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John A. Tvedtnes

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# VARIANTS IN THE STORIES OF THE FIRST VISION OF JOSEPH SMITH AND THE APOSTLE PAUL

*John A. Tvedtnes*

*Abstract: Some critics of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have noted that the different accounts of Joseph Smith's first vision, though written by the prophet himself, vary in some details. They see this as evidence that the event did not take place and was merely invented to establish divine authority for his work. They fail to realize that the versions of Paul's vision on the road to Damascus, in which the risen Christ appeared to him, also differ from one another. Indeed, they vary more than Joseph Smith's accounts of his experience. This article examines those variants.*

Some critics have suggested that Joseph Smith contradicted himself in different accounts of his first vision. In one, for example, he says that the Lord told him that all the churches were wrong, while in another he says that he had already come to this conclusion before going out in the woods to pray. I see no real contradiction between Joseph Smith believing, when he went to pray, that he should join none of the churches, and the Lord confirming that thought by revelation. After all, he went into the woods to get an answer. If his mind was already made up and he merely needed confirmation, this fits the pattern described in D&C 9:8, where the Lord said, "you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right." The point of the official published version of Joseph Smith's story is that he received a revelation on the issue. But even that version does

not preclude the idea that he had already determined the answer and needed confirmation.

In one account, Joseph says that he saw “the Lord,” while in another he notes that he saw “two personages.” Similarly, one account mentions that he saw “angels,” a fact omitted in the others. Rather than viewing this as contradictory, I see it as merely a matter of emphasis. I have done the same thing when recounting events in my life, sometimes omitting details that are irrelevant to the point I am trying to make or that do not suit the audience or the medium of expression. But this does not mean that I am inventing the story. As for the variants “the Lord,” “two personages,” and “angels,” we can note that, in the Bible, the Lord is often said to be an angel (which merely means messenger).<sup>1</sup> As late as 1880, John Taylor used verbiage similar to that of Joseph Smith, speaking of the Prophet’s first vision. While mentioning the Father and the Son, like Joseph, also using the term *Lord*: “as a commencement the Lord appeared unto Joseph Smith, both the Father and the Son, the Father pointing to the Son said ‘this is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased, hear ye him’”<sup>2</sup>

Other LDS scholars have already effectively dealt with the variants in the different accounts of Joseph Smith’s first vision, and while I recommend them to the reader, I shall not rehearse their words here.<sup>3</sup>

1 E.g., Genesis 22:15–16; Exodus 3:2–7.

2 John Taylor. 1880. “Discourse by President John Taylor. Delivered in the Salt Lake Assembly Hall, at the Quarterly Conference, Sunday Afternoon, January 4, 1880,” *Journal of Discourses* 21:61–71.

3 For a book-length treatment, see Milton V. Backman Jr., *Joseph Smith’s First Vision: Confirming Evidences and Contemporary Accounts* (2nd ed., Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980). The following articles also deal with the subject: Richard L. Anderson, “Circumstantial Confirmation of the First Vision,” *BYU Studies* 9/3 (Spring 1969): 373–404; Milton V. Backman Jr., “Awakenings in the Burnt-over District: New Light on the Historical Setting of the First Vision,” *BYU Studies* 9/3 (Spring 1969): 301–20; Richard L. Bushman, “The First Vision Story Revived,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 4/1 (Spring 1969): 82–93. See also Steven C. Harper, “Evaluating Three Arguments

The real subject of the present paper is another “first vision,” the one experienced by the apostle Paul while en route to Damascus. As with Joseph Smith’s first vision, we have several accounts of what happened to Paul in three books of the New Testament (Acts 9:1–30; 22:5–21; 26:12–20; Galatians 1:11–24; and 2 Corinthians 11:32–33). Not surprisingly, these accounts are at variance one with another. Indeed, there are fewer differences between the various accounts of Joseph Smith’s first vision than between the five different accounts of Paul’s first vision and his trip to Damascus.<sup>4</sup>

We begin with a chart that compares the different accounts of Paul’s experience, in order that the reader may better visualize the gaps and variants.

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against Joseph Smith’s First Vision” at <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/evaluating-three-arguments-against-joseph-smiths-first-vision/>.

4 One can also truthfully say that there are greater differences in the various accounts of Christ’s resurrection found in the four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John) than in Joseph Smith’s accounts of his first vision, but it is not our purpose to delve into that subject in this paper.

Acts 9:

Acts 26:

Acts 22:

Galatians 1:

1 And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest,  
2 And desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem.

3 And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven:

12 Whereupon as I went to Damascus with authority and commission from the chief priests,

5 As also the high priest doth bear me witness, and all the estate of the elders: from whom also I received letters unto the brethren, and went to Damascus, to bring them which were there bound unto Jerusalem, for to be punished.

13 At midday, O king, I saw in the way a light from heaven, above the brightness of the sun, shining round about me and them which journeyed with me.

