

Biographical Reflections on the American Joseph Smith

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I have long thought that the importance and role of Joseph Smith in the history of religion in America has been muted more than necessary by the Latter-day Saint church. As his biographer, I was and remain very anxious that his contribution to American culture and religion in general be recognized and appreciated, both by Mormons and by non-Mormons.

The Proper Approach for Biographers of Religious Figures

First, I would like to make a few comments about what I think the proper approach of a historian should be in dealing with a subject such as the life of Joseph Smith. As I said in the preface of my biography of Smith,¹ the problem in writing on any religious figure, be it Christian, Jew, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, or whatever, is that believers see the person as somewhat sacred, and nonbelievers see him or her as strange or even fake. A historian's task, as I see it, is to maintain absolute impartiality in dealing with religious subjects, to study the evidence and try to present the facts in as objective a manner as possible.

Although not a Mormon, I have learned from my association with Joseph Smith to respect and admire what he accomplished. I was asked to write his biography in part because I was not affiliated

with the church but presumably had a background to undertake the task since my principal field of research and writing is centered on the Jacksonian era—the years in which Smith grew to maturity, experienced visions, uncovered gold plates, translated the Book of Mormon, and organized The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.²

When initially asked to undertake this assignment, I wondered at its wisdom. After all, I am a historian of politics, not religion. More importantly, I wondered whether I could be impartial and could approach the subject objectively, as a historian should. I had wondered the same thing when I finished my biography of Andrew Jackson and began the study of Henry Clay, since Jackson and Clay were deadly enemies.³ But in thinking about a life of the Prophet, I decided that I had no real prejudices against Mormons or their church, one way or the other. In fact, I was not aware of knowing a Mormon, and I did not understand what they were like. I finally decided that it might be interesting and instructive to investigate the subject and improve my knowledge of an important figure in American history and American religion. So I accepted the offer, believing I could bring to it the required objectivity.

I think a historian has an obligation to find, if possible, plausible, rational reasons to explain the controversial aspects of the subject's life and to leave theological speculation to experts in the field. For example, I know that many believe that the extraordinary conversion of thousands to the Christian church in the late ancient and early medieval periods was due to the guidance and help of the Holy Spirit. A historian, to my way of thinking, should not make any attempt to cite or infer divine influence when explaining the spread of Christianity. He should stick to his discipline and offer logical, intelligent, factual, and rational explanations for what happened.

Yes, Joseph Smith had visions, but were they divinely inspired? How can a historian possibly know? It is enough as a historian to lay out the facts and allow the evidence to speak for itself. If he decides on the basis of the evidence that the Prophet was divinely inspired and chooses to say so and explain why he has reached that decision, then, I think, he has laid down his historian's pen and has become an apologist.

At the same time, if a historian does not believe Joseph Smith's claims and sets out to prove that the Prophet was a fake, intent on deceiving the gullible for his own selfish purposes, as some have said, then the work is polemical and valueless as history. And I should also like to argue that a critical evaluation of Joseph Smith and his work is not necessarily the result of a conspiratorial effort to diminish Joseph's reputation or the value of his contribution to our culture. To be sure, some critical writers are hostile and anxious to discredit the Prophet. I do not deny that, but, as I say, their work is valueless as history.

I must admit that even before I began a serious study of Joseph Smith's life, I rather liked the man. I thought him a courageous and brave individual who achieved something quite remarkable. Moreover, he sacrificed his life for what he believed. As I studied him for several years, I came to admire him the more I got to know him. A biographer, I contend, should like his subject, and I do not doubt that this fact will color his work to some extent. I suppose someone has to write a biography of Josef Stalin and Adolph Hitler, but I could never do it.

