

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Verification of the 1838 Account of the First Vision

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1

During the October 1880 General Conference, President George Q. Cannon, First Counselor in the First Presidency, acting under the direction of the newly sustained president of the Church, John Taylor, presented two books to Church officers and members: a new edition of the Doctrine and Covenants and the Pearl of Great Price. President Cannon proposed that those present accept these books and their contents “as from God, and binding upon . . . [the] people . . . and Church.” Then President Joseph F. Smith, Second Counselor in the First Presidency moved that the membership receive and accept these books as containing revelations from God to the Church. By unanimous vote, leaders and members agreed that the information contained in these two books was inspired of God (*Conference Proceedings* 42:724). Included in this canonized edition of the Pearl of Great Price was an account of the First Vision initially written by Joseph Smith in 1838 and prepared for publication before the Prophet left for Washington in 1839.

A number of questions might be asked regarding this 1838 account of the theophany near Palmyra. Since Joseph Smith wrote or dictated four accounts of the First Vision, why was the 1838 one included in the Pearl of Great Price, rather than any of the other accounts? How is this 1838 version different from those? And what confirming evidence supports the reliability of the 1838 recital?

The four accounts of the First Vision given by Joseph Smith during a ten year period are very different from each other because each was given from a different perspective, to a different audience, and for a different purpose. All four accounts are available in Backman’s *Joseph Smith’s First Vision* and Jessee’s *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*. A harmony of the four accounts is in Backman’s *Eyewitness Accounts of the Restoration*. Two of the accounts (the 1832 and 1835 versions) are scribal renditions of what the prophet was speaking to two different audiences and have remained in a rough draft stage not being prepared or polished for publication (see Backman 155–60, or Jessee 4–6 and 75–76). The last two accounts were written or prepared by Joseph Smith and were initially published in the spring of 1842. The 1838 recital was written as part of Joseph Smith’s history of the Church; and the other, contained in the “Wentworth Letter,” was written at the request of, and basically for, non-Mormons (see Backman, 160–70, or Jessee 197–

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

200 and 213–15). Although the historical portion of the Wentworth Letter, which Joseph Smith prepared with the assistance of others, was not included in the Pearl of Great Price, the thirteen statements of faith were included in that modern-day scripture.

The history which Joseph Smith initiated on 30 April 1838 at Far West, Missouri, was written as part of an official history of the Church (Jessee 196); it was probably completed by 2 May 1838 and was initially published in Nauvoo in the *Times and Seasons* in 1842, when Joseph Smith was editor of that publication. From a literary point of view, it is the best of the four accounts. Written in the language (meaning the style or word usage) of Joseph Smith, it is an account that reflects the inspired writings of a prophet of God rather than the awkward language of a poorly educated American. Joseph Smith not only wrote this account from a perspective of a deep conviction (in harmony with all other accounts), but he used words and phrases employed by literary artists.

The 1838 account is not only a literary masterpiece reflecting the work of an inspired prophet, but it contains the most comprehensive account of the First Vision, and includes more information on the coming forth of the Book of Mormon and the restoration of God's authority than any of the other histories prepared by Joseph Smith.

All of Joseph Smith's accounts of the First Vision contribute to our understanding of that sacred experience. In order to better understand the contents of the 1838 account, we need to examine that version in relation to the other recitals.

There is a different emphasis in each of the accounts of the First Vision regarding the circumstances preceding Joseph's theophany near Palmyra. In the 1832 account, for example, Joseph emphasized that his desire to secure a remission of sins led to an investigation of the churches. This quest, he said, continued with him from the age of twelve to fifteen. To be more specific, Joseph wrote that his mind became seriously impressed with the all important concerns for the welfare of his immortal soul which led to a search of the scriptures. He had been taught and believed that they contained the word of God. He was not only distressed because of his recognition that he was a sinner but was concerned because mankind did not come unto the Lord. Joseph said, "I felt to mourn for my own Sins and for the Sins of the world"; therefore, he "cried unto the Lord for mercy for there was none else to whom [he] could go and obtain mercy . . ." (Backman, *Joseph Smith's First Vision* 156–157).

