

The First Vision as Out-of-Body Experience and What That Means About the First Vision

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Abstract

When we take the First Vision as a unique, personal experience, our understanding of it is limited to what Joseph Smith tells us about it. But there are compelling indications that the vision was a so-called “out-of-body experience.” Once it is framed as such, we can then apply what we know about out-of-body experiences to our interpretation of the vision account and expand our understanding of it. Primarily, we discover a state of consciousness that is very responsive to the projection of inner beliefs as objective reality. In the case of the First Vision, the author suggests that what Joseph Smith saw was a manifestation of his *a priori* belief--an anthropomorphic god. The phenomenon is proposed as a “belief trap” with broader implications.

In today’s perspective, the 1820 experience reported by then fourteen-year-old Joseph Smith, Jr. that has become known as “the First Vision” is the seminal event of Mormonism. In that experience, Smith reported an actual, personal encounter with what he believed to be “God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son.” Among what the LDS Church draws from that experience is something of the nature of God and the mission of the Church today.

The First Vision is taken as a singular event, with hardly any precedent beyond a few briefly described biblical events. Smith’s account is personal, unique, and far beyond common experience. Virtually all we know of it is what Smith tells us about it. Though his account is compelling in its sincerity, we have precious little context with which to interpret it and thereby to understand it in a broader sense.

There are, however, several peripheral details in his report that suggest the event was probably an “out-of-body experience” or OBE. Because much more is known about OBEs than about the singular event of Smith’s Vision, once we frame the Vision as an OBE, we suddenly have much more context with which to understand the Vision. The implications of that re-framing have great significance.

I will begin with a brief overview of the out-of-body experience, and then analyze the First Vision in that context.

The Out-of-body Experience (OBE)

An out-of-body experience is a subjective experience in an alternate state of consciousness in which one perceives oneself to be located somewhere outside one's physical body. Thus, in the OBE state of consciousness, for example, you may observe your physical body lying on your bed while you sense your perceiving self in an ethereal body, floating up through the ceiling, moving easily to another place at will, and see and hear as if you were in your normal body but not being subject to the normal limitations of your physical body. Those who have this experience are certain it is not a dream. Psychiatrists who have studied it are satisfied that it is not a dream state nor hallucinatory. Though an exact understanding of the phenomenon is problematic, to the Mormon mind it is simply that one's spirit is temporarily out and about. And that may very well be exactly what it is.

OBEs are well documented across time and culture.^{2,3} There are even passing references to it in the Bible and the Book of Mormon.⁴ The most widely known type of OBE is the "near-death experience" (NDE), though the ordinary OBE is not induced by serious trauma, as a near-death experience normally is. Although there has been an understanding of OBE for centuries, in the past 50 years it has been the subject of research interest by the scientific community. All together, surprisingly much is known about it. A comprehensive bibliography of OBE now includes over 2,000 sources.⁵

OBE studies have opened an exhilarating new perspective into the vastness of our perceptual universe. Survey research shows that about 20% of a representative western culture population believes to have had a spontaneous OBE at least once.⁶ Those with more frequent experiences are less common. Typically, the experiencer does not recognize the OBE for what it is and passes it off as a dream. Some who have repetitive OBEs and have learned that they are not dreaming but believe they may be insane because they have no framework of belief within which to interpret the experience. Most experiencers are understandably reluctant to discuss their experiences. There are a few who have learned to induce an OBE at will, and do so frequently and adventurously. Shamans of virtually all non-western cultures typically use OBEs in their healing rituals. Because it is so common throughout history and across culture, there are over 100 other names for the phenomenon. The most common are: astral projection, astral travel, projection of consciousness, and shamanic journey.

Indicators of OBE in Smith's Vision

There are several circumstantial features of Joseph Smith's account of his Vision⁷ that make me suspect that the event was, in fact, an OBE. I will examine each such feature in turn:

Focus: Those who are adept at OBE advise that if one should want to induce an OBE, the prerequisite is an intense desire and a highly focused state of mind.⁸ This maps directly onto what Smith says about his own mental state just before his vision.

Smith writes that he had read a passage from the Bible which encouraged him to pray to God for direction.⁹ This is what he writes about his reaction to that reading:

Never did any passage of scripture come with more power to the heart of man than this did at this time to mine. It seemed to enter with great force into every feeling of my heart. ... I at length came to the determination to “ask of God.” ... So, in accordance with this, my determination to ask of God, I retired to the woods to make the attempt.¹⁰

Paralytic seizure: Smith reports a paralytic seizure just before his vision. He writes:

I was seized upon by some power which entirely overcame me, and had such an astonishing influence over me as to bind my tongue so that I could not speak. Thick darkness gathered around me, and it seemed to me for a time as if I were doomed to sudden destruction. But, exerting all my powers to call upon God to deliver me out of the power of this enemy which had seized upon me, and at the very moment when I was ready to sink into despair and abandon myself to destruction--not to an imaginary ruin, but to the power of some actual being from the unseen world, who had such marvelous power as I had never before felt in any being--just at this moment of great alarm, I saw a pillar of light. ... It no sooner appeared than I found myself delivered from the enemy which held me bound.¹¹

Smith’s description of his paralytic seizure is a perfect match to what is well known to occur in some OBEs: a preliminary seizure called “sleep paralysis.”

