁹ This would be the start of a spiritual journey that brought William to Pennsylvania along with many others seeking religious liberty.

As a young boy growing up in London, William was particularly sensitive, with an active spirit and mind. He later described himself as a “solitary and spiritual” child.³⁰ He started school at the age of nine in Chigwell, England, a northeastern suburb of London.³¹ In 1656, at the age of twelve, William said that the Lord appeared to him when he was alone in his room at Chigwell. He recalled, “The Lord first appeared to me . . . about the twelfth year of my age” and gave me “divine impressions” of myself.³² Although William recorded that the Lord “reproved” him for his sins, the heavenly visitation provided William with a “certain sound & testimony of [the Lord’s] eternal word,” and William knew he was “preserved” for a divine purpose.³³ This experience inspired him to pursue a different course in life than his father and other nobles of England, which would eventually lead him to the colony of Pennsylvania.

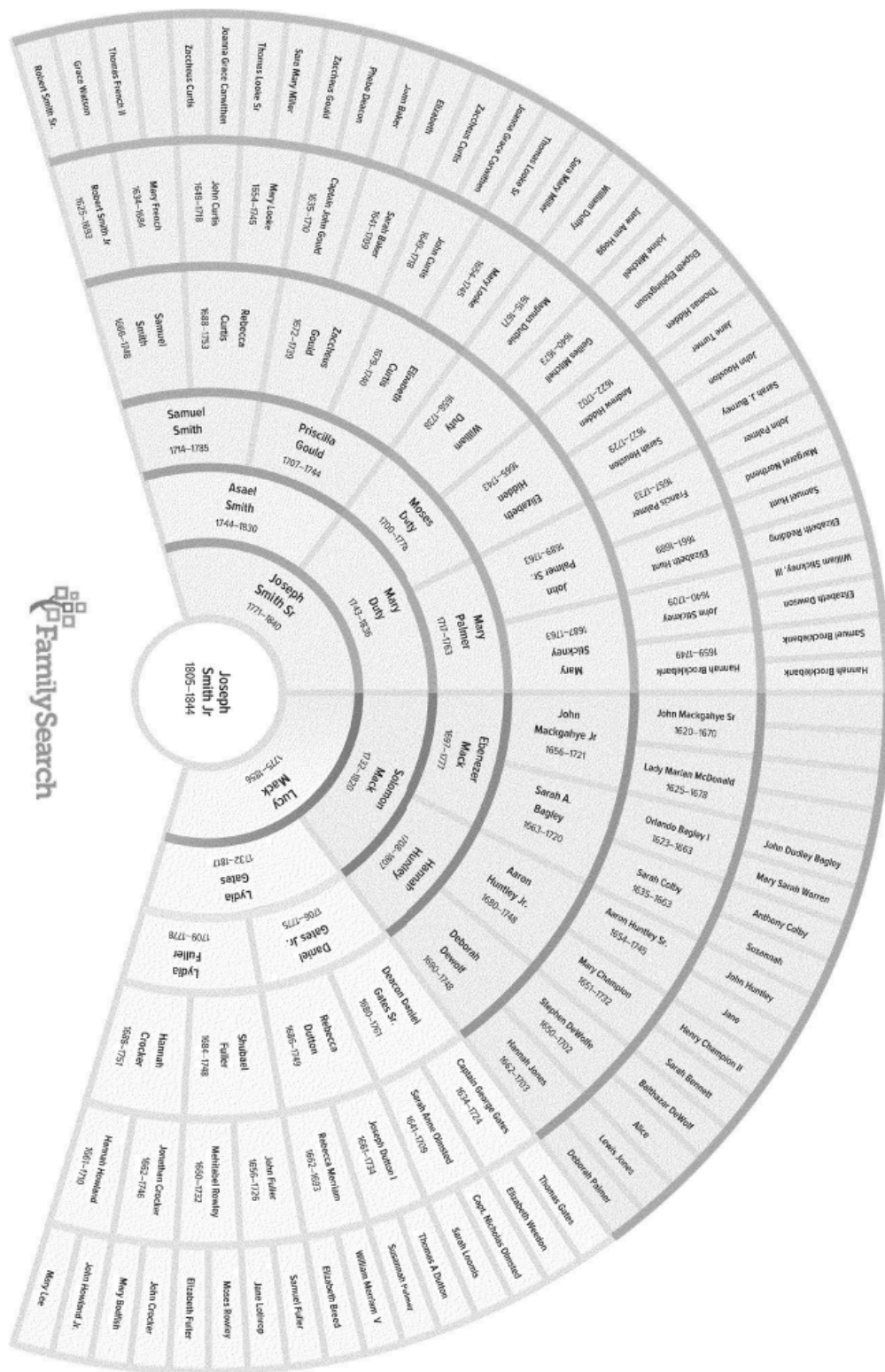
For most of William's youth, his father was away from home serving as an officer in the British Navy. Because of his father's elite position and service to England, he was favored in English society and admitted to Oxford University, the college of Christ's Church.³⁴ But William was introspective and spiritual, which did not fit with the rigid ceremonies and rituals taught at Christ's Church.³⁵ After two years, he withdrew from Oxford University, which not only disappointed his father but also, according to William, brought upon him "whipping, and beating, and turning out of door."³⁶