A Very American Religion and Prophet

One of the first things I learned in my research on Joseph Smith was that Mormonism is a very American religion, more so than I originally understood. Moreover, I found Joseph Smith is a product of his environment, a product of his time and location. (I do not think anyone at anytime ever escapes the influence of his environment and the era in which he or she lives.) Remember that Americans of the early nineteenth century were far different from Americans of the early twenty-first century. The environment during the Prophet's lifetime was saturated with religious fervor. The Second Great Awakening generated a scalding religious ferocity unlike the religious response of any other period in American history. This nation was engulfed by the fires of repeated revivals in which itinerant preachers of little education but mesmerizing oratory reduced men and women to weeping supplicants, begging forgiveness of their sins and promising to reform their lives.

Joseph was born directly in the middle of this cauldron. As a teenager, he attended these revivals and, according to his own testimony, was deeply affected by them. He said he “wanted to get religion too, wanted to feel and shout like the rest.” Unfortunately he “could feel nothing.”⁴ Remember, this was also a romantic age, and Joseph Smith was a romantic to his innermost fiber. So he turned to the scriptures for help, “believing as I was taught, that they contained the word of God.”⁵ And who taught him? Obviously his parents. He was born into a deeply religious family where he was indoctrinated into a life of daily prayer, dreams, visions, magic, and seer stones. This combination of religious turmoil surrounding him on the outside and the intense religious family upbringing at home produced a religious zealot.

So Joseph was a product of his time and family influence. But if Joseph is so American, why were Mormons rejected and persecuted? According to Richard Bushman, a localized view of Joseph Smith’s history is too limiting; it cannot adequately address the question.⁶ But the answer, I think, is simple: Americans are a violent people. We have a long history of killing those who are not like us or who disagree with us. And that turbulent history began from the arrival of the first Europeans on this continent. Whatever is different (and Joseph and Mormons certainly are different), whichever group does not conform to the approved norm for religious belief, and whatever Americans cannot or will not accept, they attack.

Bushman also asks why this American religion thrives in foreign lands. I think the answer is obvious. What is American has always been attractive to foreigners, starting with the fact that we dared to establish a republic and declare that all men are equal and have certain inalienable rights. In a sea of monarchies and dictatorships, we chose to experiment with a republican form of government that slowly evolved into a democracy. This experiment drew foreigners like Alexis de Tocqueville to these shores to investigate and report on them. Foreigners have been attracted not only to our American religion but also to our music, our movies, our computer technology, our lifestyle of jeans and fast foods and inane TV programs, and our many inventions—such as the light bulb, the telephone, the recording machine, the cell phone, the iPod, and on and on.

But why are people attracted to Mormonism, be they Americans or foreigners? My own view is that (other than a true religious conversion) people are attracted to what I call a Mormon culture, a culture that emphasizes the value and importance of the family, emphasizes helping each other and participating in community life. It is the genuine warmth of human relationships that is so attractive.

From the very beginning of Mormon history, Joseph, you will remember, sent missionaries abroad to spread the faith, and that in itself was very American. Remember the country had expanded from a hundred-mile ribbon along the Atlantic coastline in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to a nation that stretched three thousand miles to the Pacific Ocean. The era in which the Prophet lived, the Jacksonian Era, was a period in which Americans proclaimed their belief in Manifest Destiny. An article in *The Democratic Review* in 1845 provided its definition when the author said that other countries were “limiting our greatness and checking the fulfillment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions.”⁷

Notice, it is a right given us by Providence to bring enlightened government to the inhabitants of this continent. We are still doing it today in our attempts to bring democracy and freedom to the oppressed of this world. Is that so different from Joseph’s efforts to spread the blessings of Mormonism to a deprived world? And this religion was attractive to foreigners by the very fact that it was American. What other elements “beyond the Yankee domain” are necessary? Focusing on Joseph Smith’s origins in the United States is not limiting, as Bushman believes. Quite the opposite. Manifest Destiny is about expanding the vision and the goal of sharing our good fortune with others everywhere.

I frankly do not support the transnational concept in trying to explain Joseph Smith and who he was. Quite obviously, by founding a religion that has survived for almost two centuries, the Prophet did, in fact, place Mormonism in the great stream of the history of Christianity. Saying that does not mean this Yankee religion has run amok—or that it is confining. Mormonism has expanded, has been accepted, and has become part of the Christian tradition.

