



Type: Book Chapter

First Vision Concerns

Author(s): Michael R. Ash

Source: *Bamboozled by the CES Letter*

Published: Self-Published, 2015

Pages: 43-47

Chapter 4 First Vision Concerns

16) *Joseph Smith gave 4 noticeably different accounts of the First Vision.*

Answer: Joseph recorded his vision at different points in his life and emphasized different details depending on his audience and hindsight. The important points are in harmony with each other. Astute readers may have noticed that I included “hindsight” in the first sentence. The truth is that *all* people have fallible memories. Just because Joseph received a vision—a visitation with God the Father and the Son—doesn’t mean that he automatically recalled every detail of the vision with precise accuracy. Experts know that if you don’t write something down right away, you’ll forget (or perhaps even conflate) some of the details. Stuff happens to me all the time which, years later, I wish I would have recorded so I could better recollect the details of the event or experience.

There is no indication that Joseph immediately wrote down what happened. How many typical 14 year-old kids would? How many adults would (and we’re talking about in an age *prior* to having the advantage of quickly posting your story on Facebook)?

Eight months after he married Emma, 21 year-old Joseph acquired the plates. Shortly thereafter he began translating the record with Emma as his scribe. Emma later recalled that her husband “could neither write nor dictate a coherent and well-worded letter, let alone dictate a book like the Book of Mormon.”

And, though I was an active participant in the scenes that transpired, and was present during the translation of the plates, and had cognizance of things as they transpired, it is marvelous to me, “a marvel and a wonder,” as much so as to anyone else.²⁰

If the young adult Joseph couldn’t write a coherent letter in his early twenties, imagine how poor his writing abilities might have been at 14 years old when he experienced his vision. No wonder he didn’t record it immediately.

Joseph always seems to be held to a higher standard because of what he saw, heard, or experienced. None of those things made him less human. When Joseph initially recorded the event, he focused on those things which made the most impact on him at that time. Later, as he retold the event again, he included more details which—in hindsight—made additional sense from the perspective at the time he was writing. Occasionally Joseph left out some of the details from earlier recitals. Did he forget to include the details (not like he had *MS Word* and could go back and reinsert stuff he forgot to include) or was it simply because he didn’t focus on those points for this particular audience or perspective?

When we tell a story we may recall additional details that we forgot to include in the first telling. We make it a point to include those missing details in subsequent recitals. *That’s how we humans do things*. Here’s a scenario that might sound familiar. I call my adult daughter to tell her

about the excitement I witnessed at the local Walmart tonight. My wife is not on the phone but is in the same room and can hear what I say.

Me to my daughter: “It was wild. This guy was running for the exit with a *Play Station* tucked under his arm like a football.”

My wife: “Tell her about the alarm screeching from the electronics department.”

Me: “Yeah... apparently when the guy left the electronics department he triggered some sort of alarm, you could hear the squeal through the store. So anyway... he runs for the exit and actually gets outside....”

My wife: “Well, he knocked over a shopping cart before getting out.”

Me: “He *almost* made it outside before an employee grabbed his jacket, spinning him around and knocking over a shopping cart.....” *Me glaring at my wife....* “...*but* he made it all the way outside of the store before he got tackled by another employee.”

Despite the glare-over-the-tops-of-my-glasses-perched-over-my-nose at my wife, I could have retold the story correctly all by myself. Reluctantly I admit, however, that she did help me fill in some details I was leaving out in my excitement to share the event. That’s how the retelling of memories works with us mortals—and Joseph Smith was as mortal as any of the rest of us.

17) One First Vision account says that Joseph was visited by an angel, rather than by Jesus.

Answer: In Joseph Smith’s day, it wasn’t uncommon to refer to Jesus as “an angel.” In the 1832 recital Joseph claims he saw and heard “the Lord” (which could have meant Jesus or the Father). On 9 November 1835 Joseph recounted the vision to a man who had come to visit. Joseph’s scribe Warren Parrish took notes about the conversation. In this recital Joseph detailed that he had seen “two personages” (and we already know from the 1832 account that at least one of these is Jesus or the Father). Five days later, again in a conversation with a visitor, Joseph explains that he was about 14 years old when he received “the first Visitation of Angels” (which obviously means that he had no problem calling both personages—one of whom he had already designated as “the Lord”) as “Angels.”

