

Book Reviews

ROBERT L. MILLET, ed. *Joseph Smith: Selected Sermons and Writings*. New York: Paulist Press, 1989. 266 pp. \$24.95.

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Before looking at some details, we should pause to celebrate. A respected series, *Sources of American Spirituality*, has included the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith. Readers and those who use libraries possessing the series will now discover not only Horace Bushnell, Elizabeth Seton, Charles Hodge, Henry Alline, Josiah Royce, and others, all seen as possessing a genuine "spirituality," but also Joseph Smith. Only someone from outer space, unaware of the mixture of ignorance, contempt, and amusement in the stock treatment of Joseph Smith and his successors, can fail to be astounded. Both the editor of the series and the editor of the volume should be congratulated.

From the point of view of editorial standards, a person could quite possibly drop the ball when offering the supposed works of Joseph Smith. Tempting but treacherous would be the procedure of simply making selections from six of the volumes of the *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, for on the face of it, this work is *by* the Prophet himself. A few hours with a felt-tipped pen would allow one to go through these pages, turn the copy over to a printer, add a short introduction, and publish the selected passages under some such title as *The Journal of Joseph* — not an imaginary example.

To his credit, Robert Millet draws his selections either from canonized scriptures or, wherever possible, from the exemplary work of Dean C. Jessee, *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*. Although acknowledgement is given, I wish it had been more lavish, for in a sense the present work rides piggyback on Jessee's painstaking project of many years, and in spite of what Millet hopes, the average reader will *not* "readily realize" this work's indebtedness (4). Incidentally, Jessee's monumental work continues. *Personal Writings* has now been followed by volume one of *The Papers of Joseph Smith*. Readers scrupulous for every detail,

wishing to know which scribal hands wrote what and where insertions were made, will still wish to consult Jessee, for Millet has not reproduced the documents with total fidelity. Considering his purpose, I do not quarrel with the procedure.

The selections included in the work under review fall into six categories: personal reflections, letters, sermons, revelations, translations, and prayers. Generally, one must applaud the selections. Given space limitations, Millet serves up a resplendent array of the Prophet's production. Some of my own favorite passages are here: Joseph's reactions to New York City in 1832, the letters from Liberty Jail (now in D&C 121–123), the warm welcome of the returning penitent William W. Phelps, the Wentworth letter, and even the letter to Nancy Rigdon on "Happiness is the object and design of our existence" (109).

With sermons a bit of confusion arises. The introductory paragraph explains the background of the School of the Prophets, where lectures were given. As Millet explains, "It appears that Joseph Smith and perhaps some of the leaders of the Church (e.g. Signey [sic] Rigdon, William W. Phelps) prepared seven theological lectures . . . and this material came to be known as the 'Lectures on Faith'" (115). It may be unimportant just who contributed what, or perhaps we will never know exactly, but we are scarcely entitled to such editorial comments as "In the third lecture, Joseph explained . . ." (128). I would prefer to see a statement to the effect that the lectures were very early attributed to Joseph Smith and that, even if he did not actually pen them, he certainly approved of them, and thus they can be taken as statements of his views.

After three numbered excerpts from the Lectures on Faith, we come to sermon number 4, the 1844 King Follett discourse, an amalgamation prepared in 1983 by Donald Q. Cannon and Larry E. Dahl from versions recorded by different scribes.

In the section "Revelations" are sixteen sections from the Doctrine and Covenants in this order: 1, 19, 25, 46, 49, 76, 83, 87, 89, 91, 93, 137, 110, 132 (verses 1–50), and 133. There is one previously unpublished revelation from the collections of the Harold B. Lee Library at Brigham Young University. One might regret the omission of other possibilities, for example sections 20, 58, 59, and 88, but, in light of space limitations and the facts that the Liberty Jail letters are included in the previous section and sections 65 and 109 appear under "Prayers," the selection deserves high marks. It gives a very good idea of the Prophet's range, versatility, and ability to tap into a source of inspiration beyond the ordinary.

