

Joseph Smith's Many Histories

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In 1992 my wife, Claudia, published a book titled *America Discovers Columbus: How an Italian Explorer Became an American Hero*.¹ The book argued that until the American Revolution, Columbus was almost completely neglected in histories of the British colonies. Not until three centuries after the fact did North Americans honor him as the discoverer of America. Even in 1792, it required a stretch of the imagination to give him the credit, since he never touched foot on the North American continent and for centuries the British had distanced themselves from the hated Spanish exploiters of the New World. But after attaining independence, the newly formed United States needed a new link to their European past besides their one-time oppressors, the British. And so Columbus was elected as grandfather of the new nation, sharing the honors with George Washington, the father, with whose name Columbus was imperishably linked through the title of the nation's capital, Washington, District of Columbia.

Claudia's Columbus story reminds us that our histories are detachable. Every nation, every institution, every person can be extricated from one history and attached to another, often with perfect plausibility. Each of us has many histories. The histories I refer to are not the events of our lives, but the various cultural contexts that produce us and explain who we are—our many different pasts.

Imagine that upon meeting a person you first learn he is of Italian descent and grew up on a New Jersey farm. Think further if he told you he went to the University of Chicago, then to medical school, and that he had converted to Mormonism. Each of those little identity fragments connects our friend to a history and a cultural context; viewing him through each history, we find a new side to his character. Similarly for each of us, our complexity and the interwoven nature of history gives us freedom to select from a number of histories in explaining who we are.

I wish to explore, in broad general terms, the histories to which historians have attached Joseph Smith. As you can imagine, the context in which he is placed profoundly affects how people see the Prophet, since the history selected for a subject colors everything about it. Is he a money-digger like hundreds of other superstitious Yankees in his day, a religious fanatic like Muhammad was thought to be in Joseph's time, a prophet like Moses, a religious revolutionary like Jesus? To a large extent, Joseph Smith assumes the character of the history selected for him. The broader the historical context, the greater the appreciation of the man. If Joseph Smith is described as the product of strictly local circumstances—the culture of the Burned-over District, for example—he will be considered a lesser figure than if put in the context of Muhammad or Moses. Historians who have been impressed with Joseph Smith's potency, whether for good or ill, have located him in a longer, more universal history. Those who see him as merely a colorful character go no farther than his immediate environment for context. No historians eliminate the local from their explanations, but, on the whole, those who value his genius or his influence, whether critics or believers, give him a broader history as well. I want to talk first about the way historians have sought the Prophet's larger meaning by assigning him a history, and then examine the histories to which Joseph Smith attached himself.

Histories Assigned to Joseph Smith

Writers have always put Joseph Smith in his American or Yankee context. He himself once boasted of his Vermont heritage and said

that he was a son of the American Revolution.² His 1838 history begins with an account of his birth in Sharon and tells of the conditions in New York prompting him to pray for divine guidance about the churches. His visions seem to grow naturally out of the New England and New York religious landscapes. In that spirit, Mormons are happy to call Joseph Smith an “American Prophet.” (They proudly tell the story of Leo Tolstoy inquiring about Mormonism, what he called the “American religion.”³)

Mormons, of course, attach Joseph Smith to American history differently than non-Mormon historians do. Mormons call Joseph Smith American in an attempt to win the affection of the American people. They want Joseph to be received with the generosity exemplified in Robert Remini’s charming biography of the Prophet.⁴ Non-Mormon historians are more likely to use the term to mean that Joseph Smith and his revelations were products of an American environment. Fawn Brodie approvingly quoted Alexander Campbell, the first of Joseph’s major critics, saying: “This prophet Smith, through his stone spectacles, wrote on the plates of Nephi, in his Book of Mormon, every error and almost every truth discussed in New York for the last ten years.”⁵ Brodie and Campbell thought Joseph Smith was no more than a product of his American environment; he absorbed his culture, digested it, and transferred his views into the Book of Mormon, whereas Mormons consider Joseph a prophet with an American accent.

