

FIRST VISIONS

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PERSONAL OBSERVATIONS ON JOSEPH SMITH'S RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

THE conventional Mormon and anti-Mormon interpretations of Joseph Smith's first vision and related visionary phenomena are both unconvincing to me for much the same reason: neither takes seriously the full richness and complexity of Joseph's religious experiences. The pro- and anti-Mormon arguments are analogous to a dispute between two blind men, each of whom has hold of a different part of the elephant's anatomy and proclaims that only *he* knows what the elephant really is. But I believe that Joseph Smith's religious experiences were so powerful and significant that they deserve the most comprehensive treatment possible. Indeed, if properly understood these experiences may raise vital issues not simply for Mormons but for all those concerned with the nature and significance of direct religious experience.

The following observations possible framework for such a have deliberately chosen to refer talization to emphasize that I am experience itself rather than account. Like some of the other scholars to understand the own interpretation inevitably Joseph's direct religious experi- personal observations of a non- some new directions worthy of as well.¹

Perhaps the greatest single attempts to understand the first experiences of Joseph Smith has in the context of similar phe- cultures. Joseph Smith himself indicated in the 1838 account that of St. Paul on the road to cally that he could not deny the matter what others might say. Most Latter-day Saints, however, have shied away from considering the broader parallels to Joseph's visionary experiences. The primary reason, I believe, is that such an analysis would indicate that, far from being unique, Joseph Smith's first vision and related experiences were almost a classic model of such phenomena in all times and cultures. This can be seen most clearly in the description by the anthropologist Anthony F. C. Wallace of the characteristic way in which new religions—or as he calls them "revitalization movements"—originate. Based on a consideration of hundreds of different groups on five continents, Wallace concludes: "With a few exceptions, every religious revitalization movement with which I am acquainted has been originally conceived in one or several hallucinatory visions by a single individual. A supernatural being appears to the prophet-to-be, explains his own and his society's troubles as being entirely or partly a result of the violation of certain rules, and promises individual and social revitalization if the injunctions are followed and the rituals practiced, but personal and social catastrophe if they are not." Wallace observes that thereafter the "prophet feels a need to tell others of his experience, and may have definite feelings of missionary or



are an attempt to set out part of a broader analysis. Note that I to the "first vision" without capi- talking primarily about the simply about the canonized 1838 fine recent efforts by Mormon nature of Joseph's visions, my will fall short of conveying ence. Yet perhaps these purely Mormon scholar may suggest consideration by Mormons

weakness of most previous vision and related visionary been the failure to consider them nomena in other times and was aware of such parallels, as he when he compared his vision to Damascus and declared emphati- truth of his own experience no

messianic obligation. Generally he shows evidence of a radical inner change in personality soon after the vision experience: a remission of old and chronic physical complaints, a more active and purposeful way of life, greater confidence in interpersonal relations, the dropping of deep-seated habits like alcoholism. . . . Where there is no vision (as with John Wesley), there occurs a similarly brief and dramatic moment of insight, revelation, or inspiration, which functions in most respects like the vision in being the occasion of a new synthesis of values and meanings."²

One need not accept the value judgment Wallace makes when he refers to such visionary experiences as "hallucinatory" (that is, not literally true), to accept his general description of what happens in such instances as strikingly similar to the case of Joseph Smith. Young Joseph, though highly talented, was at loose ends initially—viewed by some as a pleasant and outgoing ne'er-do-well who spent much of his time hunting for hidden treasure. The series of visions that he had in his teens ultimately led to the transformation of his life and the founding of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Although surviving accounts of Joseph Smith's first vision are far from wholly consistent on points of detail, such as whether one or several figures appeared to him, the accounts do indicate that young Joseph was deeply disturbed by the competing claims to religious truth that were being put forward in his area. Joseph was bright enough to understand that such mutually exclusive claims simply could not all be true. Eventually he would realize that he had been specially called by God to introduce a new religious synthesis which would integrate and supersede all previous ones. As Joseph Smith described the development, a series of subsequent visions led to his finding a set of golden plates and his dictation of a "translation" of those plates, which was first published in 1830 as the Book of Mormon. In the meantime, he had also begun to deliver revelations, many of which would later be published in the various editions of the Doctrine and Covenants.