There is a transitional state between normal waking consciousness and the out-of-body state during which the experiencer may have a confused, choking, stifled, oppressed feeling, accompanied by a sense of darkness or blackout.¹²

Psychologist Celia Green reports that according to survey data, “Nearly five percent of [experiencers] report apparent paralysis occurring at some stage of their ecsomatic experience.”¹³

Compare Smith’s description with that of frequent out-of-body experiencer, Sylvan Muldoon, which is typical:

My experiences consist of the following: I feel tired and lie down on the bed. After a while, something seems to happen to my head and body. It seems to me that my body gets sort of stiff. What happens to [or in] my head is hard to describe. The inside seems to be held as if in a vice, and a feeling of fear takes hold of me. I try to get up from my bed, but only succeed if I do so immediately after I notice these symptoms. If I wait a little longer I find it impossible to do so no matter how hard I try. And I try very hard, because I want to get rid of the feeling and the fear that is gripping me.¹⁴

Another experiencer records the following:

I would lie in bed reading, and then quite suddenly I would have the physical experience of becoming stiff. I would try to move, the experience was so unpleasant that I felt if relaxed I would be able to come out of this [whatever it was] more quickly.¹⁵

Frequent experiencer, Oliver Fox, reported:

I was awake now—yes, but completely paralyzed! I could not open my eyes. I could not speak. I could not move a muscle. ...[M]y position was...unpleasant...¹⁶

The onset of the paralysis is not deliberate nor welcome. It seems to come of itself. No one understands why. For first-time experiencers, it is very alarming. Those who experience it repeatedly, however, learn to accept it, and even welcome it, because they have learned that no harm comes of it and that an OBE will follow.

Here's one such report:

Mrs. Napier would first feel a 'sort of prickling sensation throughout her body, from head to foot,' a sensation resembling a slight electric current. Then there would follow a state of cataleptic rigidity and, at times, the feeling of leaving her body would become painful, followed further by the opposite sensation of a very pleasant flight through space.¹⁷

Fox elaborates:

I know now there was no need for me to have had that painful struggle to break the condition. If I had just composed my mind and dozed off again, my body would have been normal on waking. I have proved this on many occasions, and can recommend it as much the better course to pursue if any reader should find himself, perhaps quite by accident, in this state; for the mental strain and tendency to panic might react unfavourably upon a weak heart.¹⁸

Muldoon reports:

One night I lay stretched out on my bed, but I could not sleep. I noticed that my limbs were growing stiff, that my breath was starting to come in gasps. ... I grew frightened, and more so when I discovered that I could not move. I wanted to call out for help, but could not utter a sound. I tried in vain to open my eyes. A terrible pain shot through my chest, and I was helpless to resist or wince from it. It seemed as if I were going to be literally torn apart as I lay there, hopelessly powerless but nevertheless *clearly conscious*. ... In another moment, all pain ... left me. My body grew light, as if it weighed nothing, and slowly ascended into the air.¹⁹

Encounter with a being of light: Another common experience in an OBE, and certainly in a near-death experience (NDE), is seeing a light and, moreover, an exquisite being of light.²⁰

Psychiatrists Glen Gabbard and Stuart Twemlow report survey data in which 30% of experiencers report seeing a brilliant light, and a significant portion of them see a being or beings in that light.²¹

In his August, 1990 Sunstone symposium paper,²² Robert Fillerup noted the several similarities between the First Vision and the classic near-death experience, including seeing a bright light and an encounter with a being of light, so I will not document that aspect of the experience here. Smith's account has many of the classic attributes of the NDE encounter with the being of light. One aspect usually overlooked, however, is the *identity* of the being of light.

In accounts reported and tabulated in the NDE research literature, the being of light does *not* state its identity. In Smith's reports, though the beings do not explicitly state their identity,

Smith identifies them unambiguously as God “the Father” and Jesus, “the Son.”^{23, 24} For most other experiencers, the identity of the being of light also seems obvious. The commonality of his experience with the classic experience is that the being is intuitively recognized. The being is typically described as having perfect knowledge and perfect love, and as being authoritative. The image fits the idea of a god very well.