Both Mormons and non-Mormons agree then that Joseph has an American history, whether as a setting to the revelations, as Mormon historians say, or as the source for the Book of Mormon and the revelations, as the critics maintain. But in the nineteenth century, historians of all stripes also agreed that Joseph was more than American. Something about his life and accomplishments transcended his time and place. Critics and supporters alike knew he was more than a small-town, rural visionary, whether for good or ill. His effectiveness in building a church and attracting followers made him more than a local crackpot. The Boston Unitarian Josiah Quincy said Joseph Smith might eventually be seen as “the most powerful influence” of the nineteenth century “upon the destinies of his [American]

countrymen.”⁶ Joseph had to have a broader history to explain his extraordinary powers, and both critics and friends supplied him with one.

To reveal what he truly was, Mormons linked Joseph to the history of biblical prophets. He was another Moses or Paul. They assigned him the historical role of restoring the pure gospel after a long period of apostasy.⁷ Joseph started the work of preparing the world for the Second Coming of Christ. Though he had a local and national history, to be sure, Mormons saw Joseph’s true history extending back to the New Testament and the loss of Christ’s original gospel. To be comprehended, Joseph had to be viewed from two historical perspectives—one national and the other a transnational history of apostasy and restoration.⁸ And it was the transnational perspective that made him significant.

Critical nineteenth-century historians assigned him a different transnational history. They saw in Joseph a late manifestation of a long line of false prophets and gave him a distinguished place in the horrible history of fanaticism. “False prophet” and “fanatic” were preformed categories based on prejudices that Joseph’s critics automatically snapped into place. Campbell devoted a full page to a list of examples: the Egyptian magicians who withstood Moses; ten false Messiahs of the twelfth century; Munzer, Stubner, and Stork in the Reformation; Ann Lee (Anna Leese), founder of the Shakers; and a Miss Campbell who claimed to have come back from the dead. Alexander Campbell saw Joseph as a member of an ancient and populous company of religious frauds as well as a product of Yankee culture.⁹

One decade after Campbell, J. B. Turner, a professor at Illinois College near Nauvoo, published a volume called *Mormonism in All Ages*. Turner argued that Joseph Smith was an incarnation of a type who appeared, as the title said, in all ages. Turner proposed that throughout human history people had been deluded by religious charlatans. Such fanatics were supported by their gullible followers and ruled by fire and sword like their ultimate embodiment, Muhammad. Fanatics went beyond intolerance to coercion.¹⁰ Violence, according to this deeply engrained stereotype, was the fanatic’s natural method.

Recent scholarship has shown how deeply rooted the stereotype has been in western civilization—as deeply rooted as racism—going back at least to Luther, who denounced the peasant uprisings of the sixteenth century and supported crushing them as a manifestation of fanaticism.¹¹ Tragically, the antifanatics, inflamed by their hatred of fanaticism, have resorted to violence to quell their enemies as often as the fanatics have taken up arms in the cause of their faith. Religious fanaticism has been one of those vicious stereotypes that justify forcible repression. As the Mormons were to learn, once demonized as fanatics, they could be stripped of their rights and expelled from society without scruple.

Throughout the nineteenth century, this combination of an American context and a broader history was the standard pattern of critical histories. While Mormon historians talked of apostasy and restoration, nearly every non-Mormon account featured the requisite list of false prophets and fanatics followed by scornful accounts of Joseph Smith's obvious borrowings from Yankee culture. His history was both American and universal. He was a local phenomenon but was also linked to "all ages," as Turner put it, and it was this link that made Smith important.¹² He was dangerous, terrible—and grand. Mormons were attacked not only because of what they were but also because of what they represented—a fearful tradition going back in time.

Then at the turn of the century in 1903, I. Woodbridge Riley published *The Founder of Mormonism*, a seminal book on Joseph Smith that changed the pattern. Riley abandoned the search for larger significance. He narrowed the context for the Prophet to a purely American history and even more narrowly to Smith's psychology. In Riley's telling, Smith had no broader historical character than that of a bizarre, deformed offspring of Yankee culture.

