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SUSPICION OR TRUST

Reading the Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision

There are essentially three arguments against the First Vision. All of them begin with the premise that it simply could not have happened. The minister to whom Joseph reported the event announced that there were no such things in that day. Fawn Brodie wrote with literary grace to mask her historical deficiencies that Joseph concocted the vision years after he said it happened. Wesley Walters charged Joseph with inventing revivalism when there was none. So it became a foregone conclusion that Joseph failed to mention his vision for years and then gave conflicting accounts that did not match historical facts. This essay invites readers to question these unproven assumptions, placing higher priority on the testimonies of the only eyewitness, rather than the attacks of expert witnesses brought in by the prosecution to testify that he did not see what he said he did.

JOSEPH Smith's First Vision may be the best documented theophany (vision of God) in history. The known historical record includes five different accounts in eight statements (three of the statements are nearly identical to others) of the vision in Joseph's papers, and a few other hearsay accounts in the papers of people who heard him tell of it.¹ Critics contend that the multiple accounts of Joseph Smith's vision are inconsistent with each other or with historical facts and find in them an evolving story that becomes more elaborate over time. However, another view, using the very same evidence, finds Joseph's vision well and richly documented. The multiple accounts need not lead one to disbelieve Joseph Smith. In fact, many find the rich documentation of the First Vision a good reason to believe him.

It is vital to recognize that only Joseph Smith knew whether he experienced a vision in 1820. He was the only witness to what happened and therefore his own statements are the only direct evidence. All other evidence is hearsay. With so much at stake, Joseph's accounts have been examined and questioned. Many have asked if they are credible. To answer that question satisfactorily, seekers need to know all the evidence and examine it for themselves. For several decades now, the Church and various scholars have repeatedly published and publicized the known accounts of Joseph's First Vision; images of the documents containing his own direct statements are available in the Selected Collections from the Archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.² But efforts to publish and publicize the historical record of the vision have not been widely accessed by Latter-day Saints generally. Relatively few people have learned of these vital historical documents and their contents. Critics, with the assistance of the pervasive Internet, prey upon that ignorance to try to undermine faith in the vision. The antidote to this problem is to study the accounts Joseph left.

Each of the accounts has its own history. Each was created in circumstances that shaped what it says, how it was recorded, and how it was transmitted to us. Each has gaps and omissions, and each adds detail and richness. For example, Joseph describes a highly personalized experience in his earliest account (1832). Using revival language, he says he became "convicted of my sins" but could find no place for forgiveness since "there was no society or denomination that built upon the gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the new testament." This account describes how the Lord appeared and filled Joseph "with the spirit of God," and "spake unto me saying Joseph my son thy sins are forgiven thee." It emphasizes the Atonement of Christ and the personal redemption it offered Joseph. He wrote that as a result of the vision, "my soul was filled with love and for many days I could rejoice with great Joy and the Lord was with me."³

Three years later, in 1835, an eccentric visitor from the East interviewed Joseph, and Joseph's scribe captured some of Joseph's

response in his journal. In this account Joseph casts the vision as the first in a series of events that led to the translation of the Book of Mormon. He emphasizes the opposition he felt in the grove and how he made “a fruitless attempt to pray” and couldn’t speak until he knelt and was enabled to do so. This account tells that one divine personage appeared in a pillar of fire, followed shortly by another. “I saw many angels in this vision,” Joseph added as an afterthought. He also remarked, “I was about 14 years old when I received this first communication.”⁴ A week later Joseph told another inquirer about the vision, though Joseph’s scribe recorded only that Joseph gave the fellow an account of his “first visitation of Angels,” rather than describing the vision itself.⁵ Both of these 1835 accounts were incorporated into a draft of Joseph’s history.

Joseph published two accounts of the vision during his lifetime. The first and best known account is in Joseph’s manuscript history. It was written in 1838 and later published in the Church’s newspaper in 1842 and excerpted in the current edition of the Pearl of Great Price. The first published account was Joseph’s response to *Chicago Democrat* editor John Wentworth’s request for a “sketch of the rise, progress, persecution and faith of the Latter-day Saints” as source material for a friend, George Barstow, who was writing a history of New Hampshire.⁶ Many of Wentworth’s papers were destroyed in the 1871 Chicago fire, and there is no known evidence that Barstow ever published or used Joseph’s account. Nevertheless, Joseph had it printed in March 1842 in the Church’s *Times and Seasons* newspaper.