To say that Joseph Smith's visionary experiences correspond to a pattern seen in the visionary phenomena of other times and places is not to reduce them to triviality, any more than a skillful description of how a great athlete, musician, or scientific genius operates reduces our appreciation of his achievements. Indeed, quite the contrary is the case. If Joseph Smith's visions had been completely unique and beyond human comprehension, they could have little meaning for any of us. The same holds true for the experiences of other great religious leaders such as Jesus. Traditional Christianity emphatically affirms not only that he was "wholly God" but also, paradoxically, that he was "wholly man" as well. He was not a supernatural being outside of human history and untouched by it (that was the heresy of the gnostics) but a very special synthesis of the divine and the human who pointed the way toward and made possible our salvation. Joseph Smith's religious experiences, though they may be understood in some degree as to their form, are also in a deeper sense ultimately a mystery. This mystery is not really grasped by those Saints who bear their testimony, almost as though it were a creed, that Joseph Smith had a vision of God the Father and the Son and that somehow *that* was the chief point of the experience. Even if Joseph did see

(or believe he saw) God the Father and the Son (and I shall question that point below), the deeper mystery still remains for those with faith.

Both Mormons and anti-Mormons often appear to have a curiously limited understanding of the first vision. Neither is primarily interested in reconstructing precisely *what* Joseph Smith actually experienced. Both reduce the phenomena in all its rich complexity to a narrow true-false proposition. An enormous amount of water has gone under the bridge, for example, concerning whether or not the first vision took place in the year 1820. Ingenious anti-Mormons such as Wesley Walters seem to suggest that if they could show that the vision could not have happened in 1820, then perhaps no vision actually happened at all. Defensive Mormons, on the other hand, have believed that if they could establish the plausibility of the vision's having happened in 1820, as stated in the canonized 1838 account, then the conventional story of Joseph Smith's having seen God the Father and the Son is thereby also established *en toto*. Both these approaches beg the question logically. Whether or not an error was made in dating precisely when a vision occurred has no necessary connection with whether it occurred (perhaps it could have occurred at another time) or what specifically occurred. While at least one other error in dating exists in the early pages of the published *History of the Church* (due presumably to normal memory lapses in writing of events that occurred more than a decade before), such trivial errors in dating by no means establish that a reported event did not happen at all.

The underlying question which such scholasticism conveniently avoids is precisely what happened in Joseph Smith's early visionary experiences. The primary reason that Mormon apologists have for the past several decades been tied in such intellectual knots regarding the first vision is really very simple: The 1838 version of the first vision, which has been canonized as *the* First Vision, seems less reliable historically than the earlier accounts of the vision, especially Joseph Smith's account of 1832. Originally, as the 1832 account suggests, the vision was chiefly important to Joseph Smith himself as he began to establish his personal sense of mission, and it was almost totally unknown to the general membership. Today, however, as historian James B. Allen observes in his pathbreaking article, "The Significance of Joseph Smith's First Vision in Mormon Thought": "Its significance is second only to the belief in the divinity of Jesus of Nazareth. The story is an essential part of the first lesson given by Mormon missionaries to prospective converts, and its acceptance is necessary before baptism."³

Under the circumstances, even Mormon historians who understand the problem of describing what actually happened in the first vision are unable to explain that problem in a way that could be comprehended or accepted by most Latter-day Saints. The result of this unfortunate situation is that even many conservative Mormons unnecessarily suffer pangs of doubt at inconsistencies in the accounts that could be resolved if it were possible to begin with the more reliable 1832 version of the vision as the basis for religious education and analysis. Yet the prospects for effective change in this situation in the foreseeable future are slight. The 1838 version is the one which was canonized, it is the

more appealing from a literary point of view, and millions of Latter-day Saints have been brought up to believe that *that* specific version is one hundred percent correct as written. Latter-day Saints may indeed have to wait, as the saying goes, until the coming of the Millennium to see this man-made confusion resolved.