Many LDS leaders referred to Jesus as an "angel" who appeared to Joseph Smith even after the official 1838 account of the First Vision had been published. Brigham Young, for example, who had read Joseph’s 1838 account said in 1855 that “an angel” informed Joseph not to join any of the existing sects. John Taylor, who was the editor of the *Times and Seasons* in 1842 when the official 1838 recital was printed, said in 1863 that “an angel” came to Joseph and revealed the true position of the world.

In 1864 George Albert Smith gave a talk wherein he quoted a portion of the 1838 recital and expressly noted that Joseph had seen two personages and that one had introduced the other as His “beloved son.” *Five years later* George said that Joseph “was enlightened by the vision of a holy angel” when Joseph had asked which church was right. Modern critics are the ones who have a problem with the term angel being used to describe the Lord. The early Mormons had no problem interchanging the terms.

18) *The earliest version gives Joseph's age as 15 when he experienced the First Vision. Subsequent recitals claim that he was 14.*

Answer: As noted above, Joseph didn't write down the details of the event until several years later. How weird that someone would forget what year an important event happened. Tell that to all the husbands (and sometimes wives) who can't remember their anniversary date let alone how many years they've been married. If we don't write things down, we tend to forget when things happen.

"I just bought this vacuum last Christmas and it's already stopped working," says the customer to the clerk.

"You bought this vacuum two Christmases ago," replies the clerk after looking up the sale on his computer.

When Joseph first wrote about his brother Alvin's death, he got the year wrong as well. This is what happens when you are human. The 1832 First Vision account was written by Joseph Smith himself. It was a rough draft and was not meant for publication. After Joseph had written the text, his scribe, Frederick G. Williams, inserted "in the 16th year of my age" into the document (which would have made Joseph 15 at the time of the vision). This is a bit like my fictional phone conversation with my daughter (see #16 above). Williams, probably in discussion with Joseph, was trying to add details to clarify the document. This detail was likely in error and was corrected in later versions.

19) *No one in Joseph Smith's day (including his family) seems to have heard about his First Vision until at least a dozen years later. There is absolutely no record of a First Vision prior to 1832.*

Answer: President Thomas J. Whitmore (in the movie *Independence Day*): "Take my word for it, there's no Area 51, there's no recovered spaceship." Secretary of Defense Albert Nimzicki: "Ah, excuse me, Mr. President, that's not entirely accurate."

The First Vision took place in 1820. So according to the CES Letter the first record of the First Vision would have appeared in 1832. First, it should be noted that there are a few early sources which imply—with some ambiguity—that the First Vision was being discussed as early as 1827. In my opinion, however, the interpretation of the data from these early sources leaves too much room for misinterpretation—so I'll skip to the next known source.

In 1831 a local paper was reporting that, according to LDS missionaries, Joseph had seen God frequently and personally and had received authority to teach about Christ's true church. The 1831 source is, in my opinion, *solid* evidence for early LDS discussions about the First Vision. The CES Letter says that there is no record of the First Vision until 1832; the 1831 newspaper story contradicts that argument. The claim that all swans are white is falsified by a single black swan. Eleven years instead of twelve years, however, is mere quibbling. The truth is that we do not currently have any documents that mention or imply a knowledge of the First Vision until nearly a dozen years after it took place.

Just because we don't know of any solid pre-1831 documents mentioning the vision, however, doesn't mean that everyone was silent on the matter, or that no one besides Joseph knew of his experience. The single black swan is instructive. Did all the people in Joseph Smith's vicinity write down everything of interest that happened in their neighborhood (and, it should be noted, Joseph wasn't the only one claiming to have had a vision of Christ, so maybe his claim was a big "yawn" to some of his neighbors)? And if they did write everything down, did all of those journals, notes, dictations, survive? And if they did survive, do we have them all for study? We can never positively say that there are no earlier records of Joseph Smith's First Vision; the best we can say is that the earliest records of which we currently know date to more than a decade after Joseph Smith claimed to have experienced the vision. So what?