Written as his doctoral thesis at Yale University, Riley's work was the most ingenious of the anti-Mormon books up to that point, inspiring a notable series of histories and biographies through the remainder of the century. Riley rejected the Spaulding theory of the Book of Mormon's composition, the ruling hypothesis in the earlier anti-Mormon histories. Those authors speculated that the Book

of Mormon was not the work of Joseph Smith; he was too ignorant and crude to have produced such a complex work. The book was instead the reworking, probably by Sidney Rigdon, of a novel written by Dartmouth graduate Solomon Spaulding. Riley exploded this frail argument and looked for evidence that Smith wrote the book himself. Following Campbell's lead from seventy years before, Riley found in the Book of Mormon a bevy of American themes: anti-Masonry, anti-Catholicism, Methodism, attacks on infidelity, theories of Indian origins, anti-Calvinism, and Baptist doctrine—all ideas particular to the United States in Joseph Smith's time. Riley's work persuaded the Yale scholar George Trumbull Ladd, who wrote the preface, that Joseph Smith could not have emerged "under other conditions than those which actually surrounded him in the first third of the last century" in the United States. In other words, Joseph Smith was not only the product of America but of one particular moment in American history, the first third of the nineteenth century.¹³

Further narrowing the focus, Riley offered a psychological interpretation of Joseph Smith, finding the origins of Mormonism in Joseph's medical history. He diagnosed the Prophet as suffering from epilepsy and explained his visions as the result of seizures. Cultural history was not required to explain the visits of angels; they were the product of a diseased body. Adding the two together, immediate American influences and a psychological diagnosis, Riley believed he had fully accounted for the Mormon prophet. And he did not amount to much. At the end of the book, Riley asked, "Was He Demented or Merely Degenerate?" Joseph Smith was pretty much a freak and little more.¹⁴

The Riley model set the pattern for a significant tradition of Joseph Smith biographies into the twentieth century. Fawn Brodie, who was dependent on Riley for many of her ideas, adopted the same analytical structure. She found a psychological diagnosis for the Prophet in a personality type, the "impostor," which the psychoanalyst Phyllis Greenacre had discovered in her practice. According to Greenacre, the impostor suffers from a severely divided personality, one part being weak and the other, the impostor part, being fantastically strong. Brodie was more modest in her claims about the

applicability to Joseph than Riley had been with epilepsy, but she thought it suggestive. Everything else about Joseph—his ideas, his revelations, and his translations—according to Brodie was “purely a Yankee product.”¹⁵ He had no history beyond his American environment and his own defective personality.

Dan Vogel’s 2004 *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* stood in the same tradition: a sociopsychological diagnosis—in Vogel’s case, family systems theory—along with American environmental influences explain Joseph Smith. Vogel argued that after the death of his older brother Alvin, Joseph became the family leader, replacing his failed father. His religion grew out of his search for a solution to a dysfunctional family’s problems. Beyond that, everything else came from his American environment. No one has gone as far as Vogel in linking characters and events in the Book of Mormon to particular persons and happenings in Joseph Smith’s immediate environment. *The Making of a Prophet* carried Riley’s program to its ultimate realization in extreme detail.¹⁶

Like all of the books in the Riley tradition, Vogel’s work diminishes Joseph Smith. By limiting the Prophet’s cultural-historical horizon, all of the narrowly Americanist accounts strip the Prophet of grandeur and depth, even of the gothic horror of the religious fanatic. Brodie and Vogel will always be a part of the historiography of Joseph Smith, but they do not open new vistas for readers. They pile on more without going beyond Riley’s original insight. By constricting Joseph Smith’s historical horizon, they reduce him to a colorful fraud. They have no way of plumbing his depths or putting him in a broader perspective. Even Fawn Brodie, the biographer who valued Joseph Smith most out of the three, spoke of the “barrenness of his spiritual legacy.”¹⁷

In my opinion, we have reached the end of the line for these purely nationalist studies. I expect that Joseph Smith’s future biographers will swing back toward the nineteenth century’s combination of American analysis and transnational histories of the Prophet, allowing Joseph Smith to escape a confining provinciality. The books that have most excited—and, in some instances, most irritated—historians in the last thirty years are the transnational histories of Joseph Smith by Jan Shipps, John Brooke, and Harold Bloom.

