

FIRST VISION: ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE

by Robert R. Bobbitt

It is the contention of the fundamentalist counter-cult movement and liberal historians that the first vision of Joseph Smith was merely a fabrication. As a teenager, Smith claimed that he saw and heard the Father and the Son. This claim has been the target of derision from every corner of the religious world since he first described his experience to a Methodist minister.

This paper will primarily address concerns raised by Richard Howard in his article, "An Analysis of Six Contemporary Accounts Touching Joseph Smith's First Vision" as found in *Restoration Studies* ¹. But in doing so, we hope to address a few of the issues that concern evangelicals as well. The author presents six accounts, one of which, Account B, is not a description of the vision itself. Howard identifies 14 "anomalies" and "discrepancies" that serve as a basis to question the veracity of Smith's testimony. It is our intention to offer an alternative view in areas that seem to concern Mr. Howard and other skeptics. Following are the accounts as he identifies them:

Account A	1831-1832	Smith	Kirtland Letterbook
Account B	1834-1835	Cowdery and Smith	Messenger and Advocate
Account C	1835	Smith	Interview with Jewish Minister
Account D	1840	Pratt	Missionary Tract
Account E	1842	Smith	Wentworth Letter
Account F	1842	Smith	Times and Seasons

ALLEGED DISCREPANCIES

1) JOSEPH SMITH'S AGE AT THE TIME OF THE VISION

Account A supposedly said that the first vision occurred in Smith's "16th" year. This account is presently in the Mormon church's archives in Salt Lake City. Referring to this account, Milton Backman stated, "The '16th' is an insertion that is difficult to read."² Accounts C, D and E are all approximations and say that he was **about** 14 or 15. Account F refers to his age in two different places: in one it said he was 15, and in the other it said he was "between 14 and 15 years old." Assuming that we are reading A correctly, it would appear that A is the only account that conflicts with the others, and that only on one point: Smith's age. According to Backman, Account A was written in 1832, twelve years after the experience.

¹Richard P. Howard, "An Analysis of Six Contemporary Accounts Touching Joseph Smith's First Vision," *Restoration Studies* **I**, Herald Publishing, 1980, pp. 95-117.

² Milton V. Backman, Jr., "Joseph Smith's Recitals of the First Vision," *The Ensign*, Volume 15, No. 1, January, 1985, p. 13.

Assuming it is true, what is the significance of this discrepancy? Some critics have suggested that teenage boys should comprehend the larger historical importance of such an event at the time it occurs and be able to recall the exact year that it took place. In addition to the above accounts, Byrna Zerr has identified another account that Smith submitted to I. Daniel Rupp for inclusion in an 1844 history of United States religious denominations. This account also says that he was "**about** 14 years of age."³ Because Smith frequently used approximations to describe the year, it was clear that the future significance of this experience had not been clearly impressed on his mind at the time it occurred.

Those critical of Joseph Smith have suggested that his alleged failure, twelve years later, to accurately recall the exact year is clear evidence of his lack of integrity. But in the history of legal testimony has every witness who was one or even two years off in recounting events been summarily dismissed from testifying, or better yet accused of perjury?

It appears that critics of these accounts fall into two camps. On one hand are fundamentalists under the illusion that prophets, if they truly are prophetic, will have photographic memories and mechanically recall details with absolute precision. On the other hand, if every detail of these accounts is exactly the same, liberal historians are ready to skewer Smith for delivering a carefully pre-meditated story with little spontaneity.

Regarding the chronology that Smith gave, Wesley Walters and the Tanners have been some of his harshest critics. They believe the Palmyra Road Tax Record and the Manchester Assessment Record clearly demonstrate that the Smith family did not move to Manchester until after April 1822, two years after the vision took place.⁴ But they fail to take into account an 1820 Stafford street survey and the 1820 Federal Census of Farmington (Manchester) Township that clearly demonstrate the Smith family had already moved to their farm on the Palmyra-Manchester town line by 1820.⁵ Tax records might give us an approximate time when they purchased property, but their move occurred much earlier. Fawn Brodie, a well-known critic of Smith, even says, "**After months of hiring out to farmers**, Smith [Senior] signed a note for a hundred acres of unimproved land two miles south of Palmyra."⁶

Finally, a word needs to be said about the **agreement** that exists between the various accounts. Accounts C, D and E all indicate that Smith was about 14 or 15 years of age. If we accept this as true, then they are in general agreement with F that makes

³ Byrna S. Zerr, **In Behalf of Joseph: An Affirmation**, Grain Valley, Missouri, 1992, p. 31.

