

INTERPRETER

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A JOURNAL OF MORMON SCRIPTURE

Volume 15 · 2015 · Pages 29-32

Rediscovering the First Vision

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Offprint Series

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ISSN 2372-1227 (print)

ISSN 2372-126X (online)

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REDISCOVERING THE FIRST VISION

Neal Rappleye

Review of: Matthew B. Christensen, The First Vision: A Harmonization of Ten Accounts from the Sacred Grove (Springville, Utah: Cedar Fort Inc., 2014). 51 pp., no index. \$14.99.

The First Vision: A Harmonization of Ten Accounts from the Sacred Grove is a small book, richly illustrated, which provides even the most diligent students of the vision with a fresh and rewarding experience. Boasting a back dust jacket endorsement from none other than Richard Bushman — the dean of Joseph Smith scholars in the early twenty-first century¹ — this small, stylishly designed book is, in my opinion, the *best* way to introduce Latter-day Saints to the various accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision.

Christensen begins with an introduction wherein he explains himself and what he is doing. Christensen is wholly aware that he is not following the conventions of historical scholarship and is clear that what he produces is not intended to be taken as an actual historical document or be treated like the reconstruction of an event that a professional historian might produce. Instead, Christensen is producing a tool for the faithful to use in getting closer to the founding vision upon which their faith is rooted, to help them get a fuller and more complete view of what Joseph Smith experienced. Christensen also introduces and gives some background of each of the ten accounts he used (five first-hand, five second-hand, all from Joseph Smith's lifetime).

After the introduction comes Christensen's "harmonization." Here, Christensen takes the ten accounts he introduced earlier and produces

1 Bushman's biography of the prophet, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Knopf, 2005) is widely viewed as the best and most comprehensive treatment of the prophet to date.

and amalgamated account, incorporating parts of all ten accounts into one synthesized whole. Christensen smooths out each account, updating grammar and punctuation, and substitutes first-person pronouns when using second-hand accounts for the purpose of readability, especially for his target audience of lay Latter-day Saints. He also color-codes the text with a key at the bottom of each page so the reader can easily and quickly see which account any given portion comes from. Lest one mistakenly think that by doing all this Christensen obscures the differences the accounts contain, it should be noted that he often uses the endnotes to mention and discuss some of the key differences in the various accounts.

Being familiar with the different accounts, I found many of Christensen's choices interesting. I couldn't help but think about how I might have merged the accounts differently. Sometimes Christensen seemed so determined to include as much as possible that the account begins to feel redundant, and I often felt that some things could have been left out. To his credit, however, there were some cases where I felt his insistence on pulling together *all* ten accounts was very rewarding. In particular, the recounting of the Father's and Son's appearance — the vision proper — I felt was very well put together, with Christensen adeptly piecing parts of each account together in a way that vastly enriched the traditional description of their appearance in a pillar of light. He also skillfully wove together every word attributed to the divine visitors in the various accounts, thus providing a full and complete picture of the message given to Joseph Smith that day, as he understood and related it to others.

There are also some places where Christensen omits things I would have included. For instance, I was disappointed that Christensen didn't include Joseph's explanation, found in the 1832 account, that his search began "at about the age of twelve years," and continued, "from the age of twelve years to fifteen."² Few people realize that Joseph spent *years* searching and pondering before he had his vision, and I think getting a sense for how long Joseph was grappling with his deep questions is important for better understanding, relating to, and learning from Joseph Smith and his visionary experience. Including these age markers thus could have improved Christensen's synthesis of the accounts.

2 Joseph Smith, "History, circa Summer 1832," online at <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/history-circa-summer-1832> (accessed March 4, 2015). For convenience, I have opted to simply use the editorial title applied to this document by the editors of the Joseph Smith Papers project.

On balance, however, I thought Christensen did a nice job and that the account which emerges serves to enrich the experience for the reader, making it possible to better grasp the fullness of Joseph's experience. I would recommend it as an ideal way to get introduced to the various accounts of the First Vision, particularly for parents with adolescents, who I believe should be introduced to the different accounts and other historical issues in settings and formats that foster faith.

This, however, should not be mistaken as a way to fully come to know the various accounts, both the ways they can enhance our understanding of Joseph Smith, of God and Christ and of the vision and the challenges that surround the accounts. This is a good *introduction*, meaning a great place to *start* learning about the different accounts but not necessarily where it should end. Those interested in further pursuing Joseph Smith's vision and the narratives he told about it should also seek out contextual studies which seek to illuminate both the setting of the event itself and the context of the documents which tell us about it.

There have been several such studies over the years, the most recent being Steven C. Harper's book, *Joseph Smith's First Vision: A Guide to the Historical Accounts*, published in 2012.³ Harper also helped compile and edit, with Samuel Alonzo Dodge, *Exploring the First Vision*, a recent anthology of the seminal articles and essays on the First Vision from the past forty-plus years.⁴ Harper's book is short yet thorough, summarizing the past scholarship and making a few original contributions. It would be a good next step after Christensen's harmonization, and it makes for easy reading that I am confident even teenagers could handle. Many of the papers in the volume coedited with Dodge are heavier, more technical reading, and get into the nitty-gritty details of historical reconstruction, interpretation, and even the controversies that have surrounded the accounts.⁵ This is not to suggest that they are unreadable or too technical for the average member of the Church but rather to simply suggest that they provide a level of depth that may not be to everyone's interests.

Studies like those by Harper and Bushman certainly provide important context and understanding that can't be gained through harmonizations like Christensen's. But even those with a savvy awareness

3 Steven C. Harper, *Joseph Smith's First Vision: A Guide to the Historical Accounts* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book, 2012).

4 Samuel Alonzo Dodge and Steven C. Harper, eds., *Exploring the First Vision* (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2012).

5 For a full review of this volume, see Neal Rappleye, "Trusting Joseph," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 4 (2013): 75–83.

of the different accounts and intimate familiarity with the secondary literature can have a rich and rewarding — and even a *spiritual* — experience encountering the vision as Christensen has presented it. As such, I would heartily recommend this little volume to any Latter-day Saint wanting to get a new and fresh perspective on the First Vision — which should be *all* of us.

An earlier version of this review appeared on the FairMormon Blog.

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