Shipps, a long-time student of Mormonism and a well-known insider-outsider, dazzled me with her brilliant analysis of early Mormonism in her 1985 study, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition*. Shipps's interpretation was exciting because she did not confine her study to the American environment. Approaching Mormonism from the perspective of religious studies, by its nature comparative, she drew parallels between the origins of Christianity and the emergence of Mormonism. Shipps saw Mormonism as departing from Christianity just as Christianity departed from Judaism. The idea was not solely hers; Brodie had suggested it in a few sentences much earlier. But Shipps expanded the hypothesis and revealed its reach. In her telling, Mormonism is much more than Yankee religion run amok. Mormonism is a global movement in the making that may eventually take its place alongside other global religions. Whether this is indeed the course Mormonism will follow remains to be seen, but Shipps's formulation compelled readers to look beyond the history of the United States.¹⁸

John Brooke's *The Refiner's Fire* reinforced the cosmopolitan outlook of Shipps's study. A cultural historian by training, Brooke placed Mormonism in the hermetic tradition, a Renaissance metaphysical practice linked to alchemy and magic, which he believes was conveyed to America by miners, counterfeiters, and Masons. In Brooke's telling, Smith was a miracle worker, a "magus," as the hermeticists called such people, who sought divinity by working upon nature and conducting emblematic divine weddings. The book had a mixed reception when it appeared in 1994. While exciting non-Mormon historians, it dumbfounded Mormons. The connections to hermeticism were so tenuous and the parallels so forced that Mormons thought the book must fall of its own weight. But Mormon objections notwithstanding, *The Refiner's Fire* broke through the nationalist boundaries that had constricted the views of other twentieth-century critical historians. Like Michael Quinn's *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, Brooke's reading of Joseph Smith traced his roots back to the Renaissance and before.¹⁹ The favorable response to Brooke's work suggests that historians are prepared once more to go beyond national boundaries in the study of the Mormon Prophet, as in the study of so many other American subjects these days.

The Yale literary scholar Harold Bloom made the Prophet both more and less American by returning to the pattern of nineteenth-century historians in *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation*. Bloom thought of Smith as the premier example of what he called the American Religion, which emphasizes the individual's immediate access to God, but Bloom also found echoes of biblical antiquity in Smith's writings. Smith had an uncanny ability, Bloom thought, to recover ancient types, such as Enoch or Metatron, and to renew quests, such as the Kabbalistic search for the divine human, without instruction from his environment. "I can only attribute to his genius or daemon," Bloom wrote, "his uncanny recovery of elements in ancient Jewish theurgy that had ceased to be available either to normative Judaism or to Christianity, and that had survived only in esoteric traditions unlikely to have touched Smith directly."²⁰ By setting Smith against ancient religious traditions, Bloom discovered a Joseph Smith never fully seen before, a man in touch with religious currents from the deep past and, as Bloom said, a genius in religion making.²¹

Shipps, Brooke, and Bloom are not all admirers of Joseph Smith—Brooke condemns him, for example—but they each enlarge him and give him scope. Future historians of Joseph Smith will likely feel free to explore a much wider range of possible histories. Smith's American roots will continue to be investigated as they always have been, but national history will not confine our inquiries. The American history of Joseph Smith looks for causes: what led Joseph Smith to think as he did? Comparative, transnational histories explore the limits and capacities of the divine and human imagination: what is possible for humans to think and feel? Pursuing broader questions, future historians may compare Smith to the great mythmakers of history like Dante, Milton, Blake, and Nietzsche.²² They may ask about his place among philosophers, reformers, politicians, and prophets. How does Smith look alongside religious figures such as Augustine, Luther, Gandhi, or Muhammad? We will no longer be bound by the tight historicist restrictions of the twentieth-century critical studies but look much farther afield for illumination of the Prophet. In my opinion, only by working in the larger field will we see his true dimensions.

The History Joseph Smith Assigned to Himself

To what history did Joseph attach himself? By the time he wrote his 1838 history, he had settled the question and was able to speak confidently about his early development. He smoothly blended his beginnings in Vermont and New York (his American origins) with his call to be a prophet, translator, and church founder (his biblical history). His development seemed easy and natural by then, but it may not have been so easy at the time. As I imagine Joseph Smith, the search for his own history was more arduous than he later let on. For a number of years, Joseph did not know who he was, that is, which history he belonged to. Not until he translated the Book of Mormon did his place in history become clear.