Joseph and scribe Frederick Williams wrote the earliest account a decade before these two accounts were published, and the Church historians brought this document across the plains to Utah. However, it was unknown to Latter-day Saints until Paul Cheesman published it in his 1965 master’s thesis.⁷ Similarly, the two accounts that Joseph’s scribe Warren Parrish penned in Joseph’s journal in November 1835, which were later copied into a draft of Joseph’s history, were generally unknown until Latter-day Saint historians published them in the 1960s.⁸

There are also a handful of contemporary hearsay accounts written by people who heard Joseph describe his vision. Orson Pratt wrote one of these and published it in Scotland in 1840 as *A[n] Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions*. It echoes passages from Joseph's earlier accounts and prefigures passages in later ones. Orson Pratt must have had access to Joseph's reminiscences, either in person or through the documents of the pre-1840 accounts (or both), and possibly to an unknown document that predated the 1842 Wentworth letter. Alternatively, Elder Pratt's own rendering of the vision may have shaped the account in the Wentworth letter. The two accounts clearly share phrasing.

Pratt's account of the vision is the most thorough of the third-person accounts. Other hearsay accounts include Orson Hyde's 1842 German publication of a variation on Pratt's pamphlet, the first translated publication of a First Vision account. Levi Richards wrote in his journal of hearing Joseph relate the vision in June 1843. David Nye White, editor of the *Pittsburgh Weekly Gazette*, similarly wrote in his paper of his August 1843 interview with Joseph and included an account of the vision. Alexander Neibaur, a German convert to Mormonism, wrote in his journal of hearing Joseph speak about the vision in May 1844, just a month before Joseph's death. All accounts have been published recently, together with scholarly analysis, in the first two chapters of the book *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844*.

Joseph's several accounts tell a consistent story of teenage anxiety followed by a comforting heavenly vision—a theophany. It is a fact, however, that the accounts vary in emphasis and disagree on some points. In 1832 Joseph declared that “the Lord opened the heavens upon me and I saw the Lord,” perhaps referring to two separate heavenly beings each as the Lord, but not explicitly describing two personages as his later accounts declare. His 1835 account says he saw one personage, then another, as well as “many angels.” In one account Joseph called the experience his “first visitation of Angels,”

in another he “saw two glorious personages.” Joseph’s 1835 and 1838 accounts emphasize opposition from an unseen power. The other accounts do not mention that part of the experience. In the 1832 account, Joseph’s scribe Frederick Williams inserted a clause saying that Joseph was sixteen when he received the vision, whereas his 1835 and 1842 accounts and the 1843 hearsay account all say “about 14,” and his 1838 account says “in my fifteenth year,” or fourteen. These are the historical facts; interpretations of their meaning vary among interpreters.

Suspicious interpreters decide that Joseph is unreliable, perhaps even scheming. Trusting interpreters decide that the variability in the accounts makes sense in terms of the particular ways Joseph remembered and related the experience and the diverse settings and circumstances in which his accounts were communicated, recorded, and transmitted. Two writers—Fawn Brodie and Wesley Walters—have largely shaped the skeptical interpretations of Joseph’s First Vision. They first articulated the criticisms that others have since adopted and circulate widely today. Critical interpretations of Joseph’s vision share a common hermeneutic or explanatory method. They profess to know how a person in Joseph’s position must have acted if his story were true, and then show that his accounts vary from the assumed reaction. Sometimes they postulate an alternative to Joseph’s own explanation. In the first edition of her biography of Joseph, Fawn Brodie cited his 1838 history, the one excerpted in the *Pearl of Great Price*. Because she did not draw on Joseph’s 1835 journal and was unable to refer to the undiscovered 1832 account, she concluded that no one had spoken of the vision between 1820 and 1840. For Brodie, that meant that Joseph concocted the vision “when the need arose for a magnificent tradition.”¹⁰

Fawn Brodie did not change her assumptions when she revised her biography of Joseph after the 1832 and 1835 accounts were discovered and published. She did not reconsider her interpretation in the light of evidence that showed Joseph had written and spoken

openly of the vision on more than one occasion earlier than 1838. Rather, she simply substituted *1830* for *1834* in this sentence about the vision: “It may have been sheer invention, created some time after 1830 when the need arose for a magnificent tradition.”¹¹ She also noted the differences in details between the accounts, suggesting that their inconsistencies were evidence of Joseph’s invention and embellishment of the story.

