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George L. Mitton

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**Title** Editor's Introduction: Anti-Mormon Writings:  
Encountering a Topsy-Turvy Approach to Mormon  
Origins

**Author(s)** George L. Mitton

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**Abstract** Introduction to the current issue, including editor's picks. Mitton explains the need to address anti-Mormon texts and their authors, beginning in the early days of the church. It is important to give attention to Joseph's own explanation and that of his close associates.

## Editor's Introduction

### ANTI-MORMON WRITINGS: ENCOUNTERING A TOPSY-TURVY APPROACH TO MORMON ORIGINS

George L. Mitton, associate editor

*He always conceived every subject on so comprehensive a scale,  
that he had not room in his head, to turn it over  
and examine both sides of it.*

Washington Irving<sup>1</sup>

*Surely your turning of things upside down shall be  
esteemed as the potter's clay: for shall the work say  
of him that made it, He made me not?*

(Isaiah 29:16)

Some have inquired as to why we devote so much space in response to anti-Mormon literature. Would that we could confine ourselves to discussions of positive things, but the negative ones are troublesome to some, and we think that they demand attention. It is our experience that a careful consideration of such writings is instructive and that the faith always comes out better understood and strengthened. Nevertheless, in this issue we offer essays on a remarkable range of subjects, including several of interest on some very positive works and developments. I will mention these briefly and then discuss some important general matters regarding anti-Mormon writings, helping to explain why we feel a need to study and respond to them.

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1. Washington Irving, *A History of New York . . . by Diedrich Knickerbocker* (New York: Inskeep & Bradford, 1809), 1:120.

### Some Congenial Things

I first take note of the essay by Benjamin N. Judkins on the status and quality of Book of Mormon apologetics—those many and extensive writings that have been prepared in defense of the faith. He describes these achievements modestly, and doubtless more could be said, but he gives a useful overview of the remarkable work and findings of those who have sought to improve our knowledge of the Book of Mormon, while impressively defending its doctrines, background, and historicity in ways the anti-Mormon press has seldom attempted to refute. His essay provides a useful summary for those who seek to learn more.

Kevin L. Barney calls our attention to a new “Reader’s Edition” of the Book of Mormon, attractively edited by Grant Hardy. M. Gerald Bradford reviews an important new book of Latter-day Saint scholarship that treats the final hours of the life of Christ. Gaye Strathearn discusses a new scholarly work on the concern of the early Christians about salvation for the dead, which should be of interest to Latter-day Saints. Nathan Oman provides the results of his research on the term *secret combinations*, showing that its use in the Book of Mormon likely has a much broader meaning than the interpretation of some who have held that it was a reference only to Freemasonry—a narrow view that can result in misunderstandings of the Book of Mormon and a failure to appreciate its broad insights. John A. Tvedtnes offers a review of a book regarding Chinese discovery of America, raising the question of relevance to an understanding of Lehi’s voyage.

John W. Welch introduces us to an important new translation and commentary on the *Book of Enoch* (known as *1 Enoch*). Since the discovery of this ancient work in Ethiopia and the study of it, together with related texts that have come to light, scholars have regarded it with growing interest, recognizing its importance in studying the theology of ancient Israel, its influence on the New Testament, and its help in understanding the meaning of early Christianity.<sup>2</sup> Latter-day

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2. For an introduction see Margaret Barker, *The Lost Prophet: The Book of Enoch and Its Influence on Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1988).

Saints should be particularly interested because of its significance to revelations received by Joseph Smith. Welch discusses this with obvious excitement, which I share, and points the way for further study and understanding.

### Responses to Anti-Mormon Writings—or ad Hominem Attacks?

We have included several responses to writings that are clearly anti-Mormon. I will not detail them all here, as readers can scan the contents and find what interests them most. What does anti-Mormon mean? Davis Bitton has written a thoughtful piece for us on “Spotting an Anti-Mormon Book.” Some authors, even of virulent attacks on the church, nevertheless complain when we use the term *anti-Mormon* because they claim to “love the Mormon people.” This despite the fact that they do their best to undermine our faith and the faith of our youth, vilify the prophets whose memory we hold dear, dishonor our scriptures, and trample on things that are sacred to us and thereby violate some of our most tender feelings. Most of their arguments have been given reply by the Saints, but they are repeated over and over as though no reply had ever been made. There is a sameness to this literature, but occasionally a new approach comes along. As a perceptive writer once remarked, “new errors, as well as new truths, often appear.”<sup>3</sup>

Frequently, our answers and responses are given the silent treatment. We then have reason to suspect that writers or publishers find it difficult to reply to our findings. Oftentimes an attempt is made to respond by complaining that our essays are ad hominem attacks on the writers and their reputations, rather than efforts to cope with their arguments. These claims are usually made on the Internet.<sup>4</sup> It has even

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3. John Jay, in *The Federalist*, no. 64.

