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Can a Man See God? 1 Timothy 6:16 in Light of Ancient and Modern Revelation

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CAN A MAN SEE GOD?

1 TIMOTHY 6:16 IN LIGHT OF ANCIENT AND MODERN REVELATION

James Stutz

Abstract: Joseph Smith's First Vision is a favorite target of critics of the LDS Church. Evangelical critics in particular, such as Matt Slick of the Christian Apologetics and Research Ministry, seek to discredit the First Vision on biblical grounds. This article explores biblical theophanies and argues that Joseph's vision fits squarely with the experience of ancient prophets, especially those who are given the rare blessing of piercing the veil of light and glory, the Hebrew kabod, that God dwells within.

"I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head, above the brightness of the sun..." –Joseph Smith Jr.¹

One of the perennial points of conflict between Evangelical and Mormon theology is whether mortal man is capable of seeing God the Father. The vision of God, otherwise known as a *theophany*, is the centerpiece of Mormonism's origin story. In 1820 Joseph Smith entered a grove of trees to inquire of God through prayer which of all the churches he should join. The answer to his prayer came in the form of a visitation from God the Father and Jesus Christ. Joseph Smith's "First Vision," as it has come to be called, forms the foundation of Mormonism's claim to be the "only true and living church" (Doctrine & Covenants 1:30). The importance of Joseph Smith's First Vision to Latter-day Saint theology renders the First Vision a natural target for critics of the restored church.

1 Joseph Smith—History 1:16

The First Vision also exists as an assault on traditional Christian teachings about the nature of God the Father, who, in their view, is immaterial and without physical form. Joseph described God the Father and Jesus Christ in his vision as “two personages” (Joseph Smith—History 1:17), separate, distinct, and visible. The First Vision directly challenges the traditional notion of God the Father, affirming that he has material form, in which light can reflect off his person and be seen by mortal eyes. This bold doctrinal claim is understandably met with criticism from ardent Evangelical defenders, who seek to show from the Bible that the vision of God the Father is not possible.

One representative example is evangelical apologist Matt Slick, the president and founder of the Christian Apologetics and Research Ministry (CARM).² CARM is primarily an Internet-based organization, also featuring a weekly radio broadcast and active message board. On his website Slick lays out an argument from the New Testament for why Joseph Smith could not have seen God the Father and concludes that “since [Joseph Smith’s] first vision is foundational in Mormonism, without it, Mormonism cannot be true.”³ Slick’s argument against the First Vision centers on his interpretation of 1 Timothy 6:16.⁴ Speaking of God the Father, the passage reads:

16 Who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see: to whom be honor and power everlasting. Amen.⁵

2 <http://carm.org/>

3 Matt Slick, “Can the Father be seen?” at the CARM website, at <http://carm.org/can-father-be-seen> (accessed November 7, 2012).

4 1 Timothy is traditionally ascribed to Paul the Apostle, though modern scholars now recognize that this “pastoral” epistle is pseudepigraphal. For purposes of homogeneity in conversation between Mormonism and Evangelical Christianity (especially, in this case, between Matt Slick and myself), I will continue to refer to the writer as “Paul.”

5 All Bible passages quoted are from the King James Version.

This passage has been utilized by Slick in at least three different venues: an article on CARM.org,⁶ during interaction with Mormons in the CARM chat room,⁷ and in a YouTube video in which he proselytizes to LDS youth outside the rededication of the Boise Idaho temple.⁸ In his interaction with LDS youth at the temple, Slick quotes 1 Timothy 6:16 and argues that it prohibits anyone, including Joseph Smith, from the ability to see God the Father:

In 1 Timothy 6:16 Paul the apostle says that the Father, speaking of God as the Father, “dwells in unapproachable light who no man has seen nor can he be seen.” So the Bible—Paul the Apostle—says that God cannot be seen. Joseph Smith said he saw the Father... if Paul says you can’t see the Father, [but] Joseph Smith says you can, whose [version is] true?

For Slick, this passage rejects the possibility that Joseph Smith could have seen God the Father because “God cannot be seen.” Elsewhere Slick establishes that the individual being considered in this passage is God the Father, not Christ.⁹ Slick is correct on this point because it would not make sense for Paul to claim that Christ cannot be seen because Paul himself has seen Christ (1 Corinthians 15:8).