But who exactly is this being of light who is seen in the NDEs? Most believe it is God; some are sure it is Jesus.²⁵ Kenneth Ring, the preëminent NDE researcher, says the being is identified *variously*: For those with a non-Western cultural tradition, it may be the Buddha or some other greatly revered historical figure. In short, the perceived identity of the being of light seems to depend on the belief system of the experiencer.²⁶

Near-death experiencer, Mellon-Thomas Benedict, put it this way:

I had conversations with the Light. That's the best way I can describe it. The Light changed into different figures, like Jesus, Buddha, Krishna, mandalas, archetypal images and signs. I asked in a kind of telepathy, ‘What is going on here?’ The information transmitted was that our beliefs shape the kind of feedback we receive: If you are a Buddhist or Catholic or Fundamentalist, you get a feedback loop of your own images.²⁷

I will explore this phenomenon of ambiguous identity later in this paper.

Non-physical experience: Smith describes the brightness of the beings he saw in the vision as being greater than that of the sun.²⁸ From the context and tone of the description, I do not suppose he was using hyperbole for emphasis, but rather giving a literal description of the brightness. From his other description of the beings he saw, it is clear that he looked at them for some time. It was not just a mere glimpse, as would be as much as one could normally stand of looking directly at the sun. The point then is, Smith was doing something that is normally impossible with a physical body: looking for an extended time at light brighter than the sun. I suppose he was not looking at the light with his physical eyes. He was out of his body.

Aftermath: As the final indication of Smith’s Vision as an OBE, I note his description of the aftermath: “When I came to myself again, I found myself lying on my back, looking up into heaven.”²⁹ It would probably have been unusual for him to have taken a supine position when setting out to pray, but he at least found himself in that position by the end of the Vision, contrary to how artists typically prefer to compose the image. The supine position certainly did offer him a better way to view the light which he says was “exactly over my head.” I suppose that he became supine as a result of the seizure, so in this way, the account is congruent with the OBE hypothesis.

It is notable that he should say, “When I came to myself again,” which indicates that he recognized he was not in his normal state of consciousness during the vision.

Implications of the Vision as OBE

What then is the significance of framing the First Vision as an OBE? In summary, it offers us some alternatives with which to interpret what actually happened in the vision. Smith may have been accused of dreaming, hallucinating, or just plain lying about his experience, but I, with the Mormons, believe he was sincere. The issue, however, is *not* his sincerity, but rather the accuracy of his report, or more precisely, his interpretation of his perception. From the perspective of OBE, we can get a sense of the reliability of that interpretation.

At this point, we enter into an arena that is normally considered out of bounds for consideration within our tradition of responsible inquiry. Entering this arena is a stretch for the mind. For some it may be a stretch outside their comfort zone, though it is congruent in many ways with Mormon cosmology. I would like to make the stretch as easy as I can, so I will justify it methodologically before proceeding. I do so by appealing to the methodology of near-death studies.

Methodological Justification

Though near-death experiences have always existed in the background of our cultural awareness, it was Raymond Moody who brought them to the foreground in the 1970's. Moody is both a philosophy PhD as well as a psychiatric MD, and has had various professorial appointments. He once came across a report of a near-death experience, as medical professionals occasionally do. Trained in the rigor of rational, empirical inquiry, Moody felt that whatever the experience was—a dream, an imagination, a wishful thought, or a hallucination—it was anecdotal. That was, until he heard another near-death experience. Moody recognized some similarities in the two reports, and that piqued his curiosity. He wondered if there might be other, similar reports. If there were, they would have more credence.

He then undertook a systematic collection and correlation of near-death experiences, working with about 150 cases, many of which he obtained through interviewing the experiencers himself. What he found was of great interest. Even though the accounts all had variations of detail, they corroborated each other remarkably in their substantial features. Not all reports contained all features, but when he overlaid the reports, a very consistent picture emerged. He abstracted these features and published them in his now famous book, *Life After Life*.³⁰

Moody's book spawned great public and professional interest in the near-death experience. Not long afterward, the International Association for Near-Death studies was formed, and several determined physicians and psychologists around the world undertook to replicate his study. Thousands more near-death experiences were collected and cataloged. A journal was begun to report findings, first called *Anabiosis*, and later *Journal of Near-Death Studies*. The journal's editorial policy is typical of professional medical and psychological journals in its rigor. Moody's findings were substantiated and expanded. The exploration was fascinating for many reasons, not the least of which was because it opened a new window for empirical research into an area of consciousness that had theretofore been the province of spirituality and religion.

The point of methodology here is this: The sheer weight of thousands of independently corroborating reports moves the NDE evidence out of the category of the anecdotal and confidently into that of the normative. Whatever these data mean, we must pay attention to them. They are vividly demonstrating that there really is something there, even if it is only in our collective mind. They also suggest that if we are to extend the boundaries of empirical knowledge, we must look within as well as without.