4. A notable exception is a published response by Signature Books, through the vehicle of a book by D. Michael Quinn, which includes a great many of what appear to be contrived attacks on FARMS and its writers scattered throughout the notes of the book. From a scholarly standpoint alone, the work is thoroughly marred by this unseemly device. The editors and publisher should be ashamed of their use or allowance of it. See Quinn's *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998).

been asserted that *ad hominem* is our “stock in trade.” We have come to expect this sort of thing whenever we go to press. This is, of course, an attempt to render our arguments ineffective by destroying our reputation. It is an *ad hominem* attack on us that fails to answer our arguments. I am not aware of an author ever being discussed in our *Review* where there is not also a discussion of his or her writing. But some say we should not discuss writers at all—merely treat their work. This is not practical and would be unfair to our readers in many instances.

Why do we discuss authors? Frequently, some discussion is helpful when it brings out an author’s past work, experience, training, or known attitudes that might affect competence or preparation to deal with a subject. An example appears in Craig L. Foster’s review of Jon Krakauer’s work in this issue. Prejudice and past known viewpoints can also place in perspective a writer’s purpose or motives. Sometimes our reviewers are dealing with books that are outrageous, and they are understandably outraged and find it difficult to maintain a moderate tone. As editors, we have often used our red pencils to tone down a discussion when troublesome writings are under consideration. FARMS has received mail from many parts of the world—persons often express concern that they don’t have information on a writer that might help them assess the validity of a work in question. Our own editor, Daniel C. Peterson, receives telephone calls with questions of that sort from far and near. I think that we would be derelict if we failed to provide such information when we have it and when it appears needed for a better understanding.

### **The Anti-Mormon “Concatenation”**

Since the earliest days of the church, Latter-day Saints have found it necessary to confront anti-Mormon writings. Indeed, Joseph Smith recalled a spirit of sectarian persecution from the time, as a lad, when he first began to mention his visionary experiences—well before the church was organized (Joseph Smith—History 1:21–25, 28, 60). Extant early newspaper articles displayed a great spirit of ridicule and animosity toward him during and about his youth. These early articles tended to be written from a secular point of view. One must

search for any favorable comments on religion generally as Joseph Smith is discussed. Intellectually, these writers were a cut above the rest of us commoners, readily recognizing superstition and charlatantry as rumors passed by. Joseph, and the church after it was organized, soon learned the truth of the remarkable prophecy by the angel Moroni, made in Joseph's great obscurity, that his "name should be had for good and evil among all nations, kindreds, and tongues, or that it should be *both* good and evil spoken of among all people" (Joseph Smith—History 1:33).

In 1839, while languishing in Liberty Jail, Joseph Smith had occasion to reflect on the persecutions being heaped on him and his people. He recognized the role of anti-Mormon publications in contributing to this distress. In his review of these things, which has since been canonized, Joseph spoke of "libelous publications," "libelous histories," and of a "concatenation," or linked series of things, motivated by the adversarial spirit. He saw a need for the Saints to gather up these things and make adequate response to them—a response that should "be attended to with great earnestness" (D&C 123:4–7, 14). In replying to anti-Mormon writings, we try to be sensitive to these considerations.

Let me touch here on the origin of this kind of writing. There *is* a linked chain in anti-Mormon literature, going back to Joseph Smith's youth. Many writers have slavishly followed the early lead in their assessment of Joseph's character and conduct, and arguments made then are repeated holus-bolus to this day. It first began with newspaper writers in Palmyra and western New York. Probably the most influential, writing from a secular viewpoint, was Abner Cole, editor of the *Palmyra Reflector*. In a series of articles, Cole lampooned Joseph and the Book of Mormon unmercifully, first using as a basis some pirated sheets from the printer's office. He did this even before the Book of Mormon came off the press—and continued well after its publication.<sup>5</sup> Much of what he wrote appears foolish today—and should have then.

