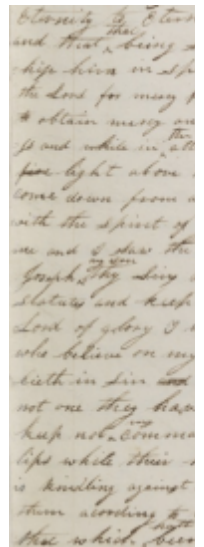


Suppression of Documents: Joseph Smith's 1832 First Vision Account vs Noncanonical Gospels

Posted on [April 18, 2020](#) by [robbowman](#)

The second article in the recent Book of Mormon Central (BMC) series of “Insights” on the First Vision is entitled “[The 1832 First Vision Account](#).” In that account, Joseph reported seeing only “the Lord” Jesus, not of the Father and the Son.^[1] This notable difference, along with other issues pertaining to the 1832 account, is an important issue in assessing the historical reliability of the official account in Joseph Smith–History.^[2] We will have occasion to refer to this account in later articles in this series.



Joseph

How Was the 1832 First Vision Account Found?

In this article, however, our focus will be on the document itself. The account was never published, quoted, or even mentioned in any LDS publication for 133 years after it was written. Although the account has been the subject of a BMC article since 1965, what does not seem to have received much attention is how this account became public. The BMC article has only this to say: “Being eclipsed in notoriety and importance by Joseph’s account in the Pearl of Great Price, it went unpublished until 1965 when Paul Cheesman in his master’s thesis.” But how was it that Cheesman became the person to make this document public?

It needs to be understood that the 1832 account was not merely “eclipsed” after the 1839 account. Rather, it was never known to the public even *before* his official account was any public reference to it for more than 120 years afterward. Paul R. Cheesman^[3] made the document known for the very first time at Brigham Young University (BYU) in 1965. This is a rare document to be first revealed. One might have expected the LDS Church to make an

the discovery of a hitherto unknown account, written in Joseph's own hand earlier than that of the foundational event of Mormonism. Instead, the document was referenced in an appendix at BYU. Curiosity about how this "discovery" took place seems to be in order.

The Joseph Smith Papers, the monumental project of the Church Historian's Office, offers the document's discovery in its long, two-page "Source Note" on the 1832 *History* (which the note cites). It does, however, provide some interesting background information. The three leaves of the *History* were cut out of the book in which it had been written. "Manuscript evidence of the excisions took place in the mid-twentieth century." Church Historian's Office inventories of the 1832 account and Salt Lake City (1855) show that the book had been in that office's custody continuously since Joseph Smith.^[4]

Who "Found" the 1832 First Vision Account?

In his Acknowledgments page, Cheesman thanked A. William Lund, Eugene Olsen, and the Church Historian's Office "for their cooperation and help in making this study."^[6] Cheesman's account of the 1832 account with a brief introduction in his appendix D,^[7] where he offered the following:

This account was found in a journal ledger in the Church Historian's office in Salt Lake City. The pages were cut out but were matched with the edge of the journal to prove location. This was done in the agreement of Earl Olsen and Lauritz Peterson of the Church Historian's office.^[8]

That is all Cheesman says about how he came into possession of the account.

One might suppose that Cheesman had been given permission to peruse some materials in the Church Historian's Office for the purpose of writing his master's thesis, was looking for accounts of the First Vision, and he found the document. On this hypothesis, Olsen and Peterson (at least) would have been in the office before Cheesman found it. However, it is also plausible that Cheesman did not himself discover the document. Rather than saying, "I found this account," or a more academically correct "This account was discovered," Cheesman wrote, "This account was found." His wording at least leads to the conclusion that Cheesman did not discover the account on his own while rummaging around in the office.