Methodologically, the same holds for reports of normal OBEs in general. What we have in OBE is an accumulated body of data from thousands of independent, contemporary individuals that is not only internally consistent but which also maps easily onto a very large corpus of experience accumulated over the last few millennia from the world's adepts, principally but not exclusively of India and Tibet. Furthermore, because the normal OBE is not a once-in-a-lifetime experience as a near-death experience usually is, there are many repeat out-of-body experiencers of record who go about researching the phenomenon out of personal fascination. These go back into the state again and again—probing, testing hypotheses, and philosophizing—trying to understand it. Like Alice in the rabbit hole, they find a world that gets curiously and curiously the further in they go.

The “Astral” State

Here is where that stretch begins I mentioned earlier. The fundamental question about the world seen out-of-body is this: just what world are you in? It is definitely not Kansas. It is far more variegated than the world of our acquaintance, with all its geographic and cultural variety, and with all its flora and fauna. It is not a world accessible through telescopes or space ships. It does not map in Cartesian space. It is accessible only through the mind—from the comfort of our living room easychair...or monastery cell...or grove of trees.

I used the term OBE “world” to refer to what is experienced, but that term may imply unintended meaning. On the surface of it, the experiencer does have the sense of being in an actual place, but that may not be as straightforward as it seems. Other terms that are used to refer to the experience include “reality,” “dimension,” “state,” “level,” or “plane.” The famous out-of-body observer of our time, Robert Monroe, coined the term “locale” as a term he could be comfortable with. An old expression, however, has it that “a plane is not a place, but a state of being.” Another expression for it is “realm of visual imagination,” though it is more than that. The issue seems to be whether it is “real” in an objective sense, or subjective in an internal sense. The issue in those terms is problematic, however, as this state seems to straddle the border of objective and subjective, as will be seen later, and greatly extend the domain of the real. The term I prefer for out-of-body experiences is “perceptual states.” Taking the whole of OBE evidence into consideration, there are many widely different perceptual states possible into which one can “project” consciousness. It is a vast domain.

Though it is possible to perceive our natural, physical world in the out-of-body state, the most commonly experienced state by far, the one most out-of-body experiencers invariably encounter, is not our normal world, but another state of non-physical form, commonly called the “astral plane.” It is the state that is the one most elaborately described by the experiencers. So of

course, it is the astral plane about which we have the most understanding. It is here where I will focus attention and where we can mine the probable meaning of the First Vision experience.

The astral plane that the out-of-body experiencer typically encounters *appears* to be our own natural world at first. Most first-time experiencers take it as such, not having a belief system in place to support any alternative. Everything seems to belong to our familiar world: geographic features, flora and fauna, man-made features, and ordinary people going about ordinary activities. More experienced observers come to believe that the astral world is some counterpart of our normal world. Sometimes experiencers notice that everything they observe seems to be a bit finer in quality: in color, condition, design, health, or vibrancy, as if it were an idealized world. In Mormon parlance, it is the spirit world—a world of spirit matter, rather than physical matter. And that world is apprehended “in the spirit,” not in the physical body.

Experienced observers of the astral plane are quick to explain that it is full of variety and with several regions and sub-regions. In accounting for the character of the astral plane, the old fable of the blind men and the elephant comes easily to mind. In the story, a number of blind men encounter an elephant, but each in a limited way: one touches only an ear, another the trunk, another the massive side, and another the tail. After their brief encounter, each comes away with a very different idea of that an elephant is. This little story is a very apt metaphor for the reports that are found of the astral plane from infrequent visitors who have had a restricted range of experience. One must be careful to recognize that uninformed reports are very limited in scope and do not adequately account for either the great variety or the fundamental character of the astral plane. For a more informed understanding, it is important to take into consideration the data gained from the repeated experiences of several, independent observers.

Artificial Creations

The reports of naïve observers vary considerably in detail. If experiencers are fortunate enough to have such experiences repeatedly, so that they are not overwhelmed by the strangeness of it all, they will become more observant and reflective. For example, in their distraction, most first-timers are completely oblivious of what they may be wearing. The more observant notice that they are wearing something fairly ordinary, usually not the bed clothes that their physical body is in at the time, but rather some of their own day-time wear appropriate to their perceived situation. One observer noticed that she was wearing some clothing that she had discarded some time before.³¹

Advanced experiencers learn that they actually have control over their appearance and can change their clothes at will. The highly advanced experiencers learn that they can also control the appearance of their perceived bodies, like the old comic book super hero, Plastic Man, but prefer to present themselves as they would normally appear and in the prime of their life. Adventurous ones may take on the shape of an animal, or just a formless point of light.³² In this way, experiencers gradually learn that the world of form they perceive while out-of-body is a plastic medium, responsive to their conscious and unconscious beliefs and preconceptions, and to their deliberate volition as well.