Another critic of the accounts of the First Vision, Wesley Walters, was a Presbyterian minister. Beginning in the 1960s, he published articles that claimed that there had been no religious revival in Palmyra, New York, in the spring of 1820, and therefore Joseph’s claim to have been influenced by such religious fervor must be false.¹² Historians of the First Vision have credited Walters with awakening them to investigate the context of Joseph’s accounts, but they fault him for forcing his thesis.¹³ Joseph’s accounts do not claim that the revivalism centered in Palmyra itself, as Walters argues. Rather, Joseph located the “unusual excitement on the subject of religion” around Manchester, New York, and used a Methodist term to describe a wider geographical scope than only Palmyra village, as Walters emphasized. Joseph said “the whole *district* of country seemed affected” by the revivalism (Joseph Smith—History 1:5; emphasis added). To nineteenth-century Methodists, a district was somewhat akin to a Latter-day Saint stake or a Catholic diocese.

It is not hard to empathize with Fawn Brodie or Wesley Walters. Brodie was raised as a Latter-day Saint but chose to leave the faith. For her and like-minded souls, that painful reorientation process required a reinterpretation of Joseph Smith’s First Vision. Walters had just as much at stake. Joseph’s most definitive account of his vision relates how he told his mother, “I have learned for myself that Presbyterianism is not true.” He also quoted the Savior as saying that the Christian creeds “were an abomination” (Joseph Smith—History 1:19–20). Latter-day Saints may feel defensive toward Walter’s efforts to undermine the vision, but perhaps they can empathize with his response to Joseph’s testimony. In one

sense, his determined and enduring devotion to his cause is admirable. Even so, these critics and even some believers lack the open-mindedness that truth seekers try to cultivate in their quest to learn the veracity of Joseph's accounts.

The critics' preconceived certainty that the vision never happened as Joseph said it did prevents them from exploring the variety of possibilities that the historical documents offer. All of their criticism shares a common hermeneutic, or interpretive method. They dismiss the historical documents and severely limit possible interpretations by predetermining that Joseph's vision is not possible. When Joseph's 1832 account was discovered in the 1960s, it opened to Brodie new interpretive possibilities. However, she did not respond with willingness to consider that Joseph might be telling the truth; instead, she simply fit the new evidence into her previous conclusion.

Similarly, the discovery of considerable evidence of revivalism in and around Palmyra, and especially in the region Joseph described, did not alter Wesley Walters's argument. No matter what evidence came to light, he interpreted it according to his original conclusion. He chose not to see the possibilities available to those who approach Joseph's accounts with a desire to discover if he could possibly be telling the truth. There is evidence that an intense revival stirred Palmyra between 1816 and 1817, when Joseph moved there with his family. It may have catalyzed Joseph's 1832 description of his mind becoming seriously concerned for the welfare of his soul "at about the age of twelve years."¹⁴ Around 1818, Joseph's family purchased a farm in Manchester, a few miles south of Palmyra. A Methodist minister wrote in his diary of attending a camp meeting in Palmyra that June.¹⁵ The next summer, Methodists of the Genesee Conference assembled at Vienna (now Phelps), New York, within walking distance of the Smith farm. The Reverend George Lane and dozens of other exhorters were present. One participant remembered the result as a "religious cyclone which swept over the whole region."¹⁶ Orsamus Turner, Joseph's contemporary and acquaintance, remembered that

Joseph caught a “spark of Methodist fire” at a meeting along the road to Vienna.¹⁷ A Palmyra newspaper documents a revival there in June 1820, which is perhaps not too late to qualify as early spring because it snowed heavily on May 28. The diaries of Methodist minister Benajah Williams show that Methodists and others were hard at work in Joseph’s district all the while.¹⁸ They combed the countryside and convened camp meetings to help unchurched souls like Joseph get religion. Joseph’s accounts are consistent with this evidence. He said that the unusual religious excitement in his district or region “commenced with the Methodists,” and that he became “somewhat partial” to Methodism (Joseph Smith—History 1:5–8). The Walters thesis, though tenaciously defended and uncritically accepted and perpetuated by others, no longer seems defensible.¹⁹

Similarly, parts of Fawn Brodie’s thesis are not as compelling as they once were. The evidence she analyzed in her second edition suggested to her that Joseph embellished each telling of the vision until it matured into the canonized 1838–39 account. But the later accounts do not continue to become longer, more detailed, or more elaborate. Rather, these accounts sound more like Joseph’s earlier, less-developed accounts. Brodie’s evidence may merely reflect Joseph’s intention to make his 1838–39 account definitive and to develop it for publication. Some of the less-developed accounts, including ones later than 1838, were created for other purposes. Some were delivered on the spur of the moment and remembered and written later.