⁴ Wesley P. Walters, "New Light on Mormon Origins from Palmyra [N.Y.] Revival, **Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society**, X, Fall 1967, p. 228.

⁵ Donald L. Enders, The Joseph Smith, Sr., Family: Farmers of the Genesee, **Joseph Smith: The Prophet, The Man**, Vol. 17 in The Religious Studies Center Monograph Series, Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, p. 216.

⁶ Fawn M. Brodie, **No Man Knows My History; The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet**. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1946, p. 10.

reference to "15" and "between 14 and 15". The account that Daniel Rupp received from Smith also says that he was "about 14 years of age." Account A is the only one that supposedly said Smith was 16 years old. The fact that one out of seven accounts allegedly gives his age as 16 is hardly sufficient evidence to undermine Smith's entire testimony.

2) JOSEPH'S MOTIVATIONS TO SEEK AND PRAY

Howard says that all six accounts mention the strife among denominations as a reason that Joseph Smith went to pray. His problem is that only A, D and E mention Smith's sinful state/need for forgiveness, and B fails to mention James 1:5 as a motivating factor in going to pray.

But why would these necessarily be mutually exclusive reasons to inquire of God? Was it somehow impossible for each of the above to simultaneously provide an impetus for prayer? Obviously, there is nothing contradictory among the various accounts regarding this aspect of the experience, only a change of emphasis in conveying specific details.

3) SEIZED/OVERCOME BY A DESTRUCTIVE POWER OF DARKNESS

Here Howard says, "This is one of the most varied and problematic aspects of the First Vision, for we have extremes from the sheer terror of Joseph on the brink of total destruction as he struggles to pray (F) to the total lack of a reference to such an experience (A)."⁷

If this is one of the most problematic aspects, then the others should be simple to explain. We might have conflicting accounts if F described sheer terror at the same point in the experience that A described a perfect calm, but no such conflict exists. The problem is supposed to be that no mention is made of a destructive power in A, C and E. C describes a noise of walking. And F and D are the only ones that mention darkness. But it is obvious that none of these statements necessarily negates the others. Once again, all of the above are true accounts emphasizing different aspects of the experience.

4) INSTRUCTION ON POPULAR DENOMINATIONS

In looking at this aspect the author of the article did not mention any contradiction. He merely identified a different emphasis given by each account and commented on the words used to describe Account F. In saying "**By today's standards** the language of F is intemperate", Howard ignores the historical and cultural setting out of which that statement arose and holds these words to a standard that did not exist in that day.⁸ In singling out the language of Account F, the author ignores his own axiom:

⁷ Howard, p. 110

⁸Howard, p. 114.

The past permeates the present. Any one present moment is the collective body of meanings and values accruing from the historical existence of the community, and from the thought and decisions of its leaders who have articulated its most durable norms.⁹

Not that we entirely subscribe to the above, but Mr. Howard should at least ask the question, "What thoughts, decisions and norms did the leaders of that day espouse?" In Account B, Smith tells us:

For a length of time the reformation seemed to move in a harmonious manner, but, as the excitement ceased, or those who had expressed anxieties, had professed a belief in the pardoning influence and condescension of the Savior, **a general struggle was made by the leading characters of the different sects, for proselytes.** Then strife seemed to take the place of that apparent union and harmony which had previously characterized the moves and exhortations of the old professors, **and a cry -- I am right -- you are wrong -- was introduced in their stead....**In this situation where could he go? If he went to one he was told they were right, and all others were wrong -- If to another, the same was heard from those: **All professed to be the true church.....**¹⁰

Here we have protestant ministers verbally at each others' throats fighting for converts. Now that their fundamentalist descendants are somewhat united under the evangelical umbrella, they have directed their collective scorn at Smith.