I am especially elated at the decision to include a section entitled "Translations." Scholars working with such materials are

familiar with the predictable catcalls from both sides. From believers with a certain cast of mind comes the criticism that these are translations, thus not *by* Joseph Smith, and therefore not properly included in a selection of his writings. From the other side comes the jeer that these are by no means translations and therefore must be excluded or somehow labeled as spurious. To the credit of both editors, the decision was made to ignore such complaints, decidedly the wise thing to do, for, whatever the process, all of the alleged “translations” passed through the Prophet’s mind. The result is one of the richest sections of the book and one that should provide a delightful surprise to those unfamiliar with Joseph Smith. From the Book of Mormon we read 1 Nephi 1 and 11, 2 Nephi 9, and 3 Nephi 11 and 27. From the Pearl of Great Price come Moses 1 and 7 and Abraham 1 and 2. From the Joseph Smith Translation we read Genesis 14 and 50 and Matthew 7 and 24 (also in the Pearl of Great Price). Others might choose differently, but again I think we should credit the editor with intelligent selection.

The bibliography lists under “Latter-day Saint Scriptures” the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, Bible, and Pearl of Great Price, each with a Salt Lake City publication date, and Holy Scriptures, Inspired Version (Joseph Smith Translation), with an Independence, Missouri, publication date. It would be helpful to the novice — we have to remember those who pick up a book like this without any background at all — to indicate at least the date of original publication. The remaining four pages of the bibliography list “Historical and Doctrinal Sources.” The “outside” reader will be introduced to many titles not generally known away from the Wasatch Front. I do have to wonder at the thinking that would include Ivan J. Barrett’s book on Joseph Smith but omit Donna Hill’s. Since Benjamin F. Johnson’s letter to George A. Gibbs has been published, we do not need to refer only to a typescript in the Lee Library. William E. McLellin’s 1877 letter, apparently not published, should be given a more complete citation indicating its archival location. However, some of these bibliographical details turn up in footnotes.

Realizing the need of all readers, especially those new to the subject, for some framework and for explanation of details, Millet has provided an introduction and numbered endnotes for the individual documents. The notes are relatively few and generally do about what they should.

The fifty-page introduction has its frustrations. Never is the concept of spirituality brought into focus, defined in such a way as to connect it, if only for comparison, to the general Christian (or panreligious) concept. The idealized reminiscences of the Prophet

compiled by Hyrum and Helen Andrus, most of them recorded many years after the fact, are cited without so much as a *soupçon* of their reliability. Sometimes serving as documentation for the thought of Joseph Smith are references, not to the Prophet himself, but to nineteenth- and even twentieth-century Church leaders — as in “Joseph Smith and his successors.” We even encounter the practice of referring to the Prophet by his given name, Joseph, jargon among the Saints which is obtrusive in this context. And so on.

But such peccadillos should not obscure an important achievement. The introduction does introduce Joseph Smith by discussing in straightforward fashion the following: backgrounds/the religious climate, beginnings/Joseph Smith’s first vision, the expanding canon, Zion/the quest for the City of God, and (coming closest to the accepted understanding of spirituality) Joseph Smith and devotional life. Parley P. Pratt’s ringing proclamation of 1845 finishes the essay: “He has kindled a fire. — We will fan the flame” (55). Remembering the useful references to books and articles in the footnotes, one must confess that this is not a bad achievement. The general reader unfamiliar with Mormon history will learn a good deal about Joseph Smith and Mormonism.

The general series editor, John Farina, is dead right, of course, when he observes that Millet’s introduction and notes “are without the kind of critical distance that would facilitate an interpretation of the writings of Joseph Smith” (2). It is to Farina’s credit that he recognizes the value of what *is* here. Works with so-called critical distance are already available, and others will continue to appear. What this book does is more fundamental: it provides a platform from which Joseph Smith can make his own statement and an introduction showing how a disciple views him. All too often, dismissive value judgments are pronounced without the basic information here provided.

To reiterate, the publication of this work in a series that will assure its dissemination is a major achievement. All quibbles aside, the Prophet Joseph Smith is here allowed to speak for himself. He was seldom allowed as much during his lifetime. He would not, I think, expect anything more.