6 Slick, “Can the Father be seen?”

7 Experienced by the author circa 2010. Also, for a representative chat-room conversation between Slick and an unknown Mormon named “Alex” see Matt Slick, “Did Joseph Smith see God the Father”, <http://carm.org/did-joseph-smith-see-god-father>.

8 [carmvideos](http://carmvideos.com), “Boise, Idaho Temple rededication with Matt Slick and others” YouTube video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IkYSQoPf0ts&feature=plcp>.

9 Slick, “Can the Father be seen?”

“Who Only Hath Immortality...”

1 Timothy 6:16 follows a series of instructions to Timothy to be godly and remain faithful to the gospel. Paul concludes his exhortations to Timothy with a parenthetical aside extolling the greatness of God and proclaiming God’s transcendence over mortal man. Specifically, God is set apart from man because God the Father alone “hath immortality” and dwells in “light which no man can approach unto,” and therefore “no man hath seen nor can see” him. Paul’s description here of God’s nature and qualities should be interpreted as poetic doxology, a genre of writing defined as liturgical expression of praise.¹⁰ It is questionable whether Paul meant this to be interpreted as a technically precise theological guide to God’s characteristics (although a biblical inerrantist will see it that way, no doubt). At any rate, Trinitarian critics of Mormonism who wish to employ 1 Timothy 6:16 will first need to explain why the passage incorrectly describes God the Father as the only person who “hath immortality”.

The English word “immortality” in this passage is a translation of the Greek *athanasia*, which simply refers to a condition wherein death or extinction is not possible. There are clearly other individuals within mainstream Christian (and Mormon) theology who possess immortality. Jesus himself was raised from the dead into immortality, never to die again, as Paul well knew. Elsewhere Paul himself notes that mortal men will also be resurrected into immortality (1 Corinthians 15:53-55). So why does Paul describe God the Father as unique in this aspect? One could counter that resurrection into immortality, for Christ or anyone else, is accomplished and sustained by the power of God the Father, and it is in this sense that God

10 James L. Bailey and Lyle D. Vander Broek, *Literary Forms in the New Testament: A Handbook* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 74, available online at <http://tinyurl.com/mhgtg3y> (accessed Aug 11, 2013).

the Father is the only person who truly “hath immortality.” Unfortunately for this argument the Holy Ghost is still a person who is immortal, never to die, and who, according to Matt Slick and all Christians, is “eternal.”¹¹ Traditional Christians who endorse the Athanasian Creed affirm that the Holy Ghost is equally uncreated and infinite with the other members of the Trinity. It is therefore not wise to look to Paul’s doxological eruption of praise as a technical theological guide: God the Father, frankly, is not the only person who “hath immortality.”

“Dwelling in the Light”

Paul next describes God the Father as dwelling “in the light which no man can approach unto.” The motif of God dwelling behind a cloak of light, smoke, cloud, or fire that hides him from the eyes of mortal men is found throughout the Bible, both Old and New Testaments. The Hebrew word often used for this shroud of light or cloud is “kabod” (“doxa” in the Greek Septuagint), often translated as “glory.”¹² The *kabod* of God emanates from him and simultaneously represents his presence as well as protects unworthy mortal eyes from beholding him. Referring to God’s presence among Israel in the wilderness following the exile, the *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* suggests that:

Yahweh is present only in the “pillar of cloud” in the tent of meeting. The cloud indicates God’s presence while at the same time concealing God’s radiance... Thus “cloud” and “fire” symbolize God’s being and

¹¹ Slick briefly describes the nature of the Holy Ghost on his website. Matt Slick, “The Holy Spirit,” <http://carm.org/holy-spirit>.

¹² William J. Hamblin, “‘I Have Revealed Your Name’: The Hidden Temple in John 17,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 1 (2012): 74-75

presence, while at the same time concealing God's nature.¹³

Notable examples of this phenomenon in the Old Testament include the aforementioned pillar of smoke and fire that accompanied the wandering Israelites (Exodus 13:21-22, 19:18, 33:9), the "clouds" and "fire" that surround and emanate from God (Psalm 97:2), and the cloud that filled the temple, equated with the "glory of God" (1 Kings 8:10-11). Ezekiel also describes the "fire" and "brightness" of God (Ezekiel 1:4, 26-28). In each instance God's physical presence is manifest by the *kabod*, but his physical form is simultaneously hidden.