Judging from his own account, Joseph was less in control of his life than most believed. The way he told his story, things happened to him outside of his own initiative. He saw himself as a passive recipient of what he called “marvilous experience[s]” whose meanings were not clear at first.²³ Consider three of his early experiences: the First Vision, the discovery of the seer stones, and the command to translate the plates. These three constitute what Jan Shipps has called “the Prophet puzzle.” In a 1974 essay, Shipps said historians must reconcile the apparently contradictory themes in Joseph’s early years—his visionary life as a budding prophet versus his seerstone gazing as a young treasure-seeker.²⁴ I suggest this conflict may have been as much a puzzle to Joseph Smith as it has been to later historians.

Present-day Mormons can scarcely imagine Joseph’s initial confusion about the First Vision’s importance because we see so clearly in retrospect that the vision initiated Joseph’s life as a prophet. What was he to make of the appearance of two heavenly beings when he was fourteen? Judging from his first written account, composed in 1832, he understood the vision primarily as a personal conversion. It was an event in the history of revivals. We must remember that Joseph was surrounded by incessant preaching for what was called the New Birth. The evangelical ministry’s aim was to convict hearers of their sins, bring them to see their helplessness, and teach them to rely on Christ alone. Exposed to this kind of preaching, Joseph

worried about his sins, perhaps concerned all the more because he was unable to undergo the usual emotional conversion. According to his 1832 account, he was, like the other revival subjects, concerned for “the welfare of my immortal Soul,” by which he meant he felt “convicted of my sins,” the term used by revival preachers. In the vision, the first words he heard from the Lord assured Joseph “thy sins are forgiven thee.”²⁵

Coming out of the grove, Joseph had every reason to think that he had undergone a particularly dramatic New Birth experience, like hundreds of others in his neighborhood. As a sign of his confusion, his first reaction was to consult a minister to verify the validity of what happened. Why would a person who had just been informed that “those professors were all corrupt” immediately turn to a clergyman for guidance? He went because new converts customarily visited a minister. Because mere emotion might have overtaken them rather than the grace of God, the experience had to be checked out. In Joseph’s case, the clergyman treated the story with contempt. He told Joseph his conversion was of the devil—that he was no better than all the other visionaries of his time who were visited by angels and carried into heaven to see Christ. According to the minister, the First Vision was not a true vision or a New Birth but an illusion. Such visions were common enough to anger clergymen, who saw them as counterfeit religion, diverting people from the serious business of acknowledging their sins and accepting Christ.

The minister’s response left Joseph puzzled and frustrated. What was the vision? An expert in the field of religion had told him he was deluded. Was he merely one more misguided visionary? As late as 1838, when he wrote the story, he felt the frustration of a thwarted religious spirit. He was told to forget it, yet he knew what he had experienced. “I had actually seen a light,” he wrote, “and in the midst of that light I saw two Personages, and they did in reality speak to me; and though I was hated and persecuted for saying that I had seen a vision, yet it was true” (Joseph Smith—History 1:25). He could not deny the vision’s reality, but what did it mean? If not a conversion, as he had been told, what was it? He could not yet explain where it fit in the history of religion.

Two years later, in 1822, another marvel was thrust upon him. He discovered he had the ability to look into a stone and see things otherwise invisible to natural eyes. He had two seer stones, the origin of one being uncertain, the other found in a well. Martin Harris described the stone, as did David Whitmer and Emma and many others close to him. Apparently Joseph used the stone to find lost objects. He may have considered the knack an amusing diversion, but his father and others in the neighborhood wanted his help in finding lost treasure. For four or five years, they pressed him into service. Dan Vogel argues that Joseph planned to make a career out of treasure seeking, but I see him compelled by his cash-poor father and the enthusiasm of the money-digging neighbors into activities he did not enjoy. A year after finding the stone, Joseph was told by the angel to cut his ties with the treasure seekers, and three years later, even his father understood that Joseph was to use his powers for higher purposes.²⁶ Joseph knew his future did not lie with the treasure seekers, yet he had a gift for looking into a stone and seeing. Was the gift from God? Did it have a higher purpose? Was he a treasure seeker with a place in the history of magic, or something greater?

In 1823, Joseph Smith underwent the most perplexing experience of all. According to his own story, another heavenly visitor told him he was to translate an ancient record inscribed on gold plates. In this case, there were no conceivable precedents, no history of any kind to attach himself to. He had no committee of scholars assigned by King James to translate the Bible. He was not the learned Champollion cracking the Egyptian code on the Rosetta Stone. He was a poorly educated rural visionary who had never heard of gold plates with ancient histories inscribed on them or of partially literate young men translating. Where in sacred or secular history was there a precedent for an unlearned translator? Joseph was sailing in uncharted waters.