For those who choose to read Joseph’s accounts with suspicion, the interpretation of choice is likely to remain that Joseph elaborated “some half-remembered dream” or concocted the vision as “sheer invention.”²⁰ Those are not historical facts. They are skeptical interpretations of the fact that Joseph reported seeing a vision. There are other ways to interpret that fact. The several scholars who have studied the vision accounts for decades, written seminal articles, and produced the only scholarly book on the vision share what one of them described as a hermeneutic of trust.²¹

Those who share the skeptics' assumptions will likely arrive at the same conclusions as the skeptics. But those who are open to the possibility that Joseph told the truth can discover other meanings from the same facts. The danger of closed-mindedness is as real for believers as it is for skeptics. Many believers also seem likely to begin with preconceived notions about the accounts rather than with a willingness to learn from them. They might assume, for instance, that Joseph told his family of the vision or wrote about it immediately, that he always understood all of its implications perfectly or consistently throughout the years, that he would always remember or tell exactly the same story, or that it would always be recorded and transmitted in the same way. But none of those assumptions is supported by the evidence. Some believers quickly become skeptics when they learn of the accounts and find that their assumptions are not supported by the historical record.

There is an alternative approach to the evidence. It is to be humble and seeking and to become thoroughly informed. It involves not assuming that one already knows how Joseph would respond to and tell about a heavenly vision. Instead, it allows his accounts to shape that understanding. This is the historical method. It is the method of the believing scholars who study all of the accounts and the context in which Joseph lived and wrote or told them. Richard L. Bushman, one such scholar, wrote:

Behind the simplest event are complex motives and many factual threads conjoining that will receive varying emphasis in different retellings. In all accounts of his early religious experiences, for example, Joseph mentions the search for the true church and a desire for forgiveness. In some accounts he emphasizes one, in some the other. Similarly, in the earliest record of the first vision he attributes his question about the churches to personal study; in the familiar story written in 1838 or 1839, he credits the revival and the consequent

disputes as raising the issue for him. The reasons for reshaping the story usually have to do with changes in the immediate circumstances. We know that Joseph suffered from attacks on his character around 1834. As he told Oliver Cowdery when the letters on Joseph's early experiences were about to be published, enemies had blown his honest confession of guilt into an admission of outrageous crimes. Small wonder that afterward he played down his prayer for forgiveness in accounts of the vision. Such changes do not evidence an uncertainty about the events, as Mr. Walters thinks, as if Joseph were manufacturing new parts year by year. It is folly to try to explain every change as the result of Joseph's calculated efforts to fabricate a convincing account. One would expect variations in the simplest and truest story.²²

Several scholars read Joseph's accounts with a hermeneutic of trust and find them consistent where it counts. These are not bumpkins. They include Ivy League-educated historians who have authored prize-winning books and have studied the documents and their context for decades.

Such scholars are open to historical possibilities. For instance, Joseph may have purposely or unconsciously conflated events. Such compression or blending is common when people remember and tell their histories. Joseph may have had a hard time remembering exactly when the vision occurred and thus how old he was at the time. Some of his accounts use the word *about* to describe his age or when his father moved to Palmyra or later the Manchester farm or other details of the story. As we all do, Joseph may have mixed information from his episodic memory (the kind that recalls events from the past) with his semantic memory (the kind that recalls facts without remembering how that information was learned, as in remembering one's name or phone number). The accounts are undeniably subjective—all remembered things are. It was Joseph's vision.

If there had been two people there witnessing it together, each would remember it a bit differently from the other, and a bit differently each time they recounted it. Their memories would be mixtures of past and present. That is, whatever they were thinking about in the present would catalyze their memory of the vision and influence the nature of the memory.²³

Some assume that anyone who had such a heavenly experience could not possibly forget the date or their age, but who is qualified to make or to evaluate such an assumption? How can one know how another person will respond to or remember a heavenly vision? Those who choose the hermeneutic of trust do not prejudice the issue but rather listen to Joseph carefully with an open mind and make an informed decision about the veracity of his accounts. One who did that was the literary scholar Arthur Henry King. He wrote:

When I was first brought to read Joseph Smith's story, I was deeply impressed. I wasn't inclined to be impressed. As a stylistician, I have spent my life being disinclined to be impressed. So when I read his story, I thought to myself, this is an extraordinary thing. This is an astonishingly matter-of-fact and cool account. This man is not trying to persuade me of anything. He doesn't feel the need to. He is stating what happened to him, and he is stating it, not enthusiastically, but in quite a matter-of-fact way. He is not trying to make me cry or feel ecstatic. That struck me, and that began to build my testimony, for I could see that this man was telling the truth.²⁴

Many people who hear or read one or more of Joseph's accounts arrive at the same conclusion. Others, of course, do not. It is not therefore the historical facts or the accounts of the vision that compel the conclusion one makes about it. Believing or not believing in one of the best-documented theophanies in history is ultimately a conscious, individual decision. One must decide whether to trust or

be suspicious of the historical record created by Joseph Smith. That decision reveals much more about the subjective judgments of its maker than it does about the veracity of the claims Joseph made in historical documents.