What is not plausible is that no one in the Church Historian's office for over a century had access to the earliest records to see what was there. In particular, Joseph Fielding Smith (the grandson of Joseph Smith) had been part of the Church Historian's Office since 1901 and its head since 1921 until he became the LDS Church President in 1970. It is highly unlikely that he knew not

despite having access to the office's holdings for over sixty years before it became public. William Lund, whom Cheesman thanked for his help, had been in the office for over fifty

Evidence of Suppression of the 1832 First Vision Account

Of course, we do not have direct, irrefragable proof that Smith, Lund, or others suppressed the nature of the case, if anyone in the office knew about it and was suppressing it, we want any testimonies directly from them in support of that fact. Smith evidently did keep diaries. Stan Larson's request in late 2012 to read the diaries was denied.^[9] The best we could hope for is testimonies from outsiders to the suppression. This, we do have.

LaMar Petersen, a former Mormon, reported that he and his wife spent six sessions with Young in 1952, when Young was the senior president of the group of LDS leaders known as the Seven. On the course of those sessions, Petersen says that Young told him about the account:

He told us of a "strange account" (Young's own term) of the First Vision, which he thought was on his own hand and which had been concealed for 120 years in a locked vault. He declined to tell that it did not agree entirely with the official version. Jesus was the center of the vision, but he mentioned. I respected Young's wish that the information be withheld until after his death.

After Young died (December 13, 1963), Petersen told Jerald and Sandra Tanner about this account. (Five years later, Petersen was excommunicated from the LDS Church, reportedly because of his investigations.^[12]) Petersen also provided his own notes from that discussion, which the Tanners kept.

His curiosity was excited when reading in Roberts' Doc. History reference to "documents which were compiled." Asked to see them. Told to get higher permission. Obtained the documents. Written, he thought, about 1837 or 1838. Was told not to copy or tell what they were. A "strange" account of the First Vision. Was put back in vault. Remains unused, unknown.

After hearing about it from Petersen, the Tanners wrote to Joseph Fielding Smith requesting a copy of the account of the First Vision. "Our letter was never answered, and we had almost given up on the document."^[14] Then it surfaced in Cheesman's thesis. This is certainly an interesting coincidence. The Tanners requested from the Church Historian's Office a copy of the "strange account." Their request was ignored. The very next year, the account was made public, 133 years after the very first time, in a BYU master's thesis, having been "found" in that same Church Historian's Office some time before the thesis was submitted). This does not look like a mere coincidence or coincidence. It appears that Smith or other staff members of the Church Historian's Office knew about it

suppressed it until 1964, when they chose to make it available through Cheesman's thesis the next year. The question is why they did so at that time.

Steven Harper, a scholar who has published extensively on the First Vision, has given an account of what he and Samuel A. Dodge did in 2009 with James B. Allen, Cheesman's thesis adviser. According to Harper, Cheesman asked Allen if he could write his thesis on the First Vision, telling him, "I have read Joseph Smith's first vision." Harper explains, citing the statement in Cheesman's thesis that "Cheesman had been shown the document in the Church Historian's Office."^[15] Although Harper does not actually say that someone else had shown it to him, his wording, "This account was found in the Church Historian's Office," suggests what had happened, as we noted earlier. Harper's recounting of his interview with Allen does not mention who showed Cheesman the account or why. In a public meeting, Harper has suggested that the account was included in the 1832 *History* but withheld it from the public due to a defensive posture borne out of the Church's relationship with its grandfather Hyrum and the bad experiences of his father Joseph F. Smith.^[16] This psychological explanation (which carries with it an appeal to pity) implicitly acknowledges that the 1832 account of the First Vision was damaging to the LDS Church's claims. What it does not explain is why Smith suppressed the account until 1964 or just happened to authorize its release when he did.

Why Was the 1832 First Vision Account Released in 1965?

In 2016, Richard Bushman argued that the 1832 account and several other previously undiscovered accounts were discovered by Mormon historians searching "for earlier references to the First Vision":

The discovery of nine versions of the First Vision is the result of work by historians in response to the criticisms of the Church. The standard account found in Joseph Smith's *History of the Church* was the only account of the First Vision until 1838. It is interesting that for many years we were content to rely on it alone. Then in the middle of the 19th century, a number of critics of Joseph Smith, including Fawn Brodie author of a biography of the Prophet, questioned the account of the First Vision not written until 1838. Brodie thought that so spectacular an event should have been recorded earlier—if it had actually happened. Brodie hypothesized that Joseph Smith had fabricated the story in 1838 to reinvigorate belief at a time when many of his followers were falling away. Brodie argued, was a fabrication meant to strengthen the faith of his wavering followers.