In Account F it said "all their creeds were an abomination in his sight." In Accounts C and D it said, "all religious denominations were believing in incorrect doctrines." **The churches of that day each subscribed to a body of belief that contained some degree of doctrinal error, and that was disgusting to God.** Now that the various denominations have ceased to scratch each others' eyes out, they choose to take high umbrage at the message delivered to a teenage boy in 1820.

But what ever happened to interpreting events in light of their historical context? If Joseph Smith is to be measured by today's standards, why don't we dredge up the words of protestant ministers in that day and hold them to the same modern standard of mutual tolerance? Forgetting their own history, Smith's critics choose to selectively shine a spotlight on only one religious leader of that time. But Fawn Brodie describes the excesses and religious intolerance of *many* churches in the 1820s:

Nowhere was lapse from the old codes more evident than in the churches, which were racked with schisms. The Methodists split four ways between 1814 and 1830. The Baptists split into Reformed Baptists, Hard-Shell Baptists, Free-Will Baptists, Seventh-Day Baptists, Footwashers, and

⁹ Howard, p. 95.

¹⁰ Howard, p. 99.

other sects. Unfettered religious liberty began spawning a host of new religions....Evangelists had swarmed over the hill country, preaching in great open-air camp meetings where silent, lonely frontiersmen gathered to sing and shout....Some were seized with the "jerks," their head and limbs snapping back and forth and their bodies grotesquely distorted. Those who caught the "barks" would crawl on all fours, growling and snapping like the camp dogs fighting over garbage heaps behind the tents.¹¹

Brodie's description only reinforces the need to understand the words of Joseph Smith in their historical context. Smith was a fallible man who attempted to forthrightly convey the meaning of an experience, a task that Howard characterizes as "an immensely intricate process."¹² On this point as well, there is no contradiction between the various accounts. They were all consistent in affirming that the churches of that day subscribed to some degree of doctrinal error.

5) LIGHT VS. FERVENCY OF PRAYER THAT DISTRACTED HIM

Account D described "a bright and glorious light in the heavens":

When it first came upon him, it produced a peculiar sensation throughout his whole system; **and**, immediately, his mind was caught away, from the natural objects with which he was surrounded; and he was enwrapped in a heavenly vision....¹³

Account E reads as follows:

I retired to a secret place in a grove and began to call upon the Lord, **while** fervently engaged in supplication my mind was taken away from the objects with which I was surrounded, and I was enwrapped in a heavenly vision.....¹⁴

Regarding Account D, Howard says that Smith's mind was caught away "**as a consequence of** the light enveloping him." In E, Howard tells us it was "**a consequence of** being fervently engaged in prayer."

This is misleading. No causal relationship was ever established in either account. Neither account even implies that light or prayer **caused** his mind to be caught away.

¹¹ Brodie, pp. 12-14.

¹² Howard, p. 116.

¹³ Howard, p. 102.

¹⁴ Howard, p. 103.

6) THE PERSONAGES

Here Howard states, "neither Joseph Smith nor any other Latter Day Saint analyst has **satisfactorily** accounted for the discrepancies among the five accounts on the point of the number and identity of the personage(s) appearing to him in the First Vision."¹⁵

If we may digress for a moment, in the KJV Bible, Matthew 28:5 said there was one angel when Jesus arose from the tomb, while John 20:12 said there were two angels. In his book, When Critics Ask, Dr. Norman Geisler responds to this with:

Matthew does not say there was *only* one angel. John says there were two, and wherever there are two there is always one; it never fails! The critic has to add the word "only" to Matthew's account in order to make it contradictory. But in this case, the problem is not with what the Bible actually says, but with what the critic adds to it.¹⁶

Just like Matthew 28:5, Account A does not mention the appearance of a second personage. Skeptics have directed a great deal of ridicule toward this as an apparent inconsistency. Some have attempted to discredit the first vision, and harsher critics have claimed that this one point proves the entire restoration movement false.

But Account A does not say there was *only* one personage. All of the other accounts say there were two, and as Geisler has said, "wherever there are two there is always one; it never fails!" When the passage in Matthew is brought to the attention of critics who uphold Bible inerrancy, their views suddenly change. One minute, Smith and everything he did are false based on this aspect of Account A, and the next minute we are told to disregard the criticism they leveled. What was initially viewed as an egregious inconsistency suddenly becomes acceptable because the same principle would have to be applied to the Bible. Dr. Geisler is exactly right in saying that the problem isn't with what the account actually says, "but with what the critic adds to it."