Adept experiencer, Panchadasi, explains:

...[Y]ou appear astonished to notice that many of these scenes seem to be set to scenery, like a great theatre. You notice with wonder the artificial nature of this astral scenery, and wonder at the fact that the people on these scenes seem to regard this scenery as natural and real, instead of make-believe. It all seems ... very real to them. The secret is that the scenery is the creation of the minds of those taking part in the scenes, and those who have preceded them on this plane.³³

What I have ... said regarding the [artificial] nature of the astral scenery must not be taken as indicating that the Astral, itself, is merely imaginary or unreal in any sense. Nor is the substance of which the scenery is composed any less real than the substance of which the material world is composed. On the material plane, substance manifests as matter; while on the astral plane it manifests in a finer form of “stuff” or material. Again, on the material plane, the material, or matter, is shaped by the physical forces of nature, or, perhaps, by the mind of man using the original material in order to build “artificial” structures of forms. ... On the Astral, on the other hand, the astral material is not thrown into shape by physical forces, but is shaped and formed *only* by the thought and imaginative power of the minds of those inhabiting that plane. But these shapes, forms and structures of the astral material are not to be thought of as existing merely in the mind of the astral dwellers. They have an *independent* existence of their own, being composed of astral material, though shaped, formed and built up directly by the mind-power of the astral dwellers, instead of by the physical forces of nature. To the dwellers on the Astral, their scenery, buildings, etc., are as solid as are those of the material plane to the dwellers thereupon.³⁴

As we pass from scene to scene, we see the “happy hunting grounds” of the American Indians, thickly settled with these old aborigines who have been dwelling there for quite a period of time. They are busy, and happy hunting their astral buffaloes, and other game (all artificially created by their imagination from the astral substance, and having no real existence as living, feeling animals). A little further on, we witness similar forms of the “Spirit-land” of other primitive people, in some of which the disembodied warriors fight and conquer great hosts of artificial foes, and then have great feasts according to their old customs.³⁵

[Another] sub-plane of the Astral is filled with a multitude of souls each of whom is endeavoring to manifest and express his own particular shade of religious conception. It may be said to contain all the heavens that have ever been dreamed of in theology, and taught in the churches—each filled with devotees of the various creeds. Each of the great religions has its own particular region, in which its disciples gather, worship, and rejoice. In each region the religious soul finds “*just what he had expected*” and hoped to find on “the other shore.”³⁶

I may say here, that an understanding of the nature of the various regions of the Astral, and the scenes thereof, will throw light upon the fact that the reports of “the other side” given by disembodied souls at spiritualistic séances, etc., are so full of contradictions and discrepancies, no two seeming to agree. The secret is that *each is telling the truth as he sees it in the Astral*, without realizing the nature of what they have seen, of the fact that it is, at the best, merely one aspect among millions of others. Contrast the varying “heavens” just mentioned, and see how different the reports would be coming from some of their inhabitants. When the nature of astral phenomena is once understood, the

difficulty vanishes, and each report is recognized as being an attempt to describe the Astral picture upon which the disembodied entity has gazed, believing it to be actual and real.³⁷

I would like to focus on a particular aspect of the artificial region of the astral plane. You no doubt noticed in the descriptions of the astral that I quoted, that it is possible to mentally create not only an environment, but also animal- and human-like inhabitants that behave according to common expectations. The range of action of these entities is determined entirely by the thoughts that defined them and set them in motion. These entities belong to a class of artificial objects commonly called “thought-forms.”

Artificial thought-form creatures can be ordinary, angelic, demonic, or entirely fanciful. One out-of-body traveler reported frolicking all night with Dorothy, The Cowardly Lion, Tin Man, Scarecrow, and Toto. She reported that on later reflection, she understood that even though she had a marvelous time with them, her friends were actually only thought-forms. These thought-forms were originally created unconsciously by movie writers, producers, directors and actors, but over time had become much stronger and more articulated by the collective unconsciousness of a very large viewing audience, so that ultimately these thought-form characters have developed quite well-formed personalities.³⁸

Out-of-body adventurers sometimes report being accosted by what have variously been called devils, demons, monsters, or at the least, very frightful creatures, that, real as they may appear, turn out to be merely thought-forms. The uninitiated usually respond to such encounters in the instinctive, reactive way typical of the physical human—with panic and flight. The savvy sometimes have enough wits to realize they themselves are not physical and therefore no harm can happen to them.

Famous out-of-body traveler, Robert Monroe, reported calling the bluff of a menacing, sword-carrying demonic creature by casually complimenting it on its sword. The creature stopped, smiled, and totally distracted, started bragging about its sword. On another occasion, Monroe willed an intimidating “monster” to shrink in size, and it did, entirely defusing the encounter. And on another occasion, he asked one point blank, “Are you real?”, upon which it immediately disappeared. The “demons” of this perceptual state turn out to be paper tigers, with the maturity of a pre-adolescents playing dress-up or cops and robbers.³⁹

In a more pleasant encounter, Monore, tells of meeting a deceased friend in the astral who had build his dream retirement home on a beautiful astral beach-front location. The friend explained that he had to work a while on the ocean waves to get them “just right.” Monroe discreetly declined meeting the woman companion his friend said he had also created.⁴⁰

Panchadasi again provides useful elaboration:

In addition to the [human and] non-human entities which are perceived by astral vision ... including a number of varieties and classes ... there are to be found on the Astral...a great class of entities, or semi-entities, which [are known] as “artificial entities.”