Church historians of course could not leave that challenge unanswered. They thought Brodie's argument but without evidence of an earlier account, her conjecture might persuade some people. The historians began to scour the archives for earlier references to the First Vision. As they did, one, other accounts began to turn up, one in 1835, another as early as 1832, and others so that Brodie's claim that Joseph had said nothing about the First Vision until 1838 was effectively disproven.

the first of these accounts in 1832 as a start on a history of the church which he hoped to journal.[\[17\]](#)

The evidence we have considered strongly undermines Bushman's explanation. The "Church" certainly knew about the 1832 account long before 1964 and most likely before the 1945 publication of Brodie's biography of Joseph Smith.[\[18\]](#) The proposed connection between Brodie's 1945 discovery of the long-lost account twenty years later in 1965 is obviously weak. Moreover, the chronological gap between an initial First Vision reference in 1832 and one produced just six years later in 1838. Either way, the fact remains that Joseph apparently told no one about the First Vision until the founding of the LDS Church in 1830.

However, Bushman was probably right in thinking that the historians were concerned about the account's contents in a rather understated way, "There are no available records of the reasoning behind the decision to keep the 1832 account from becoming widely known, but the history of denying research suggests some uneasiness about its contents."[\[19\]](#) The critics of concern were most likely

An anonymous article at the FairMormon website suggests that Smith heard that Cheesman was working on Joseph's visions and "surrendered the account knowing that it would be in trusted hands." This is not so much wrong as too vague. The account was *already* "in trusted hands": it was in the possession of the Church Historian's Office. What the FairMormon author apparently means was that Smith advised his faculty adviser James Allen to write about the 1832 account in a manner supportive of

What seems to have happened is that Smith or one or more of his assistants decided that to maintain knowledge of the document's existence, the Church Historian's Office needed to control the document and to make it appear that an enterprising student "discovered" it. In this way the Church Historian's Office maintained plausible deniability regarding the charge that it had suppressed the account.

A consideration of the people whom Cheesman acknowledges as helpful to his thesis adds to the explanation. Three or four men from the Church Historian's Office (Lund, Olson, and Peterson) are mentioned on the Acknowledgments page, but *not* Joseph Fielding Smith. The lack of any acknowledgment of Smith is given that he was the head of the office. The omission makes sense, however, if Smith had the account and had arranged for others in the office to help Cheesman obtain it so as to keep it out of the record of its "discovery."

The BYU scholars involved in Cheesman's work are also noteworthy. We have already mentioned Cheesman's thesis advisor.[\[21\]](#) Cheesman also thanks Richard Lloyd Anderson and Milt

others, “for their suggestions.”[\[22\]](#) Allen, Anderson, and Backman went on to do almost scholarly writing on the First Vision over the following couple of decades.[\[23\]](#)

This narrative creates a reasonably strong case for thinking that Joseph Fielding Smith did account for years prior to Cheesman’s thesis and tried to suppress knowledge of its existence. If that the Tanners knew about the account, he appears to have arranged for the account to appear under the most favorable possible circumstances and in such a way as to make it appear accidentally by a student. In short, the evidence shows that most likely the 1832 *History* was discovered.

Were Authentic Gospel Accounts about Jesus Suppressed?

I have argued that the LDS Church suppressed Joseph’s earliest account of the First Vision years after he had written it, allowing it to become public knowledge by leaking it so as to make its appearance seem fortuitous. Those who are zealous to defend the LDS religion but recognize the church’s history supports this conclusion might wonder if the same sort of accusation might be made against the Christian church. After all, the New Testament contains only four Gospels, and yet we know that there were “gospels” written that the early church did not include. Was this a case of suppressing inconvenient or embarrassing information? The short answer is No. I have written on this question at some length here I will simply be summarizing some key points.[\[24\]](#)