The *kabod* of God is frequently understood to be a protection and a shield for mortal man because it was believed that a man or woman would face death were he or she to see the face of God. Upon seeing the burning bush (itself a shroud of fire), Moses hides his face because he is afraid to look upon God (Exodus 3:6). God explicitly stated to Moses in Exodus 33:20-23 that Moses cannot see God's face and live; therefore when God appears to Moses his "glory" (*kabod*) will pass by, and God's hand "will cover thee," protecting Moses from death. The father of Samson, on seeing an angel of God, appears to be momentarily confused and fears that his death is imminent because he thinks he has seen God (Judges 13:21-23). In Exodus

13 David N. Freedman, Mainz B. E. Willoughby, "ānān" in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* XI, eds. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001), 256, available online at <http://tinyurl.com/b9ctulr> (accessed Feb 3, 2013). Cf. Gerhard Kittel, "doxa" in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, eds. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1985), 178-81, <http://tinyurl.com/bkqt55b> (accessed Feb 3, 2013); Roger Cook, "God's 'Glory': More Evidence for the Anthropomorphic Nature of God in the Bible", *FairMormon*, <http://www.fairmormon.org/perspectives/publications/gods-glory-more-evidence-for-the-anthropomorphic-nature-of-god-in-the-bible> (accessed November 11, 2013).

19 God instructs Moses to keep the people away from God's *kabod* for their own protection:

18 And mount Sinai was altogether on a smoke, because the LORD descended upon it in fire: and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mount quaked greatly... 20 And the LORD came down upon mount Sinai, on the top of the mount: and the LORD called Moses up to the top of the mount; and Moses went up. 21 And the LORD said unto Moses, Go down, charge the people, lest they break through unto the LORD to gaze, and many of them perish. (Exodus 19:18-21)

In the New Testament the *kabod* of God is frequently described in terms of light, such as the “bright cloud” at Christ’s transfiguration that accompanied the light that emanated from Christ himself (Matthew 17:1-8), the “rainbow” of John’s vision of God (Revelation 4:3), and, most relevantly, the “light” described by Paul (Acts 22:6, 1 Timothy 6:16). In 1 Timothy 6:16, immediately after referring to the unapproachable light that God dwells in, Paul notes that “no man hath seen nor can see” God the Father. The connection between these two statements is obvious: No man has seen nor can see God the Father because God dwells in light (God’s *kabod*) that is unapproachable by fallen, mortal humans. On this point evangelical author and theologian Gordon F. Fee agrees:

Him no one has seen or can see (cf. “invisible” in 1:17). These clauses reinforce his dwelling in unapproachable light and reflect a common OT theme (Exod. 33:20; cf. 19:21). The emphasis in these last two items is not the Greek one, that God is unknowable, but the Jewish

one, that God is so infinitely holy that sinful humanity can never see him and live (cf. Isaiah 6:1-5).¹⁴

The reason God is unseen by mortal men is that men are not worthy to behold his face. Rather than describing an immaterial God who is inherently unable to be seen by physical eyes, Paul is describing a God who theoretically can be seen but who is presently not seen. This is an important distinction. By way of analogy, a rock deep within the mantle of the Earth is presently unable to be seen by mortal eyes (the technology does not exist to retrieve it), but it is not inherently or metaphysically unable to be seen. The explanation for man's inability to see God the Father does not lie in God's non-physical nature but in God's location behind a veil of glory impenetrable by mortal human eyes. Relative to humans, God is invisible only in practice, not in absolute reality.

“...Which No Man Can Approach Unto.”

Is it possible for God to strengthen or transfigure a person such that he or she could penetrate the *kabod* of God and be sustained in his presence? There are important instances in the scriptures in which this exact thing has taken place. This special, sacred blessing comes to some of those chosen by God to do his work, Moses being one prominent example. As mentioned above, Moses is warned that he cannot see God's face and live, and yet on occasion God makes an exception to the rule for Moses and his associates. In Exodus 24:9-11 the author expressly states that Moses and the elders accompanying him “saw the God of Israel” and that God did not punish them for it. In Exodus 33:7-11 the general method by which Moses received God's words and then relayed them to Israel is given.

14 Gordon F. Fee, *1 & 2 Timothy, Titus*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1984), 5-6 of ch. 17, available online at <http://tinyurl.com/akbc6d3> (accessed Feb 3, 2013).