The chief reason why the 1838 version of the first vision has been so important to Latter-day Saints is probably that it has been used as the primary means of supposedly "proving" the Mormon concept that God the Father has a physical body. This may or may not be the case, but in my opinion the first vision is certainly not a convincing way of establishing the point. The 1838 version of the vision only indicates specifically that Joseph Smith saw two "personages" but does not explicitly identify them. Further indication of the fundamental unimportance of the specific identity of the personage or personages is suggested by the fact that the 1832 account only mentions one figure (presumably Jesus). If seeing God the Father in physical form was so important, why wasn't he even mentioned in the 1832 account? And why wasn't Joseph Smith more explicit in

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making the direct identification in 1838? Once again, modern Mormonism has chosen to emphasize an element that appears to have been of slight importance to the early faith's understanding of the vision, perhaps even to the understanding of the Mormon prophet himself. In my opinion, surviving accounts of the first vision strongly suggest that the chief importance of the vision to Joseph Smith himself was its tremendous emotional power, not anything in particular that he may have seen. What he saw could be described very differently as he looked back later with growing insight at the powerful formative vision which even he may not have fully understood at the time.

The power and psychological complexity of visionary phenomena are highlighted by a vivid example from the celibate Shakers of the nineteenth century. When John

Lyon was about fourteen, he began to become increasingly disturbed by his developing sexual impulses which he viewed as extremely sinful. He confessed repeatedly to the Shaker elders, and genuinely tried to follow their advice, but inwardly he was deeply divided and doubted what they told him. In 1802 when he was twenty-one, Lyon had a powerful visionary experience which he describes with much insight. In great inner turmoil, he was alone at work, when "suddenly I was taken from all sense of the things of time . . . apparently the whole heavens were filled, seeming to roll forward and backward, and in every direction." He saw a thin verticle streak of light toward which he walked at the command of a voice, but suddenly he stood next to a great gulf and became "enveloped in a horrible darkness." There was nothing beneath his feet; he was unable to move in any direction and was in great distress, utterly lost and terrified.

Eventually Lyon discovered that by keeping his eyes firmly fixed on the thin ray of light, he was able to move forward safely through the unknown. But every time he lost his concentration on the light, he was overwhelmed in blackness and terror again. Finally he decided to ask for help. He was instructed in obedience and vowed in his heart that if he survived the experience, he would never disobey his elders again. Then at last he was able to move through the darkness into a bright, lovely vision. After an unknown interval of time, "I heard the same sound which I had heard at the commencement of the vision, it came rolling through the heavens, and seemed to fill all things . . . and I found myself upon my knees, having wet with my tears, a place some ten or twelve inches in diameter." Approximately four hours had elapsed. From that time forth, despite occasional inner conflicts, Lyon was firmly dedicated to the Shakers. He went on to become one of their great leaders.⁴

Visiary accounts, past and present, of which I have read and investigated hundreds, have led me both to be skeptical about specific truth claims derived from visionary experiences and to have a deep and abiding respect for the powerful personal transformation which such experiences can bring. Let us look at both reactions as they relate to Joseph Smith's early visions. On the skeptical side, I find myself sometimes puzzled and annoyed by Latter-day Saints who have never impartially investigated religious phenomena outside of Mormonism, but who categorically assert that Joseph Smith's experiences were unique. In particular, I have repeatedly heard the assertion that while other individuals may have had visions, only Joseph Smith claimed to have seen Jesus Christ and God the Father. Such statements are simply untrue. To begin with, the history of Christianity is filled with saints and other figures who said they had seen Jesus. I have personally talked with many who make that claim. Such assertions were also common in the nineteenth century, especially in areas where Joseph Smith and the Mormons were most active. The further claim to have seen God Almighty is much less common, of course, probably because anyone publicly making such an assertion is typically viewed with incredulity. Thus, the only people I have encountered who insisted that they had literally seen God have been patients in mental institutions. The common assumption that anyone making such an

extreme assertion must be either a charlatan or deranged probably helps explain Joseph Smith's own initial reticence in talking about his visions, especially his first vision, except to people who already respected his prophetic powers.