The *majority* of these artificial entities, or thought-forms, are created *unconsciously* by persons who manifest strong *desire-force*, accompanied by definite mental pictures of that which they desire. ...

Much of the effect of thought-force, or mind-power, is due to the creation of these thought-forms. Strong wishes for good, as well as strong curses for evil, tend to manifest form and a semblance of vitality in the shape of these artificial entities. These entities, however, are under the law of thought-attraction, and go only where they are attracted.

Another, and quite a large, class of these artificial astral entities consists of thought-forms of *supernatural* beings, sent out by the *strong mental pictures*, oft repeated, of the persons creating them—the creator usually being unconscious of the result. For instance, a strongly religious mother, who prays for the protective influence of ... angels around and about her children, and whose strong religious imagination pictures these heavenly visitors as present by the side of the children, frequently actually creates thought-forms of such angel guardians around her children, who are given a degree of life and mind vibrations from the soul of the mother. In this way, such guardian angels, so created, serve to protect the children and warn them from evil and against temptation.

Many supernatural visitors, saints, semi-divine beings, etc., of all religions have been formed in this way, and, in many cases, are kept in being by the faith of the devotees of the church, chapel, or shrine. In many temples in oriental countries, there have been created, and kept alive for many centuries, the thought-form entities of the minor gods and saints, endowed in thought with great power of response to prayer, offering, and ceremonies. Those accepting the belief in these powers, are brought into harmony with its vibrations, and are affected thereby, for good or evil.

Even certain forms of “spirits,” so-called, of certain forms of spiritualistic séances, arise from this principle, and have never been human beings at all. An understanding of this principle will aid in the interpretation of many puzzling phases of psychic phenomena. ... I am fully familiar with very many instances of the *real* return to earth-life of disembodied souls. But at the same time, I, as well as all other advanced [experiencers], am equally aware of the *many chances of mistake* in this class of psychic phenomena. ... Again, many apparently real “spirit forms” are nothing more or less than semi-vitalized thought-form artificial entities such as I have just described.⁴¹

You can see how tricky astral perception can be. As it is so responsive to unconscious imagination, naïve observers unwittingly find themselves in a hall of mirrors.

Another adept, Charles Leadbeater, writes on the topic of artificial entities as follows:

The astral region ... has often been called the realm of illusion—not that it is itself any more illusory than the physical world, but because of the extreme unreliability of the impressions brought back from it by the untrained seer. Why should this be so? [F]irst ... many of its inhabitants have a marvelous power of changing their forms with protean rapidity, and also of casting practically unlimited glamour over those with whom they choose to sport...⁴²

The psychically developed person ... is usually perfectly conscious when out of the body, but for want of proper training is liable to be greatly deceived as to what he sees...⁴³

[Artificial or elemental beings], the largest class of astral entities, [are] also much the most important to man. Being entirely his own creation, it is interrelated with him by the closest ... bonds, and its action upon him is direct and incessant.⁴⁴

[One type of these are] formed *unconsciously*. I have explained that the elemental essence which surrounds us on every side is ... singularly susceptible to the influence of human thought. The action

of the mere casual wandering thought upon it, caus[es] it to burst into a cloud of rapidly moving, evanescent forms ... [W]e have now to note how it is affected when the human mind formulates a definite, purposeful thought or wish...⁴⁵

Recall that Panchadasi emphasized how the strength of desire is an important factor in artificial creation, and note Joseph Smith's pointing out the strength of his impetus and clear determination of purpose in going to the woods to pray just before the First Vision.⁴⁶

Continuing on from Leadbeater:

The effect produced is of the most striking nature. The thought seizes upon the plastic essence, and moulds it instantly into a living being of appropriate form—a being which when once thus created is in no way under the control of its creator, but lives out a life of its own, the length of which is proportionate to the intensity of the thought of wish which called it into existence. It lasts, in fact, just as long as the thought-force holds it together. Most people's thoughts are so fleeting and indecisive that the elementals created by them last only a few minutes or a few hours, but an often repeated thought of an earnest wish will form an elemental whose existence may extend to many days...⁴⁷

Since the ordinary man's thoughts refer largely to himself, the [unconsciously created] elementals which they form remain hovering about him, and constantly tend to provoke a repetition of the idea which they represent, since such repetitions, instead of forming new elementals, strengthen that already in existence, and give it a fresh lease of life. A man, therefore, who frequently dwells upon one wish often forms for himself an astral attendant which, constantly fed by fresh thought, may haunt him for years, ever gaining more and more strength and influence over him...⁴⁸