Moses would enter the tabernacle to commune with God, and the *kabod* of God in the form of a cloudy pillar would cover the tabernacle, simultaneously announcing and shielding the presence of God from Israel. Inside the tabernacle Moses, as the agent of God, was privileged to speak to God “face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend” (see also Deuteronomy 34:10). According to Fabry,

Moses spoke with Yahweh “face to face” (Numbers 14:14; Exodus 33:11). In these passages Yahweh removed the concealing cloud, which actually represents an element protecting the partner in dialogue with God: when Moses came down from Sinai, his face reflected the radiance of the *kabod* (Exodus 4:29-35). All the Israelites were allowed to see the cloud and fire, but only Moses was allowed to look on Yahweh without his “veil.”¹⁵

This mode of communication is spelled out in such an explicit manner precisely because it was special and unusual. The general rule is that men do not speak to God face to face, but Moses was privileged to do exactly that. Later in the same chapter this privilege of visual contact with the Lord’s face is revoked (Exodus 33:19-23). It is a unique privilege reserved for rare and special occasions.

The patriarch Jacob was another who was blessed to see beyond the *kabod* of God (Genesis 32:30). After a nighttime encounter with God, Jacob calls the place of his vision “Peniel,” because, in his words, “I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved.” The special mention that his life was preserved after seeing God is testament to the fact that this was an exception to the general rule. The prophet Isaiah sees God in vision and fears for himself, shouting, “Woe is me! for I am undone...for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts” (Isaiah 6:1-7) Isaiah’s fear is calmed by a seraphim who declares Isaiah to be clean and holy, rendering him able to sustain the sight

15 Henz-Josef Fabry, “*‘ānān*” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* X1, 256, online at <http://tinyurl.com/b9ctulr>.

of God. The author of Hebrews noted that Moses' faith was strengthened because he saw "him who is invisible" (Hebrews 11:27). This is an especially interesting comment, suggesting that God's invisibility is only invisibility in practice, not in reality, and that exceptions exist to the rule.

The Book of Mormon contains a well-known example of a mortal man being privileged to see beyond the *kabod* of the Lord and gaze upon his physical form. The Brother of Jared sees the pre-incarnate, physical form of Jesus Christ in the spirit¹⁶ because "never has man come before [the Lord] with such exceeding faith" (Ether 3:9-16). In this moment "the veil was taken from off the eyes of the brother of Jared," a reference to the removal of the Lord's *kabod* and the strengthening or momentary transfiguration of Jared's physical body and mind so that he could endure the experience. Father Lehi likewise sees the *kabod* of God in the form of a pillar of fire and is later privileged to see beyond the *kabod* to see God sitting on his throne (1 Nephi 1:5-8). In the Doctrine and Covenants, Joseph Smith describes a vision of Jesus that he shared with Oliver Cowdery in which the "veil was taken from [their] minds" and Jesus appears in light "above the brightness of the sun" (D&C 110:1-3).

Most important to the present discussion, in Joseph Smith's retelling of his First Vision experience he variously refers to a "pillar of fire" or "pillar of light,"¹⁷ "pillar of flame,"¹⁸ "pillar of

16 Latter-day Saints believe that all spirit is physical matter. See Doctrine & Covenants 131:7-8.

17 Dean C. Jessee, "The Earliest Documented Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision," in *Opening The Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations 1820-1844*, ed. John W. Welch with Erick B. Carlson, (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), 5. In the 1832 account, Joseph initially wrote "pillar of fire" but scratched out the word "fire" and replaced it with "light," thus rendering it "pillar of light." This may reflect the difficulty that many prophets seem to have in describing heavenly scenes with limited human vocabulary.