Does this suggest, then, that I reject the notion that Joseph Smith actually saw angels or other heavenly personages? This is a complex question, and my basic answer is two fold: I personally do not think that Joseph's visions were literally true, yet at the same time I cannot discount the possibility that they might have been.

In any case, however, this is not the most important question. There are broader and more significant issues that are missed when exclusive attention is directed toward the question of whether certain events did or did not literally occur. As my grandfather once pointed out to me, individuals who are preoccupied only with the question of whether or not Jonah was, or could have been, swallowed by a "great fish" (popularly, a whale) miss the whole point about the Book of Jonah. That book is not concerned with the narrow literalistic question of whether a man could actually have been swallowed by a great fish, live for three days in its belly, and then emerge alive. Rather the Book of Jonah teaches, among its many other messages, that there is ultimately no running away from God's commands and that God cares about all of his many children, not simply his "chosen people" the Jews.

The significance of Joseph Smith's first vision, like that of the Book of Jonah, is not based primarily on whether a particular event actually occurred. Even if Joseph's visions reflected his own personal psychology rather than contact with beings from another dimension of reality, the perceived source of a vision by no means determines whether the message itself is not also true in some deeper sense. Joseph Smith was one of the most complex individuals who ever lived; if he interpreted the deeply felt inner truth of his prophetic mission as an objective experience, that interpretation in no way invalidates the truth of the mission itself. Surely if God works through fallible human agency, then it may well be that he has to operate at times through psychological experiences perceived as literally true. This may be necessary in order to communicate a complex divine message to the limited human agents through whom that message must be transmitted.

Having said all this, it still remains possible that what appears to the modern secular mind to be best understood as psychological truth may, in fact, have been literally truth as well. Joseph Smith possessed remarkable powers of dissociation. It cannot be asserted *a priori* that he did not have literal contact with beings from another dimension of reality. To paraphrase the great psychologist of religion William James, if there were to be such a thing as direct communication with God or with powers from other dimensions of reality beyond our own, perhaps that contact would have to come through individuals who were capable of transcending their normal state of conscious awareness, much in the way that Joseph Smith could.

That there may well be dimensions of consciousness beyond our normal waking state which have a "real" existence is an idea that I believe any religious person must seriously consider. My investigation of so-called extrasensory or paranormal phenomena, as well as the

experiences of some of my friends, has convinced me that such an hypothesis may indeed be the best way of understanding certain types of otherwise puzzling occurrences. Such phenomena might also have been associated with Joseph Smith's visions.

The major problem, however, remains one of seeking to understand the first vision experience in its historical and personal context. If only we could temporarily leave aside the long-standing dogmatic, doctrinal, and polemical approaches, many of the apparent problems associated with the vision could be overcome. For example, the changes in the accounts of the vision over time (which many Latter-day Saints find so disturbing) are really not surprising at all. Even as we look back over our own relatively more mundane life experiences, each of us tends to reinterpret those experiences with more concern for their significance for us in the present than with an attempt to achieve precise blow-by-blow accuracy with respect to particular details. Sometimes, in fact, we consciously or unconsciously exaggerate or modify our accounts when we retell our stories to others in order to make a deeper point more effectively.

This is even more true with regard to dreams or to visions, which can provisionally be described as powerful waking dreams which may serve to transform an individual's life. Biblical prophetic dreams, for example, could be subject to divergent interpretations, even as they were felt to communicate profound truths from powers beyond the purely human. And in Mormonism, dreams and visions were closely and in certain circumstances properly linked, as is suggested by the statement in the Book of Mormon: "I have dreamed a dream; or, in other words, I have seen a vision" (1 Ne. 8:2). The significance of religious dreams and visions lies not so much in their specific content as in their meaning. So it happens that in the first vision a figure (or figures) that Joseph Smith saw could be variously identified, even while the power and truth of the experience remained to him undeniable.