[An unconsciously created artificial elemental] will display what appears like a considerable amount of intelligence and adaptability, though really it is a force acting along the line of least resistance—pressing steadily in one direction all the time, and taking advantage of any channel that it can find... If [one's] wish [is] merely indefinite, for his general good, the elemental essence in its wonderful plasticity will respond exactly to that less distinct idea also, and the creature formed will expend its force in the direction of whatever action for the man's advantage comes most readily to hand.⁴⁹

Furthermore, [the unconsciously created artificial entity] appears to be actuated, like most other beings, by an instinctive desire to prolong its life, and thus reacts on its creator as a force constantly tending to provoke the renewal of the feeling which called it into existence. It also influences in a similar manner *others* with whom it comes into contact, though its rapport with them is naturally not so perfect...⁵⁰

[The] power of an *earnest* desire, especially if frequently repeated, to create an active elemental which ever passes forcefully in the direction of its own fulfillment, is the scientific explanation of what devout but unphilosophical people describe as answers to prayer.⁵¹

Conclusion and Reflections

The hypothesis that Joseph Smith's "First Vision" was an out-of-body experience is congruent with all the circumstantial evidence, and a likely explanation of the event. In an OBE state, Smith's perception would have been of the so-called "astral plane" rather than of normal reality.

The aspect of the astral plane he would have perceived was “artificial.” That is, what he apparently saw was not real in the normal sense, but realistic “thought-forms.” The thought-forms were unconsciously created either by him or by others with similar belief. Because of his strong alignment with those thought-forms, Smith positively though unwittingly attracted them into his conscious experience. Being naïve and inexperienced in such matters, Smith failed to realize that what he saw and heard were not objective reality, but subjective reflections of his own beliefs and predispositions--an easy and a natural mistake to make.

The thought-forms of the Vision are perpetuated and strengthened by all the followers of Smith who believe the Vision. Indeed, the thought-forms have the effect of generating and validating belief in their reality. The thought-form images and what they appear to represent, then, are a self-validating system. In this way they constitute—like any other belief system, religious or otherwise—a “belief trap.”

Smith was no doubt completely sincere as well as courageous in telling us what he thought he saw. He had no apparent motive for lying. Indeed, telling his story only got him into trouble. His sincerity is most compelling. However, sincerity is not the issue here, but rather the validity of his interpretation of his experience. By interpreting his experience as an exteriorization of his unconscious belief, we come face-to-face with the anthropomorphic god--the god of preconception, or perhaps, the god of the Judeo-Christian collective unconscious. Thus it is that the god Smith perceived has form, is human, male, fatherly, and faintly Jewish.

I am still left to wonder how the notion of an anthropomorphic god can be so compelling. It seems more than just a carryover of childhood imagery, and probably has to do with the belief trap I mentioned above. When we achieve harmony, or vibrational resonance, with a thought-form through belief, imagination, or desire, we then have access to that thought-form. We actually attract its operation into our experience. It works on us in an unconscious, non-verbal manner—we feel it, and it feels real. That feeling we take as spiritual confirmation, as indeed it is, but confirmation of a thought-form nevertheless.

Why then should we want to attract the thought-form of an anthropomorphic god, even unwittingly? I suppose that our present focus in physical reality so overwhelms our perceptual apparatus that our awareness of formlessness has faded far into the recesses of our consciousness. It’s part of the “forgetfulness” of our “sleep.” After all, form is intrinsic to the physical experience—an attribute of space-time. It’s no wonder we think so much in terms of form. It’s our current bias. Personifying God is one way we manifest this bias.

I hope not to be misunderstood as devaluing the experience of physical form. Physicality may not be the whole perspective, but it is, after all, the leading edge of our life. Nor do I disparage belief in spiritual matters. I believe unreservedly in a fundamental spiritual reality (though I am wary of illusion). Neither do I want to be misunderstood as proposing the nature of God. That would be another discussion entirely.

I recognize that I’ve developed a weighty proposition about Mormon belief with circumstantial rather than conclusive evidence. What I am proposing is only a plausible explanation. Though there are certainly other hypotheses possible, I am personally satisfied that the OBE hypothesis

with its implications is headed in the right direction. I believe this hypothesis, or one like it, to be productive in explaining many of Smith's other extraordinary experiences as well.

I would hope that others would explore this hypothesis further. Searching the literature certainly has its rewards, but it would be far better to go beyond--into the empiricism of personal experience. With desire and clear focus, extraordinary states of perception can be attained. In those states, we may transcend space and time; knowledge of the past and present becomes accessible; and our understanding and appreciation of our present physical experience is greatly expanded.

Transcending the Belief Trap

The above evidence and reasoning propose a new hypothesis for "the First Vision", but are more significant with respect to the issue of the "belief trap" mentioned earlier. Each of us must deal with this issue in a personal way. Knowledge of the existence of such a trap gives us purchase on the issue. Adeptness with alternate perceptual states is a positive approach toward transcending this trap and learning to see our inner selves "through the glass" (*i.e.*, with a mirror) no longer darkly--not as skewed or imaginative perceptions, but as we truly are. As we become personally experienced with expanded states of consciousness so that they are no longer conjectural, mysterious, nor illusory, I expect we will attain a measure of maturity in spiritual matters which Joseph Smith himself inspires us to acquire.