Fundamentalists also view Smith's assertion of a theophany as preposterous based on KJV passages such as I John 4:12 (ie. "No man hath seen God at any time"). Of course, such a view has to be reconciled with the following passages in the KJV Bible:

Exodus 33:11 -- Moses and God talk face-to-face
Exodus 24:9-10 -- Moses and 73 men approach God and see Him
Genesis 32:30 -- Jacob saw God face-to-face
Acts 7:55-56 -- Stephen saw Jesus at the right hand of the Father

¹⁵ Howard, p. 112.

¹⁶ Norman Geisler and Thomas Howe, **When Critics Ask: A Popular Handbook on Bible Difficulties**, Victor Books, Wheaton, Illinois, 1992, p. 365.

It should be noted that Accounts C, D, E and F all refer to two personages. In addition, Byrna Zerr has identified a fifth account by Smith that refers to two personages.¹⁷ This is in agreement with Acts 7:55-56 where Stephen also saw two personages. Account A refers to Christ but never says that he was the *only* one seen by Joseph Smith.

CONCLUSION

Because Richard Howard does not come from a position of biblical inerrancy, he would obviously not be "satisfied" with Dr. Geisler's explanation of Matthew nor the above explanation of Account A for that matter. But it is interesting to note that he tosses a bouquet to Smith's detractors by saying that they have "used the anomalies with vigor and skill." As self-appointed referee, he then goes on to describe the futility of trying to defend Smith:

Those who have sought to shore up Joseph's integrity in the face of negative findings and conclusions based on what seems to many to be compelling historical evidence have ranged far and wide in an energetic search for the right evidence to overturn his detractors. In view of the foregoing analysis however, it seems to me that such defensiveness may not have been all that productive. For one thing it has led to a serious oversimplification of an immensely intricate process -- that of interpreting events that are beyond history.¹⁸

Why would a church historian take such a position on an event of such historical significance? Dr. James Hitchcock, a historian at St. Louis University, provides some insight on this point. In his book, *What Is Secular Humanism?*, Hitchcock refers to liberalism's evolving role as emissary of secular culture and its habit of placing believers "in a deferential and self-deprecating posture":

Gradually liberals devised what might be called a **concentric-circles strategy**. Briefly, it amounted to a series of decisions to abandon, one after another, certain dimensions of Christian teaching which were regarded as no longer credible, for the purpose of protecting other more central dimensions. **Liberals, in effect, decided to save Christianity through a series of strategic retreats....**The result has not been, as the defenders had hoped, to make the remaining walls the more secure. It has simply rendered them all the more vulnerable. **Each generation of liberals ends by conceding the wall which the previous generation had thought impregnable....**There is practically no example in modern times of a prominent nonbeliever being persuaded of the credibility of Christianity because of liberal attempts at persuasion.... **Liberalism in religion has never been a way into faith; it has always been a way out.....**Many religious liberals no longer have enough interest in classical

¹⁷ Zerr, p. 31.

¹⁸ Howard, p. 116.

Christian teachings even to bother reformulating or denying them. They take for granted their irrelevance. Many of them also do not think the church worth saving in anything like its traditional form. **Many liberals are now more or less frank emissaries from the secular culture to the church**, seeking to win the church over to the secular agenda....Implicit in this position is the most fundamental error of contemporary religious liberalism -- its denial of authentic divine revelation. **Present-day liberals do not truly believe that God revealed himself to man or that man finds meaning in life through obedience to the divine plan.** They believe that all supposed manifestations of revelation (the Bible) are essentially human creations....They are **apostles of unbelief**, endlessly telling believers that they should no longer accept this or that teaching of Christianity. Finally, they negate all of them.....The liberal habit of looking over the shoulder to see what the skeptics think has become a general surrender to secular authority. **The church is kept in a perpetual state of judgment before the world, repeatedly apologizing for its past errors and promising to do better in the future.**¹⁹

Rudolph Bultmann has possibly been the chief spokesman for liberal theology in the past half century. In his attempts to "demythologize" the Bible, Bultmann "tends to make Christian belief captive to contemporary cultural and intellectual prejudices."²⁰ Howard seems to mimic this pattern in his approach to history by attempting to demythologize the first vision. Evangelicals who attempt to use his article to discredit Smith fail to realize that Howard would just as readily direct the charge of "oversimplification" and "defensiveness" toward their explanation of Matthew 28:5.

