

# The First Vision

From the day that Joseph Smith spoke of his first vision of God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (spring of 1820), he was ridiculed and mocked. In fact when Joseph spoke of his vision to a local minister, the preacher told young Joseph that the vision was of the devil and treated him with contempt. Evidence indicates that Joseph was careful who he related his vision to after that. At least initially, it appears that Joseph interpreted his vision (and it was even scripturally portrayed) as a “private experience with no greater implications for the world at large or Christian believers in general.”<sup>1</sup> Neither LDS missionaries, nor Joseph Smith made much mention of Joseph’s vision in the early days of the Church.<sup>2</sup>

In 1838 Joseph recorded a detailed account of his first vision – an account which has been used as the primary source for that vision ever since. Joseph had previously recorded his vision, however, as early as 1832. Shortly after the Church had been organized (1830) Joseph received revelations concerning the importance of keeping records, therefore on July 20, 1832 he dictated the basic contents of his first vision to his scribe Frederick G. Williams. Historian Milton Backman, Jr. explains that this “account of 1832 was recorded as a rough draft, the style was not polished, nor was it published by the Prophet. It is possible that after dictating the account, Joseph recognized the desirability of modifying certain statements or correcting concepts not accurately written by an untrained scribe. Often when people record biographical sketches or historical events, they write and rewrite until their ideas are clearly expressed.”<sup>3</sup>

In 1835 Joseph Smith related the experience of his vision to a man named Matthias who was visiting Kirtland. Warren Cowdery recorded this account of Joseph’s vision. Then in 1838, Joseph’s scribe, James Mulholland, recorded the prophet’s experience for publication in the *History of the Church*. This 1838 account is the most detailed and was written to correct “many reports which have been put in circulation by evil-disposed and designing persons, in relation to the rise and progress of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.”<sup>4</sup> Finally, in 1842, Joseph prepared yet another account of his vision for publication in a non-Mormon newspaper with a non-Mormon audience.

The enemies of the Church have criticized the Mormons and Joseph Smith because the various accounts include different details. This should come as no surprise, however, each account is of a different length and each account emphasizes different details. Anyone who relates a story or experience stresses certain details depending on the audience. Even today, Latter-day Saints relate the story of the first vision by emphasizing different aspects. “If one were relating the incident to a group of high priests, for example, he would undoubtedly tell it somewhat differently than he would to individuals who had never heard of Joseph Smith or the restoration of the gospel.”<sup>5</sup> The fact that the accounts all differ from each other in various details supports the integrity of Joseph Smith and indicates that

the story was not simply memorized and repeated mechanically.

One of the things that the anti-Mormons criticize, for example, is that in the 1832 account, Joseph simply stated that the heavens were opened “and I saw the Lord and he Spake unto me Saying Joseph my Son thy Sins are forgiven thee.”<sup>6</sup> The critics claim that Joseph’s story of his vision evolved and that the first recorded account tells of one personage, rather than two. Nothing in the 1832 account states, however, that there was *only one* personage. If you tell someone that you had visited with the President of the United States, does this mean that the Vice President and First Lady were not present? Just because this early account mentions only one personage, we should not assume that there was only one personage. The emphasis in this 1832 account is that the Lord had visited Joseph Smith and told him that his sins were forgiven.

As we look at Joseph’s four accounts of the First Vision we find that they really are in harmony. The table on the next page<sup>7</sup> indicates several points within the accounts of the First Vision recitals and lists which accounts embrace these details.

Should we reject the Resurrection because the Apostles could not agree on how many angels were at Christ’s tomb (see Matt. 28:2, Mark 16:5, Luke 24:4, and John 10:12)? Matthew wrote that the title on the cross above Jesus read: “This is Jesus the King of the Jews” (Matt. 27:37), while Mark claimed that the title simply read: “The King of the Jews” (Mark 15:26). Luke, however, recorded that the title read: “This is the King of the Jews” (Luke 23:38), and John claimed that the title read: “Jesus of Nazareth the King of the Jews” (John 19:19). Some people will say that we are being nit-picky, and that is the whole point. The message was basically the same—Jesus is King of the Jews. Each Apostle, however, recalled the title a little differently. If we can dismiss the minor discrepancies in the New Testament (which has several other inconsistencies) without rejecting Christ or the gospel, then we should be able to dismiss the minor discrepancies in Joseph’s various accounts of his first vision without rejecting Joseph as a Prophet or the Restored Gospel.

Richard Lloyd Anderson has observed that many of the criticisms against Joseph Smith’s vision apply equally as well to Paul’s vision. For instance the critics attack Joseph Smith because the earliest known record of his vision wasn’t given until a dozen years after it happened. The first record of Paul’s vision, however, which is found in 1 Corinthians 9:1, wasn’t recorded until two dozen years after it happened. And just as the most detailed description of Joseph’s vision was one of his later accounts, so likewise, Paul’s most detailed account of his vision was the last of several recorded. The details in both accounts are expanded because they are geared to different audiences.<sup>8</sup> The critics reject Joseph Smith’s vision for standards that they would not dare apply to the Bible.

	1832	1835	1838	1842
Joseph's quest for forgiveness	√	√		√
Joseph's disillusionment with other churches	√	√	√	√
Joseph's search for Christ's true church	√	√	√	√
Intense religious excitement in community			√	
Joseph searched scriptures for answer	√	√	√	√
Joseph receives guidance from James 1:5		√	√	√
Joseph sought Lord's help through prayer	√	√	√	√
Dark forces sought to oppose prayer		√	√	
God hears and answers prayers	√	√	√	√
Appearance of light or filled with the Spirit of God	√	√	√	
Appearance of Deity	√	√	√	√
Two personages appear		√	√	√
Many angels present		√		
Joseph's sins forgiven	√	√		
The true church was not then on the earth	√		√	√
The Gospel was to be restored			√	√
Joseph was filled with peace and love	√			
Joseph was unsuccessful in convincing others of his vision	√		√	



For more details on this topic see <http://www.mormonfortress.com/firstvis.html>

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<sup>1</sup> Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 10.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. See also James B. Allen, "The Significance of Joseph's 'First Vision' in Mormon Thought," *Dialogue* (Autumn 1966), 1:29–45.

<sup>3</sup> Milton V. Backman, *Joseph Smith's First Vision* (SLC: Bookcraft, 1980), 124.

<sup>4</sup> *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* 7 volumes (SLC: Deseret Book, 1978), 1:1.

<sup>5</sup> Backman, 202.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>7</sup> Backman, 206; James B. Allen, "Eight Contemporary Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision— What Do We Learn From Them?" *Ensign* (April 1970): 12.

<sup>8</sup> Richard L. Anderson (1985), "Parallel Prophets: Paul and Joseph Smith," *Ensign*, April 1985, 12–13.