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5. On Cole, see Andrew H. Hedges, "The Refractory Abner Cole," in *Revelation, Reason, and Faith: Essays in Honor of Truman G. Madsen*, ed. Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002), 447–75.

Still, his columns appear to have had great influence in the formation of a negative opinion about Joseph and his work. Recently I took occasion to read through the file of the *Palmyra Reflector*, and I encountered ample indications of the significant role of newspapers in forming public opinion at the time. Many could not afford newspapers, but friends and relatives would save stacks of them and pass them on—sometimes to many families. I believe that Cole’s severe satirical writings were important in forming unfavorable views among Joseph’s contemporaries. Many derogatory claims about Joseph and the Smith family are found in his pieces and other newspapers of the time and were substantially repeated by people in later statements and “affidavits.”

Perhaps we should give some slack to the people of Palmyra and western New York when we think about their reaction to Joseph and his unusual claims and doings. After all, “Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:46); “Is not this Joseph’s son?” (Luke 4:22); and “No prophet is accepted in his own country” (Luke 4:24; cf. Matthew 13:54–57). They could not foresee or appreciate the remarkable results of Joseph’s work and struggles, nor did they begin to comprehend the meaning of his experiences and the exceptional things happening to him when he lived in their midst. Their eyes could not “see afar off” (Moses 6:27). But if they deserve some slack, what shall we say of the anti-Mormon writers today, who should have the benefit of nearly two centuries of hindsight, yet still call in question Joseph’s character and veracity by putting so much stock in the shabby collection of anti-Mormon comments and documents, often taken from the rumors, gossip, secondhand recollections, ill-informed opinions, and general hearsay of the time? The early critics had blinders, but should writers continue to wear them today, confining themselves to the narrow vision of that early period when considering Mormon origins?

Opposition to Joseph appears to have had sectarian roots, but the first written opposition appears to have been largely secular. This secular hostility seems to be an important source of the statements and affidavits also. Sectarian writers have produced the most anti-Mormon literature, but they have not been shy in using secular arguments and

efforts when it suits their purpose.<sup>6</sup> Note the comments of an observer just a century ago. Nels L. Nelson, a Latter-day Saint writer, complained of the “sins of the clerical profession against the Mormons” and held that it was “their prejudiced views and mistaken zeal that have propagated the hundreds of lurid ‘Mormonisms Exposed,’ which have come to be as necessary as narcotics to many good people.” He found that “our confidence in them is shattered, by the way in which they misrepresent us,—from mere fragmentary and often misquoted passages.”<sup>7</sup> He thought the remarkable fact that “hatred (of Mormons) can temporarily unite sects which love (of Christ) has never hitherto brought together, ought at least to raise a small doubt as to the real source of the inspiration.”<sup>8</sup>

This situation is still the same today—one need merely examine the nature of books written against us found in the “cults” section of many bookstores. There appears to be moderation in the tone of a few of these writings, which is appreciated. However, the sectarian attack remains undiminished, and professional anti-Mormons still press “their ardent need of funds for the ‘Mormon Crusade’” as they did in 1904.<sup>9</sup> Recently, alert readers of the *Review* will have noticed a growing need to respond to anti-Mormon writings deriving from the secular/agnostic/atheist wing rather than sectarian sources. This trend may continue, corresponding to the growing and obtrusive secularization of the society around us. From Louis Midgley, we have an investigative essay about *Signature Books*.<sup>10</sup> With its tendentious agenda, it appears to us that it is the publishing house that is far and away producing the most anti-Mormon literature of this genre.

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6. See the flagrant recent example discussed by Daniel C. Peterson in his introduction, “Of ‘Galileo Events,’ Hype, and Suppression: Or, Abusing Science and Its History,” *FARMS Review* 15/2 (2003): xvi–xxxii.

7. Nels L. Nelson, *Scientific Aspects of Mormonism; or Religion in Terms of Life* (New York: Putnam’s Sons, 1904), 2–3.

8. *Ibid.*, 4.

9. *Ibid.*, 3.