First, the canonical Gospels are much earlier than the noncanonical gospels. As I document in my series, biblical scholars generally date the four New Testament Gospels to the second half of the first century, between the 60s and the 90s.[\[25\]](#) All of the noncanonical gospel texts, on the other hand, date to the second century or later. Bart Ehrman, for example, in his book *Lost Scriptures*, discusses seventeen gospels not included in the New Testament, and he dates none of them to the first century. The only debated exception is the Gospel of Thomas, which a small minority of scholars argue was written in the late first century. Most scholars date the Gospel of Thomas to the second century, typically the latter half of that century.[\[27\]](#)

Second, the noncanonical gospels claim to be written by first-century followers of Jesus, but scholars unanimously agree that these authorship claims are false. No scholar working in the field of New Testament studies would claim that Thomas wrote the Gospel of Thomas or that Mary Magdalene wrote the Gospel of Mary. It is obvious since, as almost everyone agrees, these books were written in the second century, long after Jesus’ original followers to have still been alive. Scholars debate whether these names were used for the purpose of deliberate deception or as a way of identifying the followers of Jesus to honor them. Either way, those gospels were not written by the persons whose names they bear.

Ironically, whatever one thinks about the origins of the New Testament Gospels, they do. None of the Gospel writers refers to himself by name or states in a clear way who he is. What Luke's original reader ("Theophilus," addressed by Luke in his preface, Luke 1:1-4) knew that may well have been the case also with the other three Gospels' original readers. In the canonical Gospels do not identify their authors in any clear or specific way. This means, I am skeptical that the apostle Matthew wrote the First Gospel, that does not mean that that is because it doesn't make any claims about its author. Christians are therefore free to consider the authorship of the Gospels without questioning their authenticity.[28]

The truth is that the early church did not suppress the noncanonical gospels. They rejected them rightly so, but they did not destroy them or keep them locked away somewhere. For the first time in existence, the early church had no political power anywhere in the world and had no means to prevent religious groups from teaching false doctrine or producing fraudulent scriptures. The texts rejected as scripture were fictions produced in the second century (and later), not authored by apostles or their associates.

By contrast, the 1832 First Vision account was the earliest account, written by the visionary himself, the one account that was in Joseph's own handwriting. Yet the LDS Church authorities kept it hidden away for more than a century and said nothing about its existence. When a few people finally asked to see it, they were refused. Only when the LDS Church decided that they could no longer suppress knowledge of the account's existence did they arrange for it to be made public knowledge.

Now that the proverbial cat is out of the bag, Mormons often speak as if there was never any problem about the 1832 account. So, for example, M. Russell Ballard, Acting President of the Twelve Apostles in the LDS Church, gave an address at the April 2020 General Conference in which they were "blessed to have four primary accounts" of the First Vision, including the 1832 account. The behavior of LDS leaders in the 1960s, however, shows that they knew otherwise.

NOTES

[1] For the text of this account, see "[First Vision Accounts: Joseph Smith's 1832 History](#)" (2020).

[2] See Robert M. Bowman Jr., *Jesus' Resurrection and Joseph's Visions: Examining the Christianity and Mormonism* (Tampa, FL: DeWard, 2020), 223–28, 249–56. For a free copy, see the [Faith Thinkers website](#).

[3] Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) had recently begun teaching in the Department of Religion in 1963, and he continued on its faculty until 1986. He later became best known for his work in defending the Book of Mormon archaeologically, although his work is considered passé by

[4] “History, Circa Summer 1832,” in *The Joseph Smith Papers: Histories, Volume 1: Joseph Smith, 1832–1844*, ed. Karen Lynn Davidson, David J. Whittaker, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard A. Shuler (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2012), 4.

[5] A. William Lund (1886–1971) was an assistant Church historian for almost sixty years. Albert L. Zobell Jr., “In Memoriam: A. William Lund (1886–1971),” *Ensign*, March 1971. (1999) was an historical researcher for the LDS Church who was part of the staff of the Church History Department in the 1960s. I have been unable to locate any information on a Eugene Olsen involved in the Church History Office. E. Earl Olson, whom Cheesman also mentioned (see below), was an assistant there.

[6] Paul R. Cheesman, “An Analysis of the Accounts Relating to Joseph Smith’s Early Vision,” (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 1965), iii.