The second rendition of his theophany is found in Joseph's 1835 diary and is quite different from the 1832 account. This diary entry was also a scribal summary of a long conversation between Joseph Smith and Robert Matthews, who was also known by the name Matthias and disguised himself initially in Kirtland by calling himself Joshua, the Jewish prophet (Jessee 654 fn. 57). What we have here is an abbreviated version recorded

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

by Warren Parrish (Jessee 651 fn. 27). There is a similarity between some of the concepts in the 1835 diary and information included in the Wentworth Letter and implied in the 1838 history. Joseph Smith probably declared the following in 1835:

Being wrought up in my mind, respecting the subject of religion and looking at the different systems taught the children of men, I knew not who was right or who was wrong, and I considered it of the first importance that I should be right, in matters that involve eternal consequ(e)nces; being thus perplexed in mind I retired to the silent grove and bow(e)d down before the Lord, under a realizing sense that he had said (if the bible be true) ask and you shall receive knock and it shall be opened seek and you shall find and again, if any man lack wisdom let him ask of God who giveth to all men libarally and upbradeth not (Jessee 75).

Although there was a brief statement in the Wentworth Letter regarding the fourteen year old boy's reflection upon the need to prepare for a future state, the thrust in that account presented to a non-Mormon audience was his confusion arising from a clash of religious sentiment in America. "If I went to one society," he observed, they referred me to one plan, and another to another; each one pointing to his own particular creed as the summum bonum of perfection: considering that all could not be right, and that God could not be the author of so much confusion I determined to investigate the subject more fully, believing that if God had a church it would not be split up into factions . . . (Jessee 213).

The 1838 recital (JS—H 1:5–20) contains the most detailed account of the historical setting of his religious experience prepared by the Prophet. This is the only account that describes specific religious conditions in the area where he lived. In this version, the Prophet mentioned that his mind was called up to serious reflection by the religious agitation in his neighborhood and that he labored under extreme difficulties caused by the contests of parties of religionists. Then he discussed with some detail the religious excitement that was occurring at the time of his vision. He declared that in the second year after his family's removal to Manchester (which would have been Farmington in 1820 but in 1839 had been changed to Manchester), there was in the place where we lived an unusual excitement on the subject of religion. It commenced with the Methodists, but soon became general among all the sects in that region of country. Indeed, the whole district of country seemed affected by it, and great multitudes united themselves to the different religious parties, which created no small stir and division amongst the people (JS—H 1:5).

He not only discussed the war of words but identified the religious groups involved in the contest of opinions as Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians. This is the only account in which he said that he personally leaned toward Methodism while his mother Lucy, his brothers Hyrum and Samuel, and his sister Sophronia were proselyted to the

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Presbyterian faith. Moreover, this is the only account in which Joseph mentioned that this was the first time in his life that he had made an attempt to pray vocally, possibly meaning his first attempt to follow the admonition of James regarding his anxieties. And this is the only account in which the Prophet identified the date of the vision: "It was on the morning of a beautiful, clear day, early in the spring of eighteen hundred and twenty" (JS—H 1:14).

In both the 1835 and 1838 accounts, there is a reference to Joseph Smith's encounter with evil. According to the 1835 account,

I made a fruitless attempt to p[r]ay, my tounge seemed to be swollen in my mouth, so that I could not utter, I heard a noise behind me like some person walking towards me, I strove again to pray, but could not, the noise of walking seemed to draw nearer, I sprang up on my feet and looked around, but saw no person or thing that was calculated to produce the noise of walking, I kneeled again my mouth was opened and my tounge liberated, and I called on the Lord in mighty prayer . . . (Jessee 75).

A similar thought was related in 1838 employing different wording. He declared in Joseph Smith—History that after he had knelt in prayer he was seized upon "by some power which entirely overcame [him]. Thick darkness gathered around [him] and it seemed . . . for a time [that he was] doomed to sudden destruction" (v. 15). But at the very moment when he was ready to sink into despair and abandon himself to destruction, he saw a pillar of light above his head (v.16).

The 1838 account is the only one of the First Vision in which Joseph Smith clearly identified the personages who appeared to him. Although Joseph Smith might have referred to the Father when he said in 1832 that he cried unto "the Lord" who opened the heavens, the emphasis in that account was the message of forgiveness related by the Savior. In the two accounts prepared for non-Mormons (1835 and 1842 accounts), Joseph mentioned the appearance of two heavenly personages without identifying them. In the 1842 account he added that they resembled each other in features and likeness, and the 1835 diary version reported that during this vision he also saw many angels. In the 1838 account he declared that he beheld "two Personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description . . . One of them spake unto me, calling me by name and said, pointing to the other—This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!" (JS—H 1:17). There is no evidence that Joseph changed this story based on an evolutionary development in his attitude toward the Godhead. Instead, it seems apparent that Joseph Smith hesitated in identifying the personages when he related this experience to people outside the Church. Some critics believed that with God all things were possible except appearing to Joseph Smith. It is apparent, in the two non-Mormon accounts which included the last account of the First

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Vision which Joseph prepared, the Prophet did not want to intensify the public criticism of this sacred experience by identifying the Father and the Son.