A few months after William withdrew from Oxford University, his father sent him to live in France, which was standard training ground for a young, noble Englishman. William's father hoped training in France would set him on the right course. William arrived in France and was introduced to Louis XIV's court at the Palace of Fontainebleau, just south of Paris. He also studied at the Protestant Academy of Saumur, which was about two hundred miles south of Paris.³⁷ After staying one year in France, William returned to England and enrolled at Lincoln's Inn, one of the most prestigious law schools in England.³⁸ But his formation in France did not change his search for spirituality and deeper meaning in life, nor did it erase his recollection of the Lord's visit to him and his divine mission. William continued his deeply spiritual path and knew that he had a spiritual purpose to accomplish. He soon graduated from law school at Lincoln's Inn and decided to practice law in Ireland.

THE "BURNED-OVER" DISTRICT

Like William Penn, Joseph Smith sought spiritual enlightenment at a young age. While living in Palmyra, New York, at the age of twelve to fourteen, Joseph became considerably troubled with the subject of religion.³⁹ Great excitement over religion persisted among all denominations of Christians; the flames of religious revival burned deep in their hearts, and upstate New York quickly became known as the "burned-over" district.⁴⁰ Streams of believers flooded the Methodist, Presbyterian, and Baptist churches.⁴¹ Joseph's mother, Lucy Mack Smith, his brothers Hyrum and Samuel, and his sister Sophronia espoused the teachings of the Presbyterian faith.⁴² His father, Joseph Smith Sr., while a firm believer in God and the Bible, did not affiliate with any one

religion. Joseph did not embrace a particular church but often attended the meetings of several churches.⁴³



Joseph Smith Jr. fan chart. Courtesy of FamilySearch.
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Joseph regularly attended Methodist camp meetings, which were scheduled to coincide with circuit riders, or traveling Methodist preachers, passing through the Palmyra area. Methodist leaders noticed Joseph's passion for religion and asked him to be an "exhorter," or a beginning Methodist preacher, whose task was to bring the circuit rider's general message to local believers in their homes.⁴⁴ Proven and experienced exhorters could become local Methodist preachers. Joseph also apparently participated in a local debate club during this time period.⁴⁵

Joseph felt an inclination toward the Methodist Church and may have caught "a spark of Methodism," but the divergent teachings of the local churches prevented him from joining any one church.⁴⁶ "So great was the confusion and strife amongst the different denominations that it was impossible for a person [as] young as I was and so unacquainted with men and things to come to any certain conclusion who was right and who was wrong," Joseph lamented. He observed great confusion and contention, "priest contending against priest, and convert against convert so that all their good feelings one for another (if they ever had any), were entirely lost in a strife of words and a contest about opinions."⁴⁷