I might also remind you that in establishing his church Joseph Smith called its head a president and organized individual communities of Mormons into wards, the term used to describe political areas in Chicago. Both these designations are American concepts. Joseph claimed that the Garden of Eden was located in Missouri and that when Christ returns in the Second Coming, He will appear in the United States. Most particularly, Joseph Smith was assassinated. Even that is not unknown in America.

The command to translate an ancient record contained on gold plates also appeals to Americans. Americans have always wanted things written down in black and white. Starting with the Mayflower Compact when the Pilgrims first arrived and including the colonial charters, Americans sought legitimacy through the written word. We want documents to prove our right to exist as a free people. We want a written declaration of independence to set before the world the reasons we are breaking loose from the British Empire. We want articles of confederation and a written constitution to describe how we shall be governed. We want a clearly worded bill of rights so that we know the government is limited in what it can do. In the struggle to win passage of the Bill of Rights in the First Congress, Thomas Jefferson told James Madison that the American people deserved to have these clearly articulated rights added to the Constitution.⁸ The American people had fought and won a revolution, and they wanted their principles of government validated by such a document. Joseph Smith is in the tradition of a nation committing one's beliefs and aspirations to writing. Jews have the Torah, Christians the Gospels, Moslems the Qur'an, and now Joseph Smith has provided his followers with the Book of Mormon.

The Book of Mormon is a typically American story, or at least one that Americans can easily appreciate. Here is the story of a people who left their homeland in search of a better life, crossed an ocean, and settled in a wilderness. It is the story of bringing the gospel to the Americas. It is a story that people of the Jacksonian age could easily relate to and understand because it is part of their own tradition. It explains where the Indians came from. It radiates the revivalist passion of the Second Great Awakening, the frontier culture and folklore, and the democratic impulses of the time.

What is truly remarkable—really miraculous—is the fact that this massive translation was completed in sixty working days by an uneducated but highly imaginative zealot steeped in the religious fervor of his age. As a writer, I find that feat absolutely incredible. Sixty days! Two months to produce a work running over six hundred pages and of such complexity and density. Unbelievable.

I frankly do not see why the experiences of the First Vision, the knack of looking into a stone and seeing things otherwise invisible to natural eyes, and a heavenly visitor informing him that he was to translate an ancient record on gold plates are necessarily, as Bushman puts it, “the puzzle of . . . disparate identities.”⁹ They are all part of who Joseph Smith was and became as he grew to manhood in a world saturated with religious enthusiasm. Because of his family background and the background of the Burned-over District of New York, he was prepared well in advance to undergo this contact with the divine. As for peering through stones and seeing things otherwise invisible to natural eyes, that was quite commonplace. A Palmyra newspaper reported that many men and women “became marvelous wise” in using seer stones by which “they saw all the wonders of nature, including of course, ample stores of silver and gold.”¹⁰ Joseph’s father used them, as did his mother on occasion. Joseph later said that “every man who lived on the earth was entitled to a seer-stone, and should have one, but they are kept from them in consequence of their wickedness.”¹¹

The Need to Plumb for Meaning

Rather than looking to a transnational explanation, both Mormon and non-Mormon historians need to seek a deeper understanding of Joseph Smith himself. I am not sure we have come to grips and plumbed the meaning of all the events that shaped his life—especially his young life. How did other things besides environment and family inform his life? For example, when Joseph was a boy, he endured a surgical operation that must have been excruciating. There was no anesthesia, and the doctors cut open the child’s leg and removed part of the bone, drilling one side of the bone and then the other, using

whatever primitive surgical instruments were available at the time. Surely such a shock to the system of young Joseph must have been so traumatic that it affected his personality. But how? Historians are not psychologists or psychiatrists, but they need to raise the question. We know that during these agonizing days he was carried around the house by his mother and later used crutches and walked with a limp. To further his recovery, he was sent to the home of an uncle, Jesse Smith, who lived in Salem, Massachusetts. What was it like to be separated from his family for nearly a year while he recovered? It is virtually impossible to state just what emotional and psychological scars he carried into adulthood, but surely this traumatic event and the agony he endured had an enormous influence on the kind of person he became and the career he chose to pursue.