There is a definite harmony in the messages in the different versions of the First Vision, related to the audience to which each account was addressed and the purpose for which each version was written. In the most complete account of the First Vision he prepared (1838 account), Joseph Smith concluded that he learned many other things. At no time did he unfold everything that he learned during this theophany near Palmyra. Yet all accounts include some portions of that sacred message, and by reviewing all of these versions, we can gain a better understanding of the truths unfolded in 1820 and some of the other things Joseph learned in the sacred grove.

The major emphasis in the 1832 outline was Joseph Smith's desire to secure a remission of sins. Therefore, in that account the Prophet said that Jesus forgave him of his sins, adding that he learned at that time that Jesus took upon himself the sins of mankind. He further said that the Redeemer would return to the earth. While describing the state of religion, the prophet wrote the Lord's description of it as follows:

The world lieth in sin 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 according to th[e]ir ungodliness and to bring to pass that which hath been spoken by the mouth of the prophets and Apostles . . . (Jessee 6).

There is almost an absence of information on the message of 1820 in the 1835 diary account. Only two brief statements were recorded by Warren Parrish that related to truths disclosed during the First Vision. Both concepts appeared in the 1835 history:

"He [one of the personages who appeared to Joseph Smith] said unto me thy sins are forgive[n] [and] Jesus Christ is the Son of God" (Jessee 75). This incompleteness in not including the message that would appear in a later published history may be explained by the busy schedule the brethren had in which recording information in Joseph's diary was only one of many responsibilities and activities.

In the Wentworth Letter, which contains the second shortest account of this theophany, the Prophet emphasized the fundamental message he desired to relate to non-Mormons regarding this experience—that the church of Christ was not functioning in 1820. "They told me," he explained,

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

that all religious denominations were believing in incorrect doctrines, and that none of them was acknowledged of God as his church and kingdom. And I was expressly commanded to “go not after them” (Jessee 213).

This is the only account in which there is a specific reference to Joseph’s prophetic calling. He testified that during this vision he was promised “that the fullness of the gospel should at some future time be made known unto” him (Jessee 213).

The most specific instructions of the Savior regarding general conditions of the churches at the time of the First Vision were included in the account prepared as part of the 1838 official history of the Church. The most vivid and condemning statements do not appear in any other version. Joseph wrote that after asking which of all the faiths was right, the Lord told him that all were wrong. Their creeds, the Lord added, “were an abomination in his sight,” and their “professors were all corrupt . . .” (JS—H 1:19). (Instead of using the word “abomination,” the Wentworth Letter phrase has the softer, “all religious denominations were believing in incorrect doctrines.”) Then quoting a scripture mentioned in the 1832 account, the Lord continued the 1838 rendition ““they draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me”” (JS—H 1:19; cf. Isaiah 29:13; Luke 6:46). Then he included another scriptural reference (which is sometimes used in support of the LDS belief in the apostasy) which is not found in any other account of the First Vision: they have a ““form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof”” (JS—H 1:19; cf. 2 Tim. 3:5).

Although in the 1832 account there is a reference to the peace which Joseph experienced following this vision, only in the 1838 account is there a discussion of the negative reaction of others to his telling of his experience. In this account he specifically referred to the opposition of the Methodist preacher. But persecution was not limited to one man or to one faith. As Joseph Smith explained in the 1838 account,

How very strange it was that an obscure boy, of a little over fourteen years of age ... should be thought a character of sufficient importance to attract the attention of the great ones of the most popular sects of the day, and in a manner to create in them a spirit of the most bitter persecution and reviling ... I have thought since, that I felt much like Paul, when he made his defense before King Agrippa, and related the account of the vision he had when he saw a light, and heard a voice; but still there were but few who believed him; some said he was dishonest, others said he was mad; and he was ridiculed and reviled. But all this did not destroy the reality of his vision (JS—H 1:23–24).

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Then bearing witness of one of the most significant events in the annals of history, Joseph Smith, under the inspiration of the Almighty God, testified to the world in a language which one would think was beyond his own limited ability of expression:

So it was with me. I had actually seen a light, and in the midst of that light I saw two Personages, and they did in reality speak to me; [or one of them did] and though I was hated and persecuted for saying that I had seen a vision, yet it was true. . . . I knew it, and I knew that God knew it, and I could not deny it. . . . I had [also] found the testimony of James to be true (JS—H 1:25–26).

7

The 1838 account of the First Vision was the most frequently published and quoted version. After this history was published in Nauvoo, it was reprinted in *The Millennial Star* (published in England), in the *Deseret News* (printed in Salt Lake City, Utah), and in the first and all subsequent editions of the Pearl of Great Price.