During this time of religious excitement and confusion, Reverend George Lane, a presiding elder of the Methodist Church, preached in Palmyra and the surrounding towns.⁴⁸ It was recorded that "Mr. Lane's manner of communication was peculiarly calculated to awaken the intellect of the hearer, and arouse the sinner to look about him for safety—much good instruction was always drawn from his discourses on the scriptures."⁴⁹

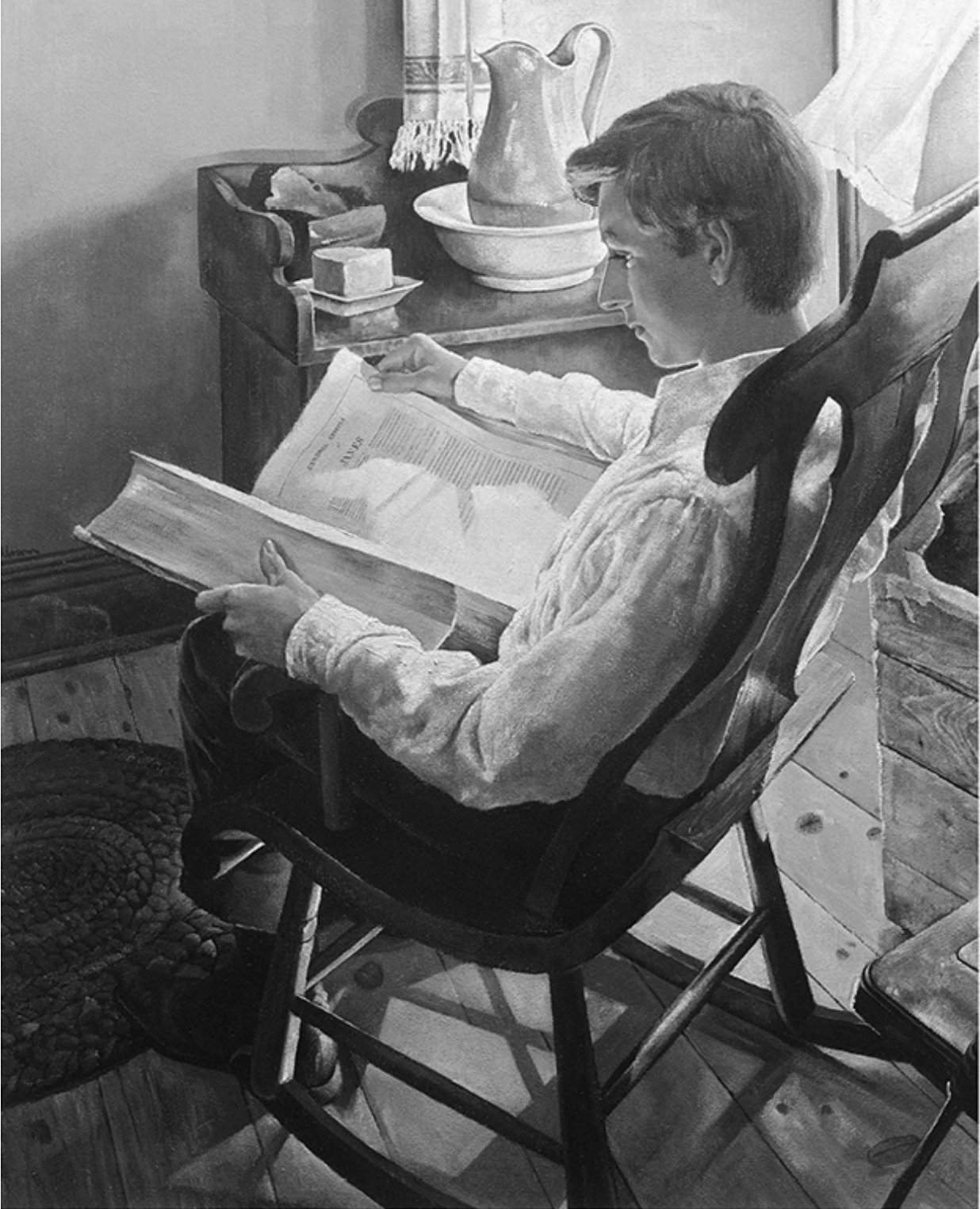
Reverend Lane was a prominent Methodist circuit rider, appointed presiding elder of the Susquehanna District in 1819.⁵⁰ He incessantly traveled his territory preaching to congregations; counseling the traveling preachers, local preachers, and exhorters; meeting the official members of the circuit societies; and promoting the interest of the church in every possible way. Reverend Lane also traveled outside his territory to other areas.⁵¹ Possessing profound literary knowledge and deep humility, Reverend Lane was "celebrated throughout the country as a 'great revival preacher.'"⁵² It was said that his exhortations were overwhelming, and sinners "quailed under them, and many cried aloud for mercy."⁵³ Reverend George Peck, a prominent Methodist preacher who knew