As he turned eighteen, these three marvelous experiences—the First Vision, the seer stones, and the command to translate—bestowed upon Joseph Smith an incomprehensible mixture of possible identities with only perplexing or indiscernible histories to explain them.²⁷ Groping his way and following the instructions of the angel, Joseph

took possession of the plates in 1827 and began the baffling task of translating. In the early stages, the seer stone experience may have sustained him. His first reaction when he received the Urim and Thummim was to tell Joseph Knight, “They are marvelous; I can see anything.”²⁸ Seeing lost objects in a stone had prepared him to look into the Urim and Thummim and see words. But still there was no history of unlearned translation, no known events to which he could attach himself, no way to secure an identity from past experience.

Joseph Smith must have been immensely relieved to hear about Martin Harris’s visit to Charles Anthon. Joseph did not show much interest in the professor’s opinion of the characters or the translation, but he was thrilled to recognize the fulfillment of a Bible prophecy. Someone—whether Harris or Joseph or someone else—discovered that Anthon’s reply to Harris corresponded to a biblical prophecy. Joseph Smith’s history explains how Anthon’s response “I cannot read a sealed book” conformed to the prophecy in Isaiah 29 that says the unlearned would read a book the learned could not read (Joseph Smith—History 1:64–65). At last a tiny thread tied Joseph to the Bible. If the Bible prophesied his work, he had a history. His unlearned translation had been foreseen.

But it was the Book of Mormon itself, the book Joseph was translating, that finally clarified his identity. The Book of Mormon provided Joseph his long-sought history. Joseph must have been excited to translate Ammon’s conversation with the Lamanite King Limhi about King Mosiah. When asked to translate the records of the Jaredites, Ammon said he had no such powers, but he knew someone who did. King Mosiah had an instrument, two stones, which he looked into and translated. Mosiah was a seer and a prophet also, and no greater gift than this existed, Ammon said (Mosiah 8:6–18). In Mosiah, Joseph found a kindred soul with a similar configuration of powers: seer stones, translation, and prophethood.

But the Book of Mormon offered more than Mosiah’s example. It created a world history in which Joseph’s set of powers played a critical part. One of the dominant historical structures in the Book of Mormon is the history of Israel. Nephi and Jacob rehearse Israel’s story a half dozen times, and Christ repeats it during his visit to

the Nephites. It is the story familiar from Isaiah and other Hebrew prophets: Israel covenanted with God; Israel has strayed from God; Israel will be forgiven and restored as God's favored people in the last days. The story is as persistent in the Book of Mormon as it is in the Bible.

The Book of Mormon, however, gives the familiar story a particular twist. The Israel of the Book of Mormon extends far beyond Israel in Palestine, the familiar homeland. The Book of Mormon speaks for scattered Israel, spread around the globe (1 Nephi 22:3–5). The Nephites' story begins with a departure from the Holy Land. Whereas the Israelites in the Bible always returned to the Promised Land, the Book of Mormon people headed for a new promised land, never to return. The Book of Mormon puts Israel on a world stage. It is a book about Israel in dispersion. Isaiah mentions Israel on the “isles of the sea” once; Nephi uses the term nine times.²⁹ Isaiah’s “isles of the sea” phrase was assurance that God knew the dispersed Nephites, that they were still Israel, and that they had a place in God’s plans, though far from their homeland. Later in the Book of Mormon, Christ says he will visit scattered Israel just as he visited the Nephites in America.³⁰ Overall, the Book of Mormon reorients biblical geography. It tells Israel’s story from the margins and the isles of the sea, rather than from the heartland. The Book of Mormon is the story of Israel’s diaspora.

And that is where Joseph Smith’s particular configuration of gifts comes in. Scattered Israel kept records. According to the Book of Mormon, there is not one Bible but many bibles, each telling the story of a branch of Israel, as Mormon’s history tells of the remnant of Jacob in the New World. All of these records are vital to the gathering of Israel and have to be translated. When the branches of Israel come together, so will their records.³¹ The Book of Mormon even provides instruments for performing this vital task. Mosiah translated the records of the Jaredites, as the Book of Mormon says, “by the means of those two stones which were fastened into the two rims of a bow” (Mosiah 28:13). When the Lord gave the brother of Jared a vision written in a language no one understood, he also received “two stones” to seal up with the plates which “shall magnify to the

eyes of men these things which ye shall write" (Ether 3:23–24).³² The Book of Mormon's version of Israel's history calls for a translator who works with stones.³³

Joseph stood at the center of this history of the world. He was to translate the records of Israel in America, which are in turn to assure the House of Israel everywhere "that they are not cast off forever" (title page, Book of Mormon). In translating the records, the puzzle of three disparate identities of his early life—visionary, seer, and translator—was resolved. As the revelation at the organization of the church said, "Behold, there shall be a record kept among you; and in it thou shalt be called a seer, a translator, a prophet" (Doctrine and Covenants 21:1).

The Book of Mormon gave what Harold Bloom would call a "strong reading" of scripture, an interpretation loyal to the original but decisive in its departures. The Book of Mormon turned Israel's story into global history. By striking out for the New World, the Book of Mormon prophets spread Israel across the earth. From that global perspective, a new set of phenomena resulted: scattered remnants, additional records, the requirement of translation, the need for translation instruments, and lastly, a prophet-translator. Joseph's seemingly haphazard collection of possible identities cohered into a providential design. His own revelation supplied him with a pertinent history, making him the ultimate self-made, or from his point of view, God-made man.

Once Joseph began translating the Book of Mormon his confidence soared. In 1828 after the first 116 pages were completed, he began writing revelations that would later comprise the Doctrine and Covenants. Initially it took courage to believe his own revelations, but by 1828 he believed the promptings of the Spirit. He trusted the inspired words enough to organize a church, send missionaries to find a site for the New Jerusalem, and call people to gather—all on the basis of his revelations. In 1831 according to one account, he strode into the Newel Whitney store in Kirtland, Ohio, and announced himself as Joseph the Prophet. It was a hard-won identity that he embraced confidently once the Book of Mormon revealed to him who he was.

As we address the meaning of Joseph Smith in the twenty-first century, such complex interweavings of experience, text, and history must figure in our narratives. Whatever we think about the origins of the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith's revelations, all of us, critics and believers alike, must take into account the Prophet's self-understanding. Our stories of him must comprehend his story of himself—not an easy task. Could this uneducated, unpracticed, twenty-three-year-old have devised the whole intricate narrative on his own? New York farmers did not ordinarily come up with histories of scattered Israel and translating stones. It is doubtful that a purely American history of the Mormon prophet will explain him. His mind ranged far beyond his own time and place, and we will have to follow if we are to understand.³⁴ A small history will not account for such a large man.

Notes

1. Claudia L. Bushman, *America Discovers Columbus: How an Italian Explorer Became an American Hero* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1992).
2. Joseph Smith Jr., *General Joseph Smith's Appeal to the Green Mountain Boys* (Nauvoo, Ill.: Taylor and Woodruff, 1843), 3.
3. Leland A. Fetzer, "Tolstoy and Mormonism," *Dialogue* 6, no. 1 (Spring 1971): 13–29, throws into question the validity of the famous story. Tolstoy's question seems to have appeared only in a late, doctored version of the interview.
4. See Robert V. Remini, *Joseph Smith*, Penguin Lives Series (New York: Viking, 2002).
5. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith the Mormon Prophet*, 2d ed. (New York: Knopf, 1971), 69.
6. Josiah Quincy, *Figures of the Past from the Leaves of Old Journals* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1892), 376.
7. For example, George Q. Cannon, *Life of Joseph Smith the Prophet* (1888; repr., Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986), 11–15.
8. Cannon, *Life of Joseph Smith the Prophet*, 25–34. Cannon traced Joseph Smith's American roots as well as situating him in the history of apostasy and restoration.
9. Alexander Campbell, *Delusion: An Analysis of the Book of Mormon; with an Examination of Its Internal and External Evidences, and a Refutation*

of Its Pretences to Divine Authority (Boston: Greene, 1832), 5–6; reprinted from Alexander Campbell, “Delusions,” *Millennial Harbinger* 2 (February 1831): 85–96.

10. J. B. Turner, *Mormonism in All Ages; or, The Rise, Progress, and Causes of Mormonism; with the Biography of Its Author and Founder Joseph Smith, Junior* (New York: Platt and Peters, 1842), 65–109.

11. Dominique Colas, *Civil Society and Fanaticism: Conjoined Histories*, trans. Amy Jacobs (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997). Colas treats fanaticism as a real threat, not as a stereotype, but his evidence points to the continuing fears. He also describes the danger of civil society overreacting as Luther did to the peasant uprisings.

12. Turner, *Mormonism in All Ages*, 13.

13. I. Woodbridge Riley, *The Founder of Mormonism: A Psychological Study of Joseph Smith, Jr.* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1903), vi, 120–37, 141–65, 171–72, 367–95. On pp. 170–71, Riley offers a few examples of previous frauds as predecessors to Joseph Smith, but they are not central to his argument.

14. Riley, *The Founder of Mormonism*, 343–65. The emergence of psychological and sociological explanations for phenomena once considered moral and political is traced in Jeffrey P. Sklansky, *The Soul's Economy: Market Society and Selfhood in American Thought, 1820–1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

15. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, ix, 418–19.

16. Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004).

17. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, 403.

18. Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 1985), 65, 85, 148–49. Although treating American religions, Richard T. Hughes and C. Leonard Allen write from the same broad perspective in their chapter on Mormonism in *Illusions of Innocence: Protestant Primitivism in America, 1630–1875* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 133–52.

19. John L. Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644–1844* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994). Michael D. Quinn's *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (Salt Lake: Signature Books, 1987) blazed the path that Brooke later followed but emphasized magic more than alchemy.

20. Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 101.

21. “He was an authentic religious genius, and surpassed all Americans, before or since, in the possession and expression of what could be called the religion-making imagination.” Bloom, *The American Religion*, 96–97.

22. Bloom presages these broader comparisons in a comment about Joseph Smith's place among other American religious reformers. Many other religions have sprung up in America, Bloom observes, "but none of them has the imaginative vitality of Joseph Smith's revelation, a judgment one makes on the authority of a lifetime spent in apprehending the visions of great poets and original speculators" (*The American Religion*, 98).

23. Dean C. Jessee, ed. and comp., *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (1984; repr., Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2002), 9.

24. Jan Shipps, "The Prophet Puzzle: Suggestions Leading toward a More Comprehensive Interpretation of Joseph Smith," *Journal of Mormon History* 1 (1974): 2–20.

25. Jessee, *Personal Writings*, 10, 11. A glancing reference to the First Vision in Doctrine and Covenants 20:5 also emphasizes forgiveness of sins.

26. Vogel, *Joseph Smith*, 35–43; Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 69–76.

27. Confusing as his situation was, he went ahead, supported only by his family. At first, they may have seen the plates as a buried treasure and Moroni as a guardian spirit. For a few years, the folk-magic culture may have provided a prop for Joseph's self-understanding, even while the angel was strictly instructing Joseph that he must leave treasure seeking behind.

28. Joseph Knight Sr., ca. 1847, published in Dean C. Jessee, "Joseph Knight's Recollection of Early Mormon History," *BYU Studies* 17, no. 1 (1976): 33–36, and in John W. Welch, "The Miraculous Translation of the Book of Mormon," in John W. Welch, ed., *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2004), 168.

29. See Isaiah 24:15; 1 Nephi 19:10, 13, 16; 21:8; 22:4; 2 Nephi 10:8, 20, 21; 29:7.

30. See 3 Nephi 15:11–24; 16:1–3.

31. See 2 Nephi 29:8, 11–13; Alma 29:8.

32. See also Mosiah 8:13; Ether 4:5.

33. For a more elaborate explication of the themes in the preceding paragraphs, see Richard L. Bushman, "The Book of Mormon in Early Mormon History," in *Believing History: Latter-day Saint Essays*, ed. Reid L. Neilson and Jed Woodworth (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 65–78.

34. The task is complicated by the abundance of Joseph Smith's revelations. The Book of Mormon provided one history to which he could attach himself, but it was not the last word. As his life went on, further revelations created additional histories—the books of Moses and Abraham, sections 84 and 107 in the Doctrine and Covenants, and the extraordinary section 128. Joseph's histories multiplied until the end of his life, culminating according to many in the history of the intelligences in the King Follett discourse.