10. See Louis Midgley, “The Signature Books Saga,” in this number of the *FARMS Review*, pages 361–406.

## On Taking Hurlbut and Howe Too Seriously

The first anti-Mormon book was published in 1834 in Painesville, Ohio (near Kirtland), by Eber D. Howe, editor of the *Painesville Telegraph*. Bearing the title *Mormonism Unveiled*, it was an attempt to discredit the reputation of Joseph Smith.<sup>11</sup> It has been responsible for much harm, despite its serious flaws, and has been used to the present by countless anti-Mormon writers as a foundation for their argument against the Prophet. Today, it should be clear that much in Howe's book is discredited and should be used only with the greatest caution and with a warning to readers of the remaining questions about its reliability. Alas, such warnings seldom appear.

*Mormonism Unveiled* used two basic thrusts against Joseph. Howe felt the first was the more important and featured it in the subtitle of his book. This was the charge of plagiarism, in which he alleged that the historical parts of the Book of Mormon were derived from an old manuscript by Reverend Solomon Spalding. Supported by statements of persons who claimed to remember details of the manuscript, it was a difficult argument for the Saints to answer until the manuscript was discovered in 1884.<sup>12</sup> Aside from a very few diehards, nearly all scholars today have rejected the theory and do not see any meaningful connection between the manuscript and the Book of Mormon.

Howe's second thrust has proved more enduring but should still be viewed with great suspicion. This concerns the statements or "affidavits"<sup>13</sup> collected by Doctor<sup>14</sup> Philastus Hurlbut, a Mormon excom-

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11. Eber D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled: Or, a faithful account of that singular imposition and delusion, from its rise to the present time with sketches of the characters of its propagators, and a full detail of the manner in which the famous Golden Bible was brought before the world to which are added, inquiries into the probability that the historical part of the said Bible was written by one Solomon Spalding, more than twenty years ago, and by him intended to have been published as a romance* (Painesville, OH: the author, 1834).

12. For an overview, refer to Lester E. Bush Jr., "The Spalding Theory Then and Now," *Dialogue* 10/4 (1977): 40–69. See also Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 160–61.

13. The alleged affidavits are not known to be extant, except as printed in *Mormonism Unveiled*.

14. "Doctor" does not mean he was a medical doctor. It was part of the given name conferred on him by his parents.

municated for immorality, who visited Palmyra and vicinity in 1833 to obtain information against Joseph Smith on behalf of an Ohio anti-Mormon committee.<sup>15</sup> The committee's charge to Hurlbut was to

obtain information that would show “the bad character of the Mormon Smith Family,” divest Joseph of “all claims to the character of an honest man,” and place him at an “immeasurable distance from the high station he pretends to occupy.” To accomplish his task, Hurlbut traveled in Ohio, New York, and Pennsylvania collecting statements disparaging to the Smith name.<sup>16</sup>

Recently, Dale W. Adams has summarized Hurlbut's Palmyra efforts as follows:

Hurlbut spent a month or more in Palmyra giving anti-Mormon lectures and securing anti-Smith statements. A reading of these statements suggests that most of them were collected at lectures given by Hurlbut, supplemented by talks given by local ministers who were critical of Joseph Smith, Jr. . . .

In evaluating these statements it must be recognized they were not assembled from a random sample of people who knew the Smith family. It would not have been in Hurlbut's interests to seek statements that were neutral or complimentary to the Smiths. His rhetoric and the histrionics of the local ministers who helped him certainly fostered, or at least reinforced, negative testimonials by those who attended the anti-Smith meetings organized by Hurlbut in Palmyra.<sup>17</sup>

From the beginning, Latter-day Saint writers have challenged the Hurlbut-Howe statements and affidavits on several grounds. Briefly, they appear to contain selected rather than random comments; they

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15. For an extensive review of Hurlbut's life and purposes, and a bibliography of the discussion of the affidavits, see Dale W. Adams, “Doctor Philastus Hurlbut: Originator of Derogatory Statements about Joseph Smith, Jr.,” *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 20 (2000): 76–93.

16. Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989–), 1:12, editor's note.