18 Jessee, "The Earliest Documented Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision," 8.

light... above the brightness of the sun,”¹⁹ and “brilliant light.”²⁰ The fire and light is equivalent to the ancient Hebrew notion of God’s *kabod*, or glory. In a fascinating secondhand account by Joseph’s friend Orson Pratt we receive further insight into Joseph’s experience with the *kabod* of God:

And, while thus pouring out his soul, anxiously desiring an answer from God, he, at length, saw a very bright and glorious light in the heavens above; which, at first, seemed to be at a considerable distance. He continued praying, while the light appeared to be gradually descending toward him; and, as it drew nearer, it increased in brightness, and magnitude, so that, by the time that it reached the tops of the trees, the whole wilderness, for some distance round, was illuminated in a most glorious and brilliant manner. He expected to have seen the leaves and boughs of the trees consumed, as soon as the light came in contact with them; but, perceiving that it did not produce that effect, he was encouraged with the hopes of being able to endure its presence. It continued descending, slowly, until it rested upon the earth, and he was enveloped in the midst of it. 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 object with which he was surrounded; and he was enwrapped in a heavenly vision, and saw two glorious personages, who exactly resembled each other in their features or likeness.²¹

19 Jessee, “The Earliest Documented Accounts of Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” 14.

20 Jessee, “The Earliest Documented Accounts of Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” 18.

21 Jessee, “The Earliest Documented Accounts of Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” 21.

From Orson Pratt's account we receive several interesting details. Joseph's surprise that the light did not consume the "leaves and boughs" echoes the surprise that Moses felt upon encountering the burning bush that similarly "was not consumed" (Exodus 3:2-3). Pratt may have intended this parallel to be made by his readers. We also learn from this account that Joseph experienced a "peculiar sensation throughout his whole system" just at the moment that the light, or *kabod*, of God fell upon him. Pratt must have learned of this unusual detail from Joseph Smith himself. It is tempting to suppose that this describes the moment in which Joseph's physical body is transfigured so that he can endure the sight of God. The experience of Joseph Smith is similar to that of Moses and other ancient prophets singled out to see beyond the otherwise "unapproachable light" of God's glory. The natural man, in his fallen mortal state, is forbidden and protected from seeing God's physical form by the *kabod* of God, but this is a general rule which, like most rules, has proven exceptions. Paul's words should be read in light of this.

John 6:46

Returning to the aforementioned YouTube video, on facing Slick's criticism of Joseph Smith based on his interpretation of 1 Timothy 6:16, the LDS teens faithfully call upon their seminary training by citing Old Testament visions of God as evidence that God can in fact be seen. Matt Slick is prepared with a reply:

Jesus [said], "not that any man has seen the Father" [in] John 6:46, so they are seeing the pre-incarnate Jesus, never the Father.

Before addressing Slick's conclusion that Old Testament theophanies are of Christ, a brief look at his use of John 6:46 is necessary. The passage indeed has Jesus saying "Not that any man has seen the Father..." but Slick fails to quote the rest of

the passage, which reads, "...save he which is of God, he hath seen the Father." By consciously omitting the latter half of the passage, Slick appears to be subverting the true intention of Jesus's teaching, which is that he which is "of God" is privileged to see God the Father. Some Evangelicals may contest this point by arguing that the reference to "he which is of God" is a reference to only Jesus Christ. However, the Bible refers to other individuals as being "of God" as well (cf. 1 Samuel 2:27, 9:6-10, John 8:47, 1 Timothy 6:11, 2 Timothy 3:17, Titus 1:7, 1 John 5:19). Furthermore, according to the dominant Christology espoused by mainstream Christians, Jesus' nature is "fully man and fully God," otherwise known as the *Hypostatic Union*.²² If Jesus is "fully man," and yet is capable of seeing God the Father (according to John 6:46), then it is not wise to argue that a man, by definition, cannot see God the Father.

Sensus Plenior

Slick's broader argument is that all visions of God in the Old Testament were actually visions of the pre-incarnate Jesus Christ. He reasons that because the New Testament doesn't allow for man to see God the Father, the logical conclusion is that all Old Testament theophanies are visions of the Son, not of the Father. Of course, the relevant Old Testament pericopes do not specify that the God being seen is the pre-incarnate Christ. Slick's conclusion that it is the pre-incarnate Christ is only possible by reading it through the lens of other scripture, in this case Slick's reading of the New Testament.

This basic method is a common one throughout all of Christianity. Interpreting a passage of scripture through the

22 The "Hypostatic Union" is a formulation of Christ's nature dating back to the early centuries of Christianity, which affirms that humanity and divinity are simultaneously present in the person of Jesus Christ. Latter-day Saints agree with this basic concept but for different reasons. Mainstream Christians generally believe that humanity and divinity are mutually exclusive.

lens of earlier or later scripture is an important part of the Judeo-Christian hermeneutical tradition historically referred to as *sensus plenior*, or “fuller sense.” It rests on the belief that the deeper, fuller meaning of a passage of scripture can sometimes be revealed only by contextualizing it with other passages of scripture composed separately, even if by different authors widely separated by time and space.