[7] Cheesman, “Analysis,” 126–32.

[8] Cheesman, “Analysis,” 126.

[9] Stan Larson, “Another Look at Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” *Dialogue* 47.2 (Summer 1975), 58.

[10] According to Stan Larson, the specific meeting took place in early February 1953, but the vision may have started in 1952. See Larson, “Another Look,” 41, 58 n. 10.

[11] LaMar Petersen, *The Creation of the Book of Mormon: A Historical Inquiry* (Salt Lake City: Signature Press, 1998), xii.

[12] [“LaMar Petersen papers, 1829–2005.”](#)

[13] Jerald Tanner and Sandra Tanner, *Joseph Smith’s Strange Account of the First Vision* (Salt Lake City: Modern Microfilm, 1965), 4, underlining and all-capital letters. Scholars, after the document was made available for study, determined that it was probably

[14] Jerald Tanner and Sandra Tanner, *The Changing World of Mormonism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 10.

[15] Steven C. Harper, *First Vision: Memory and Mormon Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 204, citing an interview of James B. Allen by Samuel A. Dodge and Steven C. Harper, 2009, “Analysis,” 126. Other parts of the interview with Allen are quoted at length, and the interview is also included in two inset text boxes in James B. Allen and John W. Welch, “The Appearance of Joseph Smith in 1820,” in *Exploring the First Vision*, ed. Samuel Alonzo Dodge and Steven C. Harper (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2012), 42, 44.

[16] “2019 Uplift Gathering of Faith—The Bonner Family & Steven C. Harper,” YouTube, 1:16).

[17] Richard L. Bushman, “What Can We Learn from the First Vision,” BYU Hawaii, Devotional, 1:16.

[18] Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith* (New York: Random House, 2nd ed., 1971). In the second edition, Brodie referred to the 1832 account and some of its canonical account (24). The only change she made to her conclusion was that Joseph made “to cancel out the stories of his fortune-telling and money-digging” sometime after 1830–1834 (25).

[19] Larson, “Another Look,” 41.

[20] “Question: Did Joseph Fielding Smith remove the 1832 account of Joseph Smith’s original letterbook and hide it in his safe?” FairMormon.org, n.d. (evidently 2019, at least).

[21] Cheesman, “Analysis,” ii, iii.

[22] Cheesman, “Analysis,” iii.

[23] James B. Allen wrote three articles on the First Vision in 1966, 1970, and 1980, the first two reprinted in *Exploring the First Vision*, ed. Samuel Alonzo Dodge and Steven C. Harper (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2012), 41–89, 227–60. Richard Lloyd Anderson wrote an influential article entitled “Circumstantial Confirmation of the First Vision through Reminiscences,” *BYU Studies*, 1970, 1:1–10, and more recently wrote “Joseph Smith’s Accuracy on the First Vision Setting: The Pivot Meeting,” in *Exploring the First Vision*, 91–169. Milton V. Backman Jr. wrote at least four articles on the First Vision, the entry “First Vision,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Johnson (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 2:515–16, and the first full-length book on the multiple accounts, *Joseph Smith: Confirming Evidences and Contemporary Accounts*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997), 1–10.

[24] Robert M. Bowman Jr. and J. Ed Komozsewski, “The Historical Jesus and the Biblical Quest Matters.” In *Jesus, Skepticism, and the Problem of History: Criteria and Context Origins*, ed. Darrell L. Bock and J. Ed Komozsewski; Foreword by N. T. Wright (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Company, 2011), 17–42 (esp. 25–32).

[25] For documentation see Part #1 of this series, “Four Contrasts between Joseph Smith Accounts and the Four Gospels.”

[26] Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures: Books that Did Not Make It into the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 7–89.

[27] See the survey of scholarship in Simon Gathercole, *The Gospel of Thomas: Introduction* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 125–27.

[28] See further Robert M. Bowman Jr., “Synoptic Criticism and Evangelical Christian Apologetics,” *Journal of Theology* 13.1 (Spring 2014): 97–117 (esp. 102–106).

[29] M. Russell Ballard, “[Shall We Not Go On in So Great a Cause?](#)” General Conference, October 1997.

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