For the sake of argument, we might agree that Joseph Smith didn't retell the event until many years later. We must then ask, why?

The details Joseph included in his 1832 recital suggest that he initially understood his vision as a very personal experience. He may have felt a need to keep the sacred event private. After having experienced the vision, Joseph returned home and leaned contemplatively against the wall by the fire place. Sensing that something was amiss his mother, Lucy Mack Smith, asked Joseph if everything was ok. Did he tell her what he had just experienced? Nope. His response: "I have learned for myself that Presbyterianism is not true." He could have told her about the vision, but for reasons of his own (and those who have had very spiritual experiences may understand this better than those who have not had spiritual experiences) decided to keep the information to himself.

Three years later, on September 21st 1823, Moroni visited Joseph three times, during which time Joseph was told about the golden plates. By the next day, however, Joseph had not shared the experience with a single soul. It wasn't until Moroni came and visited him again that Joseph was "commanded" to tell his father what he had seen.

Shortly after the First Vision Joseph apparently confided in a local minister. He probably needed to talk to someone—anyone of trust with whom he could share his story. My guess is he hoped that a minister would be sympathetic and would maybe even give him advice or direction. Instead, however, the minister not only downplayed his experience but claimed that such things were of the devil. Nice thing for a 14 year-old kid to hear—a kid who had just experienced something miraculous, sacred, and perhaps more than a bit scary. Like any normal kid who might have received such a response from a religious leader in the community, Joseph was probably hesitant to tell anyone else about the story for fear that they would think he was crazy, a liar, or consorting with the devil.

It's also significant to point out that we, in the modern Church, make more of Joseph Smith's First Vision than did Joseph or the early Church. Today, thanks to hindsight, we call this event the First Vision (with capital letters) not only because it was the first of many visions Joseph would experience, but also because we now know that this began a course that would eventually lead to the Restoration. This is not something that Joseph would have understood, however, until many years later. In Joseph's day the First Vision was a personal experience for Joseph, whereas the Restoration really began with the golden plates.

More often than not, those things throughout our past—things which shape the direction of our lives—are not really appreciated or understood until many years later when we can reflect on them and how they brought us to our present state. In hindsight, Joseph—and the general membership of the Church—were able to look at the past events of Joseph’s life and see how important they were in the evolving role of the young prophet.

While the author of the CES Letter claims that he had never heard of the various accounts of the First Vision, a discussion of some of these accounts was published in the official Church magazine, the *Improvement Era*, in 1970, and again in the newer official Church magazine, the *Ensign*, in 1996. The Church wasn’t trying to hide the fact that there are different versions, but doesn’t focus on the various versions because the 1838 version is the most complete one available.

20) *History demonstrates that there was no 1820 religious revival as Joseph claimed.*

Answer: Baloney. Joseph said religious “excitement” (not necessarily the more specific “revival”) and the fact is that there was indeed religious excitement—and this is proven by the newspaper articles of the day which talk about the religious excitement in Joseph’s neighborhood. Joseph said the excitement began with the Methodists and we do, indeed, read of a Methodist “camp meeting” in Palmyra in 1820.

While we also find talk of the religious excitement in the personal writings of some who lived in Joseph’s vicinity, the religious commotion might have been *too common* to be considered constantly newsworthy for the local papers. In 1820 the *Palmyra Register*, for instance, ran a notice about a man who died from alcohol poisoning. He apparently became drunk at the previous evening’s Methodist camp meeting and died the next day. The notice *wasn’t about* the camp meeting, it was about the alcohol-poisoning death. The alcoholic consumption just happened to happen at a camp meeting.

This is a great example of the accuracy of the expression, “the absence of evidence is not evidence for absence.” If the newspaper would not have reported the man’s death, there might not have been a record of this specific Methodist camp meeting—which, of course, would have meant to the critics that it never happened. This is an important point that should be repeated every time a critic says something like, “*Nobody heard of Joseph’s First Vision for more than a decade after it happened*” (see #19 above). We just don’t know what kind of jelly was in the donut when all that’s left is the donut box.