When contemporaries related that which they learned from Joseph Smith about his sacred experience of 1820, they discussed all major concepts found in the four versions but emphasized more concepts found in the 1838 account, which was prepared for publication, than are recorded in any of the other versions. As explained earlier, a distinguishing characteristic of the Pearl of Great Price account was the identification of the two personages. When General Authorities who were contemporaries of the Prophet (such as John Taylor, Orson Pratt, George A. Smith, and George Q. Cannon) spoke on the First Vision they quoted the phrase (or one similar to it), ‘This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!’ (see *Journal of Discourses* 7:220; 11:1–2; 12:354; 13:66; 15:181; 21:65; 161; 25:156; hereafter *JD*).

In an article published in the *Millennial Star*, Orson Pratt used the First Vision as a tool to support his belief in the separate nature of the Father and Son. In an article entitled, “Are the Father and the Son Two Distinct Persons?” Elder Pratt not only used scriptural references to defend his faith but cited events from Church history to support his conviction in the separate nature of the Father and Son. He declared that Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon saw Christ “on the right hand of the God” in February 1832 (D&C 76:23) and added that Joseph Smith saw “both the Father and the Son” during his First Vision (*JD* 11:281–84, 309–12).

In sermons delivered in the Great Basin following the migration of the Saints to Utah, Elder Pratt told others of the sacred experiences related to him by the Prophet Joseph Smith. Joseph told him, he declared, that when he was about fourteen “he beheld a vision . . . [and] saw two glorious personages; and one, pointing to the other, said, ‘Behold my beloved son! hear ye him.’” Continuing to describe that which he learned from Joseph, Elder Pratt said that Joseph was commanded not to unite himself to any church

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

and was informed that at some future time the fullness of the Gospel would be made manifest to him. He was also told that he would “be an instrument in the hands of God of laying the foundations of the kingdom of God” (JD 7:220–21).

The theme relating to the first Vision that was most often cited by early church leaders when they spoke on this subject was that Joseph learned that all churches were wrong and there was a need to restore the truth. President Brigham Young, for example, declared that Joseph Smith was told not to join any of the religious sects of his day (JD 2:171), adding that the “Lord chose Joseph Smith, called upon him at fourteen years of age, gave him visions, and led him . . .” (JD 8:354).

In the 1880 conference, Church leaders bore witness of the truthfulness of Joseph Smith’s experience of 1820 as described in the 1838 history. President John Taylor, his counselors, and many other Church leaders who attended that conference were former associates of Joseph Smith. By canonizing a document that was included in Joseph Smith’s history of the Church, contemporaries of the Mormon Prophet declared that this account was brought forth by an inspired leader and was an accurate rendition of a sacred experience.

During the 1960’s I did a serious study of the historical setting of the First Vision which brought forth confirming evidence of the reliability of that history (see *Joseph Smith’s First Vision*). Records of the Western Presbyterian Church note the membership of Lucy, Samuel and Hyrum during the 1820’s. Other church records and newspaper articles clearly indicate that there was religious excitement in the neighborhood where Joseph Smith lived and in the whole region of country great multitudes united themselves to the different religious persuasions. Joseph Smith did not write that the increase in church membership was only in Palmyra. After traveling from eastern Ohio to western Missouri and back five times and after journeying to the eastern United States from Ohio on two different occasions, the Prophet wrote that in the whole region of country there were significant increases in church membership. Methodists used this same expression, “region of country,” to sometimes identify large circuits. Region of country might have been an area of twenty-five miles, fifty miles, or all of upstate New York. In all of the above interpretations of district or region of country, records substantiate significant increases in church membership of all major faiths. The first Vision occurred during the Second Great Awakening in the burned-over district, in an area of habitual revivalism. Since researchers have identified reports of revivals in more than fifty towns of upstate New York during that time, and since more people were joining churches in upstate New York than in any other section of the new nation, contemporary records clearly confirm the accuracy of Joseph Smith’s description of the historical setting of his theophany near Palmyra.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Joseph Smith the man was sometimes lifted above his capacity of expression. The Book of Mormon, the revelations published in the Doctrine and Covenants, and the selections included in the Pearl of Great Price provide evidence of his prophetic calling.

I bear you my witness that I know that Joseph Smith was a prophet of God who accurately described not only the historical setting of his 1820 vision, but most importantly unfolded many of the great truths that he learned during one of the greatest visions of the ages.



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¹ Milton V. Backman Jr., "Verification of the 1838 Account of the First Vision," in *The Pearl of Great Price: Revelations from God*, ed. H. Donl Peterson and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1989), 197–212.