It is this wide range of variation in Joseph Smith's first vision accounts that makes them inappropriate as an authoritative basis for specific Mormon doctrinal beliefs such as the nature of the Godhead. For the first vision was not originally a doctrinal experience at all; the doctrinal interpretations of the vision were added later. The only irreducible content of the earliest accounts appears to have been Joseph Smith's deep personal sense of forgiveness from sin and a reaffirmation of faith in Christ. The nature of Joseph's specific mission and the manner in which it was to manifest itself became apparent only in subsequent visions.

Thus there is strong reason to believe that a more important vision for Joseph Smith than his "first vision," was his vision of 21 September 1823, when he stated that the angel Moroni appeared to him. He was told then that he would eventually "translate" a set of golden plates—a "translation" that would become the Book of Mormon. The 1823 vision was the one that was highlighted in the first officially printed account of the origin of the Mormon faith, which appeared serially in the *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* in 1834-35 under the authorship of Oliver Cowdery. And it was this 1823 vision that was referred to over and over again in early missionary accounts and writings of the Mormon church. If

the "first vision" by itself was of such overwhelming importance to Joseph Smith and Mormonism, why was it so seldom referred to while he was alive? I would suggest, as an hypothesis for further investigation, that no single vision by itself was the decisive source of Joseph's sense of mission, but rather that the early visions should properly be considered as a unit. If one vision must be singled out, however, it should be the vision of 21 September 1823, not the "first vision," whenever it may have occurred.

The 1823 vision is the most important one, in my opinion, because of its relationship with the "translation" of the Book of Mormon. That document is the heart and soul of Mormonism—an immensely impressive book, no matter what position one may take on its literal historicity. It was the Book of Mormon, combined with the belief in Joseph Smith's role as the latter-day prophet of a new dispensation of God, that was the core of the early Mormon faith. Unlike Joseph's visions, judgment of which ultimately depends on one's prior assessment of his reliability, the Book of Mormon is a tangible product which can be analyzed in its own right. I believe that a vital Latter-day Saint faith in the late twentieth century would do well to downplay the more speculative source of authority provided by the first vision and emphasize the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith's other revelations as the starting point for their faith, just as did the first Mormons.

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Notes

1. An earlier version of this article was presented on 28 August 1982 at the annual Sunstone Theological Symposium in Salt Lake City, Utah. Since this article is primarily a personal statement directed to those already familiar with the basic literature on the first vision, only direct quotations are cited in these notes. The "Bibliographic Essay" which follows identifies some of the key sources so that those who are interested may further investigate the issues raised here. For a discussion of my overall approach toward Mormonism, see Lawrence Foster, "A Personal Odyssey: My Encounter with Mormon History," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 16 (Fall 1983):87-98.

2. Anthony F. C. Wallace, "Revitalization Movements," *American Anthropologist* 56 (April 1956): 270-71.

3. James B. Allen, "The Significance of Joseph Smith's First Vision in Mormon Thought," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 1 (Autumn 1966): 29.

4. The paragraphs on John Lyon's experiences are taken from Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality: Three American Communal Experiments of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 50-51. Used by permission of the copyright holder, Oxford University Press.

Bibliographic Essay

The chief disagreements over Joseph Smith's first vision lie not so much with the evidence itself as with the interpretation of what that evidence means. Since this article has been directed to those who have already given some thought to the first vision and its significance, this bibliographic essay will not be comprehensive but will merely highlight some of the most important primary and secondary sources which may be helpful to those seeking to further develop their own interpretation of the vision. The few direct quotations in the article have been cited above.