Notes

1. These are reprinted and analyzed in John W. Welch, ed., *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), 1–75.
2. Dean C. Jessee, “The Early Accounts of Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” *BYU Studies* 9, no. 3 (1969): 275–94. Dean C. Jessee, ed., *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002) and Dean C. Jessee, ed., *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989–92); Milton V. Backman, Jr., *Joseph Smith’s First Vision: Confirming Evidences and Contemporary Accounts*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), especially the appendices; Milton V. Backman, Jr., “Joseph Smith’s Recitals of the First Vision,” *Ensign*, January 1985, 8–17; James B. Allen, “Eight Contemporary Accounts of Joseph Smith’s First Vision—What Do We Learn From Them,” *Improvement Era*, April 1970, 4–13; and Richard L. Anderson, “Joseph Smith’s Testimony of the First Vision,” *Ensign*, April 1996, 10–21. For more recent publications, see Dean C. Jessee, “The Earliest Documented Accounts of Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” in Welch, *Opening the Heavens*, 1–34; and James B. Allen and John W. Welch, “The Appearance of the Father and the Son to Joseph Smith in 1820,” in Welch, *Opening the Heavens*, 35–76.
3. Welch, *Opening the Heavens*, 4–7.
4. Welch, *Opening the Heavens*, 7–8.
5. Welch, *Opening the Heavens*, 10–11.
6. Welch, *Opening the Heavens*, 17.
7. Paul R. Cheesman, “An Analysis of the Accounts Relating to Joseph Smith’s Early Visions” (master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 1965), 126–32.
8. James B. Allen, “The Significance of Joseph Smith’s ‘First Vision’ in Mormon Thought,” *Dialogue* 1, no. 3 (Autumn 1966): 40–41; see also Jessee, “The Early Accounts,” 275–94.
9. Welch, *Opening the Heavens*, 3–19.
10. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith the Mormon Prophet* (New York: Knopf, 1945), 25.
11. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith the Mormon Prophet*, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage, 1995), 25.
12. See, for example, Wesley P. Walters, “New Light on Mormon Origins from the Palmyra Revival,” *Dialogue* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1969): 60–67.

13. James B. Allen and Dean C. Jessee, July 27, 2009; Richard L. Anderson, July 29, 2009; Larry Porter, July 30, 2009; Richard L. Bushman, July 31, 2009; Milton V. Backman, Jr., August 12, 2009; all interviews by Samuel Alonzo Dodge, transcriptions in author's possession.
14. Welch, *Opening the Heavens*, 4.
15. Aurora Seager wrote in his diary, "I attended a camp-meeting at Palmyra" in June 1818. He wrote that over the weekend about twenty people were baptized and forty became Methodists. See E. Latimer, *The Three Brothers: Sketches of the Lives of Rev. Aurora Seager, Rev. Micah Seager, Rev. Schuyler Seager, D.C.* (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1880), 12. Quoted in D. Michael Quinn, "Joseph Smith's Experience of a Methodist 'Camp Meeting' in 1820," *Dialogue* Paperless E-Paper 3 (December 2006): 2–3.
16. Quoted in Milton V. Backman, Sr., "Awakenings in the Burned-Over District: New Light on the Historical Setting of the First Vision," *BYU Studies* 9, no. 3 (Spring 1969): 308.
17. Orsamus Turner, *History of the Pioneer Settlement of Phelps and Gorham's Purchase* (Rochester, NY: William Alling, 1851), 213. Turner's credibility as a witness is evaluated in Richard L. Anderson, "Circumstantial Confirmation of the First Vision through Reminiscences," *BYU Studies* 9, no. 3 (Spring 1969): 373–404.
18. Diaries of Benajah Williams, in possession of Michael Brown, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
19. Backman, "Awakenings in the Burned-Over District," 309; see also Richard L. Bushman "The First Vision Story Revised," *Dialogue* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1969): 85.
20. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, 2nd ed., 25.
21. Richard L. Bushman, interview.
22. Bushman, "First Vision Story Revised," 83.
23. Daniel L. Schacter, *Searching for Memory: The Brain, the Mind, and the Past* (New York: Basic, 1996), 17.
24. Arthur Henry King, *Arm the Children: Faith's Response to a Violent World* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Studies, 1998), 288.