6 And it came to pass, that, as I made my journey, and was come nigh unto Damascus about noon, suddenly there shone from heaven a great light round about me.

11 But I certify you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached of me is not after man.

12 For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ.

13 For ye have heard of my conversation in time past in the Jews' religion, how that beyond measure I persecuted the church of God, and wasted it:

14 And profited in the Jews' religion above many my equals in mine own nation, being more exceedingly zealous of the traditions of my fathers.

15 But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb, and called me by his grace,

4 And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?

5 And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.

6 And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do.

14 And when we were all fallen to the earth, I heard a voice speaking unto me, and saying in the Hebrew tongue, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.

15 And I said, Who art thou, Lord? And he said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest.

16 But rise, and stand upon thy feet: for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in the which I will appear unto thee;

17 Delivering thee from the people, and from the Gentiles, unto whom now I send thee,

7 And I fell unto the ground, and heard a voice saying unto me, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?

8 And I answered, Who art thou, Lord? And he said unto me, I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom thou persecutest

16 To reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the heathen; immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood:  
[continued below]

Acts 9:

7 And the men which journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice, but seeing no man.

Acts 26:

18 To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me.

Acts 22:

9 And they that were with me saw indeed the light, and were afraid; but they heard not the voice of him that spake to me.  
10 And I said, What shall I do, Lord?  
And the Lord said unto me, Arise, and go into Damascus; and there it shall be told thee of all things which are appointed for thee to do.  
11 And when I could not see for the glory of that light, being led by the hand of them that were with me, I came into Damascus

Galatians 1:

8 And Saul arose from the earth; and when his eyes were opened, he saw no man: but they led him by the hand, and brought him into Damascus.  
9 And he was three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink.



Acts 9:	Acts 26:	Acts 22:	Galatians 1:
<p>10 And there was a certain disciple at Damascus, named Ananias; and to him said the Lord in a vision, Ananias. And he said, Behold, I am here, Lord.</p> <p>11 And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the street which is called Straight, and enquire in the house of Judas for one called Saul, of Tarsus: for, behold, he prayeth,</p> <p>12 And hath seen in a vision a man named Ananias coming in, and putting his hand on him, that he might receive his sight.</p> <p>13 Then Ananias answered, Lord, I have heard by many of this man, how much evil he hath done to thy saints at Jerusalem:</p> <p>14 And here he hath authority from the chief priests to bind all that call on thy name.</p>		<p>12 And one Ananias, a devout man according to the law, having a good report of all the Jews which dwelt there.</p>	

Acts 9:

15 But the Lord said unto him, Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel:

16 For I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake.

17 And Ananias went his way, and entered into the house; and putting his hands on him said, Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost.

Acts 26:

Acts 22:

13 Came unto me, and stood, and said unto me, Brother Saul, receive thy sight. And the same hour I looked up upon him.

14 And he said, The God of our fathers hath chosen thee, that thou shouldst know his will, and see that Just One, and shouldst hear the voice of his mouth.

15 For thou shalt be his witness unto all men of what thou hast seen and heard.

16 And now why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord

Galatians 1

18 And immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales: and he received sight forthwith, and arose, and was baptized.  
19 And when he had received meat, he was strengthened. Then was Saul certain days with the disciples which were at Damascus.

Acts 9:

20 And straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God.

21 But all that heard him were amazed, and said; Is not this he that destroyed them which called on this name in Jerusalem, and came hither for that intent, that he might bring them bound unto the chief priests?

21 But all that heard him were amazed, and said; Is not this he that destroyed them which called on this name in Jerusalem, and came hither for that intent, that he might bring them bound unto the chief priests?

22 But Saul increased the more in strength, and confounded the Jews which dwelt at Damascus, proving that this is very Christ

Acts 26:

20 But shewed first unto them of Damascus, and at Jerusalem, and throughout all the coasts of Judaea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance.

Acts 22:

Galatians 1:

Acts 9:

23 And after that many days were fulfilled, the Jews took counsel to kill him:

24 But their laying await was known of Saul. And they watched the gates day and night to kill him.

25 Then the disciples took him by night, and let him down by the wall in a basket.

26 And when Saul was come to Jerusalem, he assayed to join himself to the disciples: but they were all afraid of him, and believed not that he was a disciple.

27 But Barnabas took him, and brought him to the apostles, and declared unto them how he had seen the Lord in the way, and that he had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus.

Acts 26:

Acts 22:

17 And it came to pass, that, when I was come again to Jerusalem, even while I prayed in the temple, I was in a trance;

18 And saw him saying unto me, Make haste, and get thee quickly out of Jerusalem: for they will not receive thy testimony concerning me.

19 And I said, Lord, they know that I imprisoned and beat in every synagogue them that believed on thee:

20 And when the blood of thy martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by, and consenting unto his death, and kept the raiment of them that slew him.