The starting point for all serious investigation of Joseph Smith's first vision must be the surviving accounts of the vision, which are presented in an exact transcription by Dean C. Jesse, "The Early Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision," *BYU Studies* 9 (Spring 1969): 275-94. One other important primary account with bearing on Joseph Smith's early visionary experiences is found in two letters of

Oliver Cowdery to W. W. Phelps in *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* 1 (December 1834): 41-43 and 1 (February 1835): 77-80. For a pioneering account of the importance that the vision has had for Mormons, see James B. Allen, "The Significance of Joseph Smith's First Vision in Mormon Thought," *Dialogue* 1 (Autumn 1966): 28-45. An important non-Mormon interpretation which analyzes the significance of Joseph Smith's early experiences for Mormon development is Mario S. De Pillis, "The Quest for Religious Authority and the Rise of Mormonism," *Dialogue* 1 (Spring 1966): 68-88. Strengths and weaknesses of the major polemical positions on the first vision—including those of Fawn M. Brodie, Wesley P. Walters, Jerald and Sandra Tanner, Milton Bachman, Richard Bushman, and others—are presented and analyzed in Marvin S. Hill, "The First Vision Controversy: A Critique and Reconciliation," *Dialogue* 15 (Summer 1982): 31-46.

For the larger context of historical, anthropological, and psychological studies of visionary experiences in other times and cultures with which Joseph Smith's visions may be usefully compared, perhaps the best introduction is Anthony F. C. Wallace, "Revitalization Movements," *American Anthropologist* 38 (April 1956): 264-81. Also helpful are Kenelm Burridge, *New Heaven, New Earth: A Study of Millenarian Activities* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), and Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine-Atherton, 1969). An indication of the extraordinary range of writings in this area is Weston La Barre, "Materials for a History of Studies of Crisis Cults: A Bibliographic Essay," *Current Anthropology* 12 (February 1971): 3-44. Four compelling, yet partially conflicting, approaches to the causes and significance of visionary and trance phenomena are found in Ilza Veith, *Hysteria: The History of a Disease* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965); William Sargant, *Battle for the Mind: A Physiology of Conversion and Brainwashing* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1959); I. M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion: An Anthropological Study of Spirit Possession and Shamanism* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1971); and William J. Samarin, *Tongues of Men and Angels: The Religious Language of Pentecostalism* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1972).

An introduction to the nineteenth-century background of Joseph Smith's activities and experiences is presented in two biographical studies with divergent perspectives: Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, The Mormon Prophet*, 2d ed. rev. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971) and Donna Hill, *Joseph Smith: The First Mormon* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1977). The larger spiritualist movement, with which Mormonism had certain strong affinities, is conveniently summarized in Slater Brown, *The Heyday of Spiritualism* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Pocket Books, 1972). The rich Shaker spiritual manifestations between 1837 and 1847, which are strikingly similar in certain respects to some of the milder Mormon visionary experiences of that same period, are described in Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality: Three American Communal Experiments of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 62-71. Two recent accounts of dissociative or paranormal experiences which have special relevance for understanding Joseph Smith's visions are Robert A. Monroe, *Journeys Out of the Body* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1977), and Jule E. Eisenbud, *The World of Ted Serios* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1967). An intellectual approach helpful for understanding the concept of multiple dimensions of reality is provided in Edwin Abbott's classic, *Flatland* (New York: Dover Publications, 1952).

Perhaps the most influential of the modern polemical treatments of the first vision was Wesley P. Walters, "New Light on Mormon Origins from the Palmyra Revival," *Dialogue* 4 (Spring 1969): 60-81, with Richard L. Bushman's critique and Walter's rejoinder, pp. 82-100. Three important approaches to the first vision are found in volume 7 of the *Journal of Mormon History* (1980). Perspectives of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints are discussed in Richard P. Howard, "Joseph Smith's First Vision: The RLDS Tradition," *Journal of Mormon History* 7 (1980): 23-29. A comparative analysis which places the vision within the context of nineteenth-century revivalism and the perspectives of Mircea Eliade and writers in the History of Religions tradition is Neal E. Lambert and Richard H. Cracroft, "Literary Form and Historical Understanding: Joseph Smith's First Vision," *Journal of Mormon History* 7 (1980): 31-42. And the historical development of Mormon conceptions of the first vision is further elaborated in James B. Allen, "Emergence of a Fundamental: The Expanding Role of Joseph Smith's First Vision in Mormon Religious Thought," *Journal of Mormon History* 7 (1980): 43-61. These and many other analyses must be taken into account by those seeking to move beyond mere true-false polemicism toward a deeper understanding of the first vision.