The eight remaining "discrepancies" that Mr. Howard identifies have more to do with emphasis on specific details or a failure to mention some aspect rather than with any perceived contradictions. For instance, we hope that Mr. Howard doesn't expect the reader to lie awake at night worrying about whether Smith prayed in a secret place, a grove, a silent grove, woods or a wilderness. Some accounts don't mention certain aspects that others do. But the fact that a specific detail is referenced in one account and not in another does not constitute a contradiction that would necessarily undermine Smith's veracity.

Howard's article examined 14 aspects of six different accounts, yet he was only able to identify one possible contradiction: Account A's description of Smith's age. Perhaps that is the reason he refers to "discrepancies" and "anomalies" instead of describing the 14 aspects as outright contradictions. A simple reading of the various accounts is enough for the average reader to conclude that Smith's integrity doesn't need "shoring up." Through his analysis, Howard appears intent on creating a problem where none exists.

¹⁹ James Hitchcock, **What is Secular Humanism?**, Servant Books, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1982, pp. 120-130.

²⁰ Hitchcock, p. 125.

It has been the habit of fundamentalist cult-hunters to perpetuate a myth that there are "**eight** contradictory accounts" of the first vision.²¹ They frequently cite Howard's article without reading it. If they understood his reasoning in writing this article, we wonder if they would be so quick to align themselves with his conclusions.

The significance of the first vision experience is undeniable. If true, it explodes the evangelical myth that visions were done away in the New Testament age and the liberal assumption that God does not speak to man. Naturally such a bold claim is threatening to those who champion such traditions. The opprobrium heaped on Joseph Smith for claiming to have a visionary experience is unwarranted. These are true accounts conveyed in the words of a fallible but honest man.

APPENDIX

Wesley Walters and the Tanners contend that a revival never took place in the Palmyra area at the time that Smith identified because they could not find any record of a revival in Palmyra 160 years later. But Smith's exact words were:

Some time in the second year after our removal 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 the country, indeed **the whole district of country** seemed affected by it, and great multitudes united themselves to the different religious parties....²²

It is important to remember that this account was written in 1838 about an experience that occurred in 1820. Smith never described what he specifically meant by "unusual excitement about the subject of religion." Milton Backman, in his book, Joseph Smith's First Vision, quotes two Palmyra residents who knew Smith in 1820:

One contemporary of Joseph Smith, Orsamus Turner, who resided in Palmyra for several years prior to 1822, wrote that "after catching a spark of Methodism, in the camp meeting, away down in the woods, on the Vienna road, he [Joseph Smith] was a very passable exhorter in evening meetings. Another contemporary who lived in Palmyra in 1820, Pomeroy Tucker, verified the religious excitement that was occurring in that part of America at the time of the First Vision. "Protracted revival meetings," he wrote, "were customary in some of the churches, and Smith frequented those of different denominations...."²³

²¹Carol Hodges Hansen, **The RLDS Church: Christian?**, Independence, MO, 1992, p. 36.

²² Howard, p. 103.

²³Orsamus Turner, **History of the Pioneer Settlement of Phelps and Gorham's Purchase, and Morris' Reserve**, Rochester, 1852, p. 214 and also Pomeroy Tucker, **Origin, Rise and Progress of Mormonism**, New York, 1867, pp. 17-18 as found in Milton Backman, **Joseph's First Vision**, Bookcraft, p. 199.

Even Fawn Brodie appears to believe that revivals occurred in the Palmyra area in Smith's adolescence:

Palmyra was the center of what the circuit riders later called the "burnt over" district. **One revival after another was sweeping through the area**, leaving behind a people scattered and peeled, for religious enthusiasm was literally being burnt out of them.....The **revivals** by their very excesses deadened a normal antipathy toward religious eccentricity. And these pentecostal years, which **coincided with Joseph Smith's adolescence and early manhood**, were the most fertile in America's history for the sprouting of prophets.²⁴

²⁴ Brodie, p. 15.