117 Neither went I up to Jerusalem to them which were apostles before me; but I went into Arabia, and returned again unto Damascus.

18 Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and abode with him fifteen days.

19 But other of the apostles saw I none, save James the Lord's brother.

20 Now the things which I write unto you, behold, before God, I lie not.

21 Afterwards I came into the regions of Syria and Cilicia;

22 And was unknown by face unto the churches of Judaea which were in Christ:

2 Corinthians 11:

32 In Damascus the governor under Aretas the king kept the city of the Damascus with a garrison, desirous to apprehend me:

33 And through a window in a basket was I let down by the wall, and escaped his hands.

Galatians 1: [continued]

**Acts 9:**

28 And he was with them coming in  
and going out at Jerusalem.

29 And he spake boldly in the name  
of the Lord Jesus, and disputed  
against the Grecians: but they went  
about to slay him.

30 Which when the brethren knew,  
they brought him down to Caesarea,  
and sent him forth to Tarsus.

**Acts 26:**

**Acts 22:**

21 And he said unto me, Depart: for  
I will send thee far hence unto the  
Gentiles.

**Galatians 1:**

23 But they had heard only, That he  
which persecuted us in times past  
now preacheth the faith which once  
he destroyed

In most cases, as in Joseph Smith's different accounts of his first vision, there are no outright contradictions in the different versions of Paul's first vision, but some information given in one account is often left out of others. For example, while Acts 22:6 and 26:13 indicate that the vision occurred about noon, Acts 9:3 does not give the time of day. Acts 9:1–2 says that Paul got letters from "the high priest," Acts 26:12 says it was "from the chief priests," and Acts 22:5 says it was "the high priest . . . and all the estate of the elders." This is the very same kind of supposed "contradiction" in Joseph Smith's account of whom he saw in his vision. And yet neither Joseph's nor Paul's accounts are really contradictory.

Also significant is the fact that the words of Jesus to Paul, as recorded in Acts 26:15–18 are much more extensive than the words attributed to him in Acts 9:5–6 and 22:7. Indeed, if these are intended to be verbatim accounts, then there are clear contradictions. Note the following comparisons:

**Acts 9:4–5**

Jesus:  
“Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?”

Saul:  
“Who art thou, Lord?”

Jesus:  
“I am Jesus  
whom thou persecutest:  
it is hard for thee to kick  
against the pricks”

Saul:  
“Lord, what wilt thou  
have me to do?”

Jesus:  
“Arise,  
and go into the city,  
and it shall be told thee  
what thou must do.”

**Acts 26:14–16**

Jesus:  
“Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?  
it is hard for thee to kick  
against the pricks.”

Saul:  
“Who art thou, Lord?”

Jesus:  
“I am Jesus  
whom thou persecutest.”

Saul:  
[no response]

Jesus:  
“But rise, and stand  
upon thy feet.”  
[Here Christ details  
Paul’s mission, with no  
indication that he should  
go “into the city.”]

**Acts 22:7–8**

Jesus:  
“Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?”

Saul:  
“Who art thou, Lord?”

Jesus:  
“I am Jesus of Nazareth,  
whom thou persecutest”

[conversation ends here]

The words of Ananias reported in Acts 9:17 are also at great variance with those found in Acts 22:13–16.

Acts 9:26–30 has Paul coming from Damascus to Jerusalem, where Barnabas introduced him to the apostles, after which he went to Caesarea, then Tarsus. But Paul later wrote to the Galatians (Galatians 1:17–21) that he went first to Arabia, then returned to Damascus and went to see Peter and James three years later before going on to Syria and Cilicia (where Tarsus was located). The much abridged account in Acts 26:20 has him coming from Damascus to Jerusalem and throughout Judaea, with no mention of seeing the apostles. In Acts 22:17–21, we

read that Paul came to Jerusalem, where he was praying in the temple when the Lord warned him to flee. Elsewhere, in 2 Corinthians 11:32–33, Paul adds a detail missing from all the other stories, telling how he escaped from Damascus by being let down in a basket through a window.

The point I wish to make is that if we are to allow the Bible to give different versions of Paul's first vision and his reaction thereto (including different versions of the conversations that took place), it seems unreasonable for anyone to criticize Joseph Smith for similar variants in the different accounts of his first vision.

*John A. Tvedtnes earned degrees in anthropology, Middle East area studies, linguistics, and Hebrew, and studied Egyptian and Semitic languages at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He taught at the University of Utah, the BYU Salt Lake and Jerusalem centers before joining the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, which became BYU's Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship. John has lectured at several other universities and has presented dozens of symposium papers in Israel and the USA. Though most of his ten books and more than 300 articles address LDS subjects, his writings have been published by four universities and several professional societies. John retired in 2007 as senior resident scholar for BYU's Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship.*