17. Adams, “Doctor Philastus Hurlbut,” 82.

often appear to be hearsay and gossip rather than a reflection of firsthand knowledge; they appear to be coached to conform to a pattern, often using similar language; and in the absence of original documents, they may have been edited or “doctored” by Hurlbut or Howe. Sometimes they would have required remarkable memory of the purported detail of Joseph’s doings or the alleged exact words of his conversation. For the most part, I am inclined to agree with the Saints’ negative assessment of the statements. I still feel today much as Robert C. Webb expressed it when he reviewed these things long ago and wondered why critics could not “perceive the *essential rottenness* of the favorite theories on the origin and significance of Mormonism, and the utterly contemptible character of the ‘evidence’ upon which they are based.”<sup>18</sup>

In 1990, Signature Books published a book by Rodger I. Anderson that attempted to rescue the Hurlbut-Howe and other similar statements from the ravages of Mormon sophistry.<sup>19</sup> There was a long line of Latter-day Saint writings in opposition to the statements and affidavits.<sup>20</sup> Anderson’s book is useful in providing in the notes a substantial bibliography on the past discussion of the issues and brings together copies of many of the statements in question. But it is with great skepticism that I receive Anderson’s conclusion that the affidavits “must be granted permanent status as primary documents relating to Joseph Smith’s early life and the origins of Mormonism.”<sup>21</sup> What is certain is that they are of great importance as primary documents related to the development of anti-Mormonism.

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18. Robert C. Webb [J. E. Homans], *The Case against Mormonism* (New York: Walton, 1915), 3, emphasis added.

19. Rodger I. Anderson, *Joseph Smith’s New York Reputation Reexamined* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990). Although not noted in the Signature Books publication, the book is based on Anderson’s study in the *Journal of Pastoral Practice* 4/3 (1980): 71–108; 4/4 (1980): 72–105. It appears in a section titled “Para-Christianity,” edited by the late Reverend Wesley Walters, who noted that “Mr. Anderson was raised a Mormon and is now a member of the Christian Reformed Church.” *Ibid.*, 4/3 (1980): 70.

20. The immediate ones that he was attempting to refute were recent studies by Hugh Nibley and Richard Lloyd Anderson. See Nibley’s *The Myth Makers* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1961), now available in Hugh Nibley, *Tinkling Cymbals and Sounding Brass* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 103–406; and Richard Lloyd Anderson’s “Joseph Smith’s New York Reputation Reappraised,” *BYU Studies* 10/3 (1970): 283–314.

21. R. I. Anderson, *Joseph Smith’s New York Reputation Reexamined*, 114.

So far as I can find, Rodger Anderson did not attempt to defend the statements Hurlbut obtained to bolster belief in the Spalding theory of the origin of the Book of Mormon—statements appearing in *Mormonism Unveiled*.<sup>22</sup> For obvious reasons he appears to maintain a prudent silence about them since supporting them would give credence to a theory now almost universally rejected by students of Mormon origins. Dan Vogel, who has done extensive work on compiling and publishing documents that he sees as bearing upon Latter-day Saint history, *totally* excludes the Spalding statements, holding that they “shed no light on Mormon origins.”<sup>23</sup> Some may think that these statements are not comparable to the Palmyra documents, but they are surely comparable in many ways. Both sets of documents are found only in the same book. Both sets were gathered by Hurlbut and on their face raise the question of coaching or editing. They also would have required persons to perform herculean feats of memory, even recalling the twenty-year-old Spalding manuscript as having specific Book of Mormon names in it, among other details, which somehow had vanished when the manuscript was later discovered. Surely these considerations raise serious questions about Hurlbut’s methodology and his procedure in promoting both sets of documents on behalf of an Ohio anti-Mormon committee.

Soon after Anderson’s book was published, Latter-day Saint responses appeared.<sup>24</sup> Even allowing for any misunderstandings in a complex subject, many questions remained about these documents. Moreover, another study of consequence soon appeared that raised deep questions about the honesty of statements in the documents.<sup>25</sup> Donald L. Enders tested the claim—appearing like a leitmotif in several affidavits and other sources—that Joseph and the Smith family

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22. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 278–90.

23. Dan Vogel, comp. and ed., *Early Mormon Documents* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996–), 1:xiv.

24. See Richard Lloyd Anderson, in *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 3 (1991): 52–80; and Marvin S. Hill, in *BYU Studies* 30/4 (1990): 70–74.

25. Donald L. Enders, “The Joseