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**Abstract** Review of *Joseph Smith* (2002), by Robert V. Remini.

## A BIRD'S-EYE VIEW OF THE MORMON PROPHET

Jan Shipps

Whether biographies are extended accounts or brief surveys of lives, they come in two main forms. Either they concentrate on an individual's life, making the subject the center of attention, or they tell a much larger story, situating a subject's life in the time and place in which it was lived. In the first instance, whether the authors tell their subjects' stories from the inside out (psychobiography) or the outside in (traditional narrative biography), they assess the accomplishments, significance, and influence of individuals by centering on their personal lives and locating them in their own extended universes of family, friends (and enemies), and more distant observers. Without ignoring the importance of the time and place in which the life was lived, the authors of such biographies stay focused on their subjects. The same is not always true when biographies become "life-and-times" studies. These biographers explore their subjects' impact on what happened, and as they do so, the historical context often becomes as much foreground as background. Although rarely explicitly acknowledged, this type of biography seeks an answer to the age-old question of whether lives are shaped by their times or whether lives shape the times.

Review of Robert V. Remini. *Joseph Smith*. Penguin Life Series. New York: Viking, 2002. xvi + 190 pp., with source list and select bibliography. \$19.95.

If the individuals under scrutiny are religious figures, especially those whose status is foundational—for example, Moses, Jesus, Siddhartha, Muhammad, Martin Luther, Ann Lee, or Joseph Smith—the life-and-times approach holds special pitfalls. In all such cases where enough can be known to establish the milieu in which these lives were lived, political confusion, intellectual uncertainty, and societal disarray were all present. Despite that, these individuals, through their messages and ministries, managed to dispel enough ambiguity and doubt to give meaning and purpose to the lives of their followers. Consequently, each biographer must grapple with the question of the extent to which living when times were out of joint played a part in his or her subject's success as a true innovator in the religious realm. Surely, understanding the chaotic times is critically important and may provide enough evidence to support an argument that a political personage shapes the times in which he or she lives. But is such knowledge sufficient to create illuminating and instructive portraits of foundational religious figures whose lives will shape cultures long after they are gone?

If Robert V. Remini's *Joseph Smith* is used to test the notion that a deep, even magnificent, understanding of the Jacksonian era is the main thing needed to fashion a useful, accurate, and revealing picture of the first Mormon prophet, the answer must be resoundingly negative. Remini is a fine biographer, the author of a prize-winning three-volume life-and-times biography of Andrew Jackson, as well as biographies of Henry Clay and Daniel Webster. In addition, he has written a dozen other books on Jacksonian America. His honors are impressive: the Lyndon Baines Johnson Foundation Award, the Carl Sandburg Award for Nonfiction, the University Scholar Award of the University of Illinois, the American Historical Association's Award for Scholarly Distinction, and the National Book Award. But in this instance they do not help. Remini's Penguin Lives biography does not—as these volumes are supposed to do—sparkle with insight from a new perspective. This one is derivative, on occasion uninformed, and not particularly well-written.

Despite this negative appraisal, many Latter-day Saints are likely to buy and take pleasure in reading this new biography of the Prophet. There are several reasons, starting with what some Saints are sure to regard as a gratifying assessment of the founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. On the very first page of this trade press book written by an eminent scholar who is not a member of the faith, Smith is described as “unquestionably the most important reformer and innovator in American religious history” (p. ix). On the second page, the author says that “Joseph Smith is the religious figure in United States history who has had the largest following” (p. x) (an assertion that is likely to be questioned by scholars of American religion who study figures like Charles Finney or Francis Asbury in the nineteenth and Billy Graham in the twentieth century).

Acknowledging the Prophet’s “enduring contribution to American life and culture” (p. ix), Remini says that Smith’s “life and legacy [are] of particular importance in better appreciating how this nation developed during the early nineteenth century and how religion played such a commanding role in that process.” At the same time, he contends that the size of his following is explained by the fact that “much of what [Smith] believed and taught resulted from the social, political, and intellectual dynamism of the Jacksonian age” (p. x).

Because hyperpatriotism and pride of country have been distinguishing characteristics of the thinking of many American Mormons in the past century, this reading of the Prophet is also likely to strike a responsive chord with Latter-day Saint readers, especially those who reside in the United States. Such a configuring of the Prophet will not be new to Latter-day Saint readers or to anyone else who keeps up with things Mormon. It was, for example, the interpretive key to Lee Groberg’s filmed biography, *American Prophet: The Story of Joseph Smith* (that was shown on PBS), as well as to Heidi S. Swinton’s lavishly illustrated text that was produced to accompany the film.<sup>1</sup> (After reading the appraisal of the Prophet in Remini’s preface, it comes as

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1. Heidi S. Swinton, *American Prophet: The Story of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Shadow Mountain, 1999).

no surprise that he started his preparations for writing this book—it could hardly be called research—by studying Groberg’s film, a docu-drama in which Remini himself was a prominent “talking head,” and Swinton’s book, in which his observations were featured.)

Besides liking the apparent celebration of their Prophet as an emblematic American religious leader and appreciating the volume’s reasonable cost, Latter-day Saints who read Remini’s work will likely be pleased with his approach to handling the supernatural claims on which Mormonism rests. Following Richard L. Bushman’s *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*,<sup>2</sup> a work in which the experiences of early Mormon participants are related in their own words, Remini narrates the Mormon story using direct quotations as much as possible.

In the preface, he indicates that he will do this in order to allow readers to decide for themselves what credence should be given to the words of the Prophet and his followers (p. x). In fact, however, those who peruse the text carefully will discover that this is not exactly what occurs as the story unfolds. Because this author is so intent on properly locating the Prophet’s life within Jacksonian America, using what happened in the United States as the key to understanding Joseph Smith, he manages to use the familiar accounts found in the seven-volume *History of the Church* to describe Mormonism as a part of the effluvium of the Second Great Awakening. Examples are legion. For instance, after quoting Smith’s statement that many people “opened their houses to us in order that we might have an opportunity of meeting with our friends for the purpose of instruction and explanation,” Remini added his own surmise that the Prophet must have been “an excellent preacher, once the ‘spirit’ stirred within him.” Then he summed up the situation by saying that “the curious listened in fascination and awe to his incredible accounts of his mystical life and the truths that had been revealed to him” (p. 78).

No doubt failing to understand that he might have stirred up a hornet’s nest of criticism when he referred to the Prophet’s “mysti-

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2. Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984).

cal” life, Remini moved ahead to say that the “next step was obvious” to Smith (p. 78). If he intended to spread the restored gospel, “he needed to establish a church, just as any number of men and women during the Second Great Awakening had done” (p. 79). Other references to the Mormon experience as standard Second Great Awakening fare include Remini’s account of the way Martin Harris responded to seeing the plates (“Like any attendant at a camp meeting during the Great Awakening, [Harris] raised his voice to proclaim God’s mercy and his goodness [shouting] ‘Hosanna!, Hosanna!’ . . . Blessed be the Lord,” p. 66) and his reference to the Book of Mormon as being “‘translated’ in record time by an uneducated but highly imaginative zealot steeped in the religious fervor of his age” (p. 71). Such a comparative construal of events reduces the Mormon story to one more odd tributary flowing from the Second Great Awakening’s mainstream, an interpretation that is by no means a novel reading. It made its initial appearance in 1944 when Alice Felt Tyler published *Freedom’s Ferment*, a social history of the United States from the colonial period to the Civil War that soon became a staple on the reading lists for college-level and graduate courses on the nation’s history.<sup>3</sup>

This Jacksonian Age interpretation has other implications that are just as sweeping. What is described above as political confusion, intellectual uncertainty, and societal disarray, Remini describes as dynamism. “Be that as it may”—one of the many expressions used in this Penguin Life volume to indicate reasonable disagreement about interpretation of some situation or event—the author’s statement that much of Smith’s appeal is tied to his having been an exemplar of all that was optimistic and constructive in Jacksonian America stands at the heart of his presentation of the life of Joseph Smith. While he acknowledges that there was more to it, Remini’s answer to the persistent life-and-times question goes like this: Smith was an American prophet who lived in a vibrant age when the nation was young and self-motivation was the way people moved ahead of the

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3. Alice F. Tyler, *Freedom’s Ferment: Phases of American Social History to 1860* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1944).

pack. Although Smith had many followers, nothing about his message or his leadership gained enough purchase in Jacksonian America to shape the times in which he lived. He, however, was very much shaped by those times.

The extended essay is the format of the books in the Penguin Lives series. They lack both index and standard scholarly apparatus, but a short section on sources (pp. 183–86) and a “Select Bibliography” (pp. 187–90) provide readers with references to works cited and a listing of the works consulted by the author. A more revealing index to the sources Remini consulted in his effort at “getting to know Joseph Smith intimately” is the list he includes in the preface (pp. xi–xii). As indicated, he said he was fortunate to know Lee Groberg and to have Heidi Swinton’s “excellently written” work (p. xi). He is grateful to Richard L. Bushman, whose published work he consulted and who introduced him to a number of scholars at Brigham Young University (see p. xi). He visited the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History, after which he was “inundated with books, articles, and doctoral dissertations,” including Grant Underwood’s *Millenarian World of Early Mormonism* and several articles by William C. Hartley (see p. xii). Scott Faulring gave him copies of Smith’s seven-volume *History of the Church*, selections from the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, and his own *An American Prophet’s Record: The Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith*. Ronald K. Esplin made sure that he had Dean C. Jessee’s edition of *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, as well as other documentary materials, and he sent along a copy of his dissertation on Brigham Young. And the patriarch of the Wilmette Illinois Stake went to Remini’s home and presented him with a bound copy of the standard works. I include this list here because it seems to me that, as important as these works are, they are the obvious sources with which to *begin* a study of the first Mormon prophet, not to carry such a study to completion—even if one is the leading authority on the Age of Jackson.

James Atlas presides over the Penguin Lives enterprise, now including some thirty-two short biographies that have been or will be published in a distribution arrangement with Viking Penguin. In an



interview with Amy Boaz of *Publishers Weekly* (20 November 2000), Atlas said that his role was finding the writers, “and they in turn choose the subjects on their own” (p. 42).<sup>4</sup> If that pattern operated here, the selection of Remini as Smith’s biographer was not simply one more instance of a trade publication seeking an “objective” (read that non-Mormon) author to write about Mormonism. Remini himself selected the subject of his Penguin Life biography. This is good news.

Yet the reality is that a non-Mormon wrote this work. Therefore it makes sense to place this biography alongside the work of other historians who have written about Joseph Smith and Mormonism from the outside. This will make it possible to locate this biography within the “Gentile oeuvre.”

When I introduced myself to Professor Remini after he presented a plenary address about his book at the 2001 annual meeting of the John Whitmer Historical Association in Nauvoo, he was courteous. As I recall, he said something to the effect that it was good to meet “the other non-Mormon” who writes about the Latter-day Saints. Since I am by no means the only “other” non-Mormon who has studied and written about Joseph Smith and Mormonism, this confused me at first. After reading this biography of the Prophet and making a careful study of Remini’s interpretation and his sources, I think it is quite possible that the author of this Penguin Life may not even be aware of useful work on Joseph Smith that other non-Mormon scholars have done.

In particular, nothing in this volume suggests that its author profited from reading Mario De Pillis’s Yale dissertation or even his groundbreaking article in the very first issue of *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*.<sup>5</sup> De Pillis argued that the “quest for religious authority” was critical to the rise of Mormonism. If Remini had taken this into

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4. This is not the unvarying pattern. Martin Marty wrote to tell me that when he was invited to prepare a Penguin Life, the invitation was to prepare a book on the life of Martin Luther. He is currently at work on this biography.

5. Mario S. De Pillis, “The Development of Mormon Communitarianism, 1826–1846” (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1960); Mario S. De Pillis, “The Quest for Religious Authority and the Rise of Mormonism,” *Dialogue* 1/1 (1966): 68–88.

account, his focus might have shifted enough to allow him to appreciate the sui generis religious dimensions of Mormonism as something other than idiosyncratic aspects of the Second Great Awakening. But his citations and source lists include no reference to De Pillis's work.

Neither, apparently, did Remini consult the work of Lawrence Foster, whose pioneering comparative study of the Mormons, the Shakers, and the Oneida community alerted students of Mormon history to the way these three movements can be seen as efforts to test alternative family forms.<sup>6</sup> What was noteworthy about Foster's study (and his subsequent studies that have carried his understandings forward) is that he has done this comparative work without reducing the stories of these three groups to bizarre episodes that tell us as much or more about the Age of Jackson landscape than they reveal about religion.

Remini includes my first published book in his list of sources, but he does not grapple with my argument that Joseph Smith was a religious figure of such unique stature that the movement that developed around him can best be understood as a new religious tradition.

Mormon readers will probably be pleased that Remini did not consult John Brooke's work,<sup>7</sup> but he might well have benefited from a consideration of Brooke's emphasis on Smith's followers as a "prepared people." This might have rounded out his picture enough to keep the text, at certain points, from reading as a *Reader's Digest* version of the *History of the Church*. It seems a shame. But the fact is that Remini does not move the non-Mormon interpretation of Joseph Smith forward so much as he doubles back to place the Prophet precisely where he stood when Alice Felt Tyler wrote about him in the 1940s.

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6. See Lawrence Foster, *Women, Family, and Utopia: Communal Experiments of the Shakers, the Oneida Community, and Mormons* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1991); and Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality: The Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981; paperback edition, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984).

7. John L. Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644-1844* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

While this critique may seem harsh, I do not mean to be unrelievedly critical. The author of this Penguin Life biography surely knows the political, economic, and social territory far better than most of the scholars—including myself—who have written about the Prophet and early Mormonism. Moreover, while he apparently made no real effort either to get to know the scholarship dealing with Joseph Smith or to comprehend Latter-day Saint beliefs, Remini used the basic Mormon sources judiciously, making every effort to leave open the possibility that a secular understanding of what happened is no better than a sacred one.

Finally, way back in 1969, Alfred A. Knopf, another trade publisher, brought out a biography of Brigham Young by Stanley P. Hirshson, a historian of the Reconstruction Period in American history.<sup>8</sup> Called *The Lion of the Lord*, it also took a life-and-times approach, and it turned out to be so dreadful that the awards committee of the Mormon History Association gave it an award for being the worst Mormon biography ever published. This biography of Joseph Smith surely does not deserve such an award. It is not awful—absolutely not. But for those who are concerned about the religious side of Mormon history, Remini's Penguin Life of Joseph Smith is a real disappointment.

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8. Stanley P. Hirshson, *The Lion of the Lord: A Biography of Brigham Young* (New York: Knopf, 1969).