Postscript

Your e-mailed responses are welcome to RobertBushman (at) comcast dot net. (To use this address, adjust it to the standard email address format.)

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Footnotes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Washington DC Sunstone Symposium in May, 2001.
2. Carol Zaleski, *Otherworld journeys: accounts of near-death experience in medieval and modern times* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).
3. I.P. Couliano, *Out of this world: other worldly journeys from Gilgamesh to Albert Einstein* (Boston: Shambala, 1991).

4. 2 Cor 12:2-3; Alma 18, 19; 3 Ne 28:15
5. Robert Bushman, *A comprehensive bibliography of the out-of-body experience*. <http://obebibliography.info/>.
6. Glen O. Gabbard and Stuart W. Twemlow, *With the eyes of the mind: an empirical analysis of out-of-body states* (New York: Praeger, 1984), 12.
7. Joseph Smith's 1838 account of the First Vision first published in B.H. Roberts, ed, *History of the Church*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1902), A-1:1-4. Reprinted in *The Pearl of Great Price* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1982), 47 ff.
8. Robert A. Monroe, personal communication, 1986.
9. Smith (1982), 48.
10. Smith (1982), 48-49.
11. Smith (1982), 49. Even though the subsequent events of the vision have much greater overall significance than the seizure, Smith devotes a disproportionate amount of attention to it in this account. Here, the seizure gets 148 words as opposed to only 23 words of description of the Father and the Son. By word count, that's more than six times as much description. Clearly, the seizure was very real for Smith. Though he calls the seizure the "power of some actual being from the unseen world," he offers nothing to substantiate that proposition. I take it as his *interpretation* of the experience of seizure.
12. Robert Crookall, *Out-of-the-body experiences: a fourth analysis* (Secaucus NJ: Citadel Press, 1970) 48 ff.
13. Celia E. Green, *Out-of-the-body experiences* (London: Hamish Hamilton [published for the Institute of Psychophysical Research], 1968) 56.
14. Sylvan Muldoon and Hereward Carrington, *The phenomena of astral projection* (London: Rider, 1951) 166.
15. Green, 56.
16. Oliver Fox, *Astral projection: a record of out-of-the-body experiences* (London: Rider, 1939) 39.
17. Muldoon and Carrington, 201.
18. Fox, 42.
19. Muldoon and Carrington, 203.
20. Crookall, 1970, 48 ff.
21. Gabbard and Twemlow, 19, 97.
22. Robert Fillerup, *Early Mormon visions and near-death experiences* (paper given at Sunstone Symposium, Salt Lake City, August 22, 1990. Also at <http://www.code-co.com/rcf/mhistdoc/nde.htm>).
23. Smith (1902), 49.
24. Joseph Smith, *Kirtland Letter Book* (MS, LDS Historian's Library, 1832-1834), 1-6. Published in Dean C. Jessee, "The early accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision" (*BYU Studies*,

9:3, 1969), 280.

25. George Ritchie, personal communication.

26. Kenneth Ring, personal communication, 1987.

27. Lee W. Bailey and Jenny Yates, eds. *Near Death Experiences: A Reader*, Routledge, New York, 1996, p 39 ff.

28. Smith (1902), 49.

29. Smith (1902), 50.

30. Raymond A. Moody, Jr., *Life after life: the investigation of a phenomenon--survival of bodily death* (St Simons Island GA: Mockingbird Books, 1975).

31. Carol Eby, *Astral odyssey: Exploring out-of-body experiences* (York Beach ME: Samuel Weiser, 1996).

32. Robert A. Monroe, *Far journeys* (Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1972).

33. Panchadasi, *The astral world: its scenes, dwellers and phenomena*. (Chicago: Advanced Thought Publishing Co, ca 1938) 57.

34. Panchadasi, 60-61, emphasis added.

35. Panchadasi, 63.

36. Panchadasi, 69, emphasis added.

37. Panchadasi, 74-75, emphasis added.

38. Esther Hicks, personal communication, 1995.

39. Monroe (personal communication, 1986).

40. Monroe (1972).

41. Panchadasi, 87 ff, emphasis added.

42. C. W. Leadbeater, *The astral plane* (Adyar: Theosophical Publishing House, 1895) 6-7.

43. Leadbeater, 37.

44. Leadbeater, 124-125.

45. Leadbeater, 125, emphasis added.

46. Smith (1902), 48.

47. Leadbeater, 125-126.

48. Leadbeater, 126.

49. Leadbeater, 127.

50. Leadbeater, 128.

51. Leadbeater, 133.

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