Reverend Lane, stated that under Reverend Lane's "powerful appeals[,] vast congregations were moved like the trees of the forest before a mighty wind. Many a stout-hearted sinner was broken down, and cried aloud for mercy under his all but irresistible appeals. His language was unstudied, but chaste, correct, simple, and forcible."⁵⁴ Reverend Lane appealed to his audience, and his sermons were the result of careful thought and laborious research. He maintained a high standing among his people.⁵⁵



Reverend George Lane from
the *Methodist Magazine*, April 1826.

At a camp meeting in 1819 in Susquehanna County, Reverend Lane delivered a powerful exhortation later described as having a “melting and overwhelming appeal to the unconverted.”⁵⁶ Many hardened sinners yielded to his call and converted. The meeting was greatly blessed and many joined the Methodist Church.⁵⁷ In July 1819 at Vienna, a town not far from Manchester, a conference of about one hundred Methodist ministers was held. This may have been where Joseph caught the “spark” of Methodism.⁵⁸



Joseph Smith Seeks Wisdom from the Bible, by Dale Kilbourn.
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According to Joseph's younger brother, William Smith, George Lane preached a sermon in Palmyra on "What church shall I join?"⁵⁹ The invitation of his discourse was to ask God, as contemplated by James 1:5 in the Bible, which states, "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him." If William Smith is correct, George Lane's message may have awakened Joseph's mind and weighed heavy on his conscience.⁶⁰ Joseph read in the book of James and remarked, "Never did any passage of scripture come with more power to the heart of man than this did at this time to mine. It seemed to enter with great force into every feeling of my heart. I reflected on it again and again, knowing that if any person needed wisdom from God, I did."⁶¹ Joseph's mother later recalled Joseph's keen interest in religion: "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."⁶²

"LET HIM ASK OF GOD"

Joseph concluded that he must do as the book of James directed—pray and inquire of God. One spring morning, in the year 1820, Joseph retired to a grove of trees not far from his home with a humble and burning question: Which church should I join?⁶³ He knelt down in a previously designated location and began to pray fervently to obtain mercy from the Lord and to receive an answer to his question.⁶⁴ Immediately, Joseph was seized upon by some power which entirely overcame him. Thick darkness encircled him, and it seemed that he was doomed to sudden destruction. He exerted all his powers to call upon God to deliver him out of the power of the enemy that had seized him. At the very moment when he was ready to sink into despair and abandon himself to destruction, he saw the forest illuminate. Joseph described the experience in his own words:

I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head, above the brightness of the sun, which descended gradually until it fell upon me. It no sooner appeared than I found myself delivered from the enemy which held me bound. When the light rested upon me I saw two personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description standing above me in the air. One of them spake unto me, calling me by name, and said—pointing to the other, this is my beloved Son, hear Him.⁶⁵

Joseph saw and conversed with God the Father and Jesus Christ. He was told that his sins were forgiven.⁶⁶ When Joseph asked the heavenly beings which of all the religions he should join, he was directed to join none of them. They told Joseph that some religious ministers were corrupt because they “draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; they teach for doctrines the commandments of men: having a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof.”⁶⁷ No one was more surprised at the response than Joseph himself. The heavenly visitors left Joseph with the instruction to continue as he was “until further directed.”⁶⁸

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