The first generation of Christian writers canonized this method by seeing prophecies of Jesus Christ in the writings of Hebrew prophets. Latter-day Saints are not an exception to this tradition; passages of LDS scripture are regularly interpreted in light of other passages of scripture. A relevant example of this LDS practice is that most Latter-day Saints would likely agree with Slick that the theophanies of the Old Testament are primarily of the pre-incarnate Jesus Christ. They arrive at this conclusion by reinterpreting Old Testament events in light of modern LDS revelations (most notably 3 Nephi 15:5). Latter-day Saints have no theological issue with Slick’s claim that Old Testament theophanies are generally of God the Son, not God the Father.

At first glance this may appear to undermine LDS arguments that appeal to Old Testament theophanies to demonstrate that God the Father can be seen. However, as has been argued above, biblical warnings about man’s inability to see members of the Godhead are due to God’s *kabod*, which both represents God’s presence and hides him from sinful eyes. Whether it is God the Father, God the Son, or God the Holy Ghost, the visual inaccessibility by mortals to the members of the Godhead is due to the glory that emanates from them, an impenetrable barrier to mortal eyes except in those cases in which God chooses otherwise.

The principle of *sensus plenior* is another tool for Latter-day Saints to contextualize 1 Timothy 6:16 and similar passages. In the Doctrine and Covenants the following insight is provided:

“For no man has seen God at any time in the flesh, except quickened by the Spirit of God” (D&C 67:11). In the Pearl of Great Price Moses has a marvelous vision of God the Father and his many creations. The aftereffects of this experience are illuminating:

And the presence of God withdrew from Moses, that his glory was not upon Moses; and Moses was left unto himself. And as he was left unto himself, he fell unto the Earth. And it came to pass that it was for the space of many hours before Moses did again receive his natural strength like unto man; and he said unto himself: Now, for this cause I know that man is nothing...But now my own eyes have beheld God; but not my natural, but my spiritual eyes, for my natural eyes could not have beheld; for I should have withered and died in his presence; but his glory was upon me; and I beheld his face, for I was transfigured before him. (Moses 1:9-11)

In this passage, Moses sees the face of God and lives to tell about it because God’s glory was upon him, and he was transfigured. Moses’s reference to “spiritual eyes” contrasts with “natural eyes,” or in other words the eyes of the “natural man” left to his own devices without the strengthening and protection of God’s power. These modern-day scriptures comport very well with the biblical teaching that man cannot see God unless quickened or protected from God’s *kabod*. Following in the long Judeo-Christian tradition of *sensus plenior*, Latter-day Saints can easily understand how the words in 1 Timothy 6:16 do not contradict Joseph Smith’s First Vision. The same principle can be applied to John 1:18, which notes that “no man hath seen God at any time.” Taken together with the entirety of scripture, ancient and modern, this passage clearly is referring to “unaided” man. Latter-day Saints argue, therefore, that Joseph Smith was transfigured, or quickened, by

God's glory such that he was able to view the face of God the Father while in the flesh.

It is not anticipated that non-Mormons interested in this issue will accept the validity of interpreting biblical passages through the lens of modern LDS scripture that they do not accept as inspired or holy. Jews, for example, would likewise reject Matt Slick's claim that all Old Testament theophanies are of the pre-mortal God the Son, a claim he arrives at only by reading the Old Testament through the lens of the New Testament. Nonetheless, non-Mormons must accept the basic logic of the practice: within the framework of a particular religious tradition (in this case, Latter-day Saint), it is wholly consistent to interpret scripture with other scripture that is a part of that tradition.

Conclusion

God the Father dwells behind a curtain or veil of unapproachable light and glory (*kabod*), which is not penetrable by the eyes of unaided mortal man. Only in rare instances of grace is a mortal strengthened by God's power to the point that he or she can pass through this barrier and endure the vision of God. Paul's doxological description of God's transcendence over man in 1 Timothy 6:16 should be interpreted in that context. God is capable of revealing his physical self to man. Such was the case with Moses and other ancient prophets, and such was the case with Joseph Smith.

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