Is there more to be learned about Joseph's youth? I think so. The following incident is only one of the events in Joseph's young life that has not been thoroughly explored to my knowledge. When he was eleven years old and the family moved from Norwich to Palmyra, New York, the guide taking the family to their new location made Joseph walk miles each day through the snow, despite his lameness, according to his mother. Joseph later remembered suffering the "most excruciating weariness & pain." Then when Joseph was left behind to ride on another sleigh and tried to gain a place in the sleigh, he was knocked down, he said, and left "to wallow in my blood until a stranger came along, picked me up, & carried me to the Town of Palmyra."¹²

How did these events affect his personality? His character? His sense of his own worth? The very fact that he remembered them as a mature man and wrote about them so graphically is an intriguing clue, I think.

Because of his fragile condition during these early years in Palmyra, Joseph could not help with the daily chores assigned to his brothers and sisters and came increasingly under the influence of his strong-willed, deeply religious mother. We know from her testimony that he was a "remarkably quiet" boy and so highly emotional that he would break down in tears at the slightest provocation.¹³ He turned inward and not surprisingly became concerned about "the

welfare of my immortal Soul.”¹⁴ Revivals were going on all around him; his father had visions or dreams, which were related to the family, and his mother served as a driving force in the development of his religious and moral convictions. Added to these religious influences at home was the cruel way the world outside treated him—the many incidents in which he was made a victim of those who wished to do him harm. What was there about Joseph that attracted violence? And reverence?

Joseph tells us that in his youth and at the height of the harassment he regularly suffered by both the “religious and irreligious;”¹⁵ he endured “all kinds of temptations . . . and . . . frequently fell into many foolish errors; and he displayed the weakness of youth, and the foibles of human nature . . . offensive in the sight of God” (Joseph Smith—History 1:28). What sins were these? What errors? Joseph does not say, except for the mention of levity and an association with “jovial company” (Joseph Smith—History 1:28). Were there other actions that really were “offensive in the sight of God?” All I am saying is that we need to know more about his youth and the forces and experiences that molded him.

Joseph Smith once said that “no man knows my history.”¹⁶ We still do not know him completely, but we must keep trying. There is still much to learn.

Notes

1. Robert V. Remini, *Joseph Smith*, Penguin Lives Series (New York: Viking, 2002).
2. But even after reading the Book of Mormon, researching both primary and secondary sources and completing this biography, I wish to state at the outset that I do not qualify as a scholar of Mormonism.
3. Robert V. Remini, *Andrew Jackson* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1999); Remini, *Henry Clay: A Statesman for the Union* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991).
4. Larry E. Dahl and Donald Q. Cannon, eds., *Encyclopedia of Joseph Smith’s Teachings* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000).
5. Dean C. Jessee, ed. and comp., *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (1984; repr., Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2002), 10.

6. Richard L. Bushman, "Joseph Smith's Many Histories," in this volume, 9.
7. "Annexation," *The United States Magazine, and Democratic Review* 17, no. 85 (July–August 1845): 5; Bushman, "Joseph Smith's Many Histories."
8. Thomas Jefferson, Letter to James Madison, December 20, 1787, in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), 12:440.
9. Bushman, "Joseph Smith's Many Histories," 17.
10. "Golden Bible," *The Reflector* 2, no. 12 (February 1, 1831): 69.
11. *Manuscript History of Brigham Young*, December 27, 1841, Church Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.
12. Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989–92), 1:268–69.
13. Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet* (Liverpool: Richards, 1853), 73.
14. Jessee, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 10.
15. *Times and Seasons* 3 (November 1841–October 1842): 749.
16. Joseph Smith Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed., rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 6:317.