“But behold, God sent his holy angel ... and behold, he spake unto us, as it were the voice of thunder, and the whole earth did tremble beneath our feet.” Alma 36:6–7

The Know

Most Latter-day Saints are familiar with Joseph Smith’s First Vision through the canonical account found in the Pearl of Great Price (Joseph Smith—History 1:15–20), but this was not the only time Joseph told people about his First Vision. Joseph told the story on many occasions. Today, four different firsthand accounts and a handful of secondhand accounts survive.¹ These various accounts make Joseph Smith’s vision “the best-documented theophany—vision of God—in history,”² and when studied together can enhance a person’s understanding of that foundational event.

Because events like this are likely defining moments in the lives of the prophets who experience them, it is common for them to give multiple accounts of their visionary experiences. For instance, three accounts of Paul’s vision of the risen Christ are found in the New Testament.³ These different accounts were told or written years apart from each other and to completely different audiences, and thus each offers a different perspective.⁴ Alma the Younger’s experience with the angel is also recorded multiple times (Mosiah 27:8–37, Alma 36:4–26 and 38:6–8). Alma’s multiple tellings of his conversion story offer several points of comparison with Joseph Smith’s multiple tellings of his First Vision.⁵

John W. Welch has concluded that the accounts of Alma’s vision differ from each other, in light of their individual settings and audiences, but distinctive details in these three accounts show that they all came from the same person. Evidence for this is found in the repetition of distinctive phrases between the accounts. For example, Mosiah 27:11 states that the angel spoke with “a voice of thunder, which caused the earth to shake upon which they stood,” and Alma 36:7 states: “He spake unto us, as it were the voice of thunder and the whole earth did tremble beneath our feet.” Alma 38:7 does the same thing: “I have seen an angel face to face, and he spake with me, and his voice was as thunder, and it shook the whole earth.”⁶
Several other phrases in Mosiah 27:28–29, like born of God, the gall of bitterness, marvelous light, racked with eternal torment, and pained no more (Mosiah 27:28–29) are used again in Alma 36. Repetitions like this are good evidence that one person experienced and wrote all that the three accounts report. Welch reasoned, “Alma had told his story many times and had grown accustomed to using these characteristic words and phrases.”

The details in the accounts are impressively consistent. In Mosiah 27 and Alma 36, Alma was told to “arise” (Mosiah 27:12–13; Alma 36:7–8) and “remember the captivity of thy fathers” (Mosiah 27:16; Alma 36:2, 28–29), exactly the same words in both accounts. There are also differences between the accounts. For example, the sons of Mosiah are mentioned more often in Mosiah 27:18 and 32 than in Alma 36, likely because King Mosiah reported the events in Mosiah 27, whereas Alma composed Alma 36 and 38.

Another difference is the statements in Mosiah 27:24–31 seem unrehearsed. As Welch stated, “They are full of emotion and rejoicing; they are direct, first-person declarations.” In contrast, Welch has noted that Alma’s comments in Alma 36 and 38 “show signs of thoughtful reflection, of years of thinking about his momentous conversion.”

For instance, in the later accounts Alma has placed his words into the context of his religious tradition. Instead of referring only to his father’s deliverance from Helam (as the angel mentioned in Mosiah 27:16), Alma also referred to older parallels: the deliverance of Lehi from Jerusalem and the Israelites from Egypt (see Alma 36:28–29).

Other differences are present because Alma “has also applied his spiritual experience to his readers’ daily religious practice, drawing lessons about trusting in the Lord throughout one’s trials, troubles, and afflictions (see Alma 36:3, 27; 38:5), and about living a moral, righteous life (see Alma 38:9–15).”

Alma even changed the structure from one telling to the next. Mosiah 27:29–30 contains an ancient Israelite poetic style called antithetical parallelism (“I was X, but now I am Y”) which he repeated four times. In Alma 36, he rearranged these into one “masterfully crafted chiasmic composition.” The focus of the chiasm is the turning point of Alma’s life, the point when he called upon Christ for forgiveness. He placed the negative attributes from Mosiah 27:29–30 into the first half of the chiasm and their positive opposites into the second half.

The Why

Prophets, including Alma and Joseph Smith, spoke and wrote about their experiences on multiple occasions in different ways. In the cases of both Alma and Joseph Smith, this was because they were writing about the experience to different audiences at different points in their lives. As Welch noted, referring to Alma,

The three accounts … consistently reflect different vantage points in Alma’s life. In Mosiah 27, Alma is a young man, spontaneously overwhelmed by the power of the angel and terrified by the prospect of the day of judgment (see Mosiah 27:31). Later in Alma’s life, it is clear that the older man has faithfully and successfully served his Lord and his people all the rest of his days (see Alma 36:24–26) so that he now emphasizes his longing to be present with God (see Alma 36:22).

This is not to say that either Joseph or Alma made things up as they went along. Rather, their variation in details seems to have been prompted by their varying audiences and inspired by what they had been going through in their individual lives. In the 1832 account, for example, Joseph focused on the presence of the Savior and only alluded to the presence of the Father because he was focusing more on the atoning power of Christ. Yet in both the case of Alma and Joseph, the retellings have all the hallmarks of a genuine memory being told and retold over a lifetime. When seen together, the different accounts create a coherent picture that is what one would expect from a real story being told at different times to different audiences.

Both Joseph Smith and Alma seem to have gone back to their memories of these visions repeatedly throughout their lives, turning to them as a source of strength and using them to teach others. It may well have been hard, if not impossible, for Joseph and Alma to even explain such overwhelmingly glorious events to the people around them, yet they did their best, knowing how much their experiences could help others. As Welch noted, referring to Alma, “these three accounts still profoundly bear the unmistakable imprints of a single
distinctive person, who throughout his adult lifetime had lived with, thought about, matured through, and insightfully taught by means of his powerful and beautiful conversion story. And of Joseph Smith, one can similarly conclude: “There is, in fact, striking consistency throughout the narratives [of the First Vision]; they combine impressively to give a consistent and coherent picture . . . , showing a high degree of interdependent, cumulative corroboration among these accounts.”

Alma and Joseph Smith drew strength from their spiritual experiences and used them to teach others. In the same way, modern readers of the Book of Mormon can return repeatedly to the spiritual experiences in their lives as a source of strength. They can also, like Alma and Joseph, repeatedly ponder the significance of these events and apply their spiritual experiences to their daily religious practice, drawing lesson after lesson from the same experience at different points in their lives, depending on their circumstances.

Further Reading


Notes


10. See John W. Welch and J. Gregory Welch, *Charting the Book of Mormon: Visual Aids for Personal Study and Teaching* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999), chart 106.


15. Welch, “Three Accounts of Alma’s Conversion,” 152.


17. Welch, “Three Accounts of Alma’s Conversion,” 152. Welch also noted that “Alma 38 is equally interesting. It presents essentially the first half of the chiasm found in Alma 36, up to the climactic turning point, before shifting into hortatory speech admonishing his second son. Having given the doubled version to his eldest son, Helaman, in Alma 36, Alma evidently felt no need to give the fully repeated structure to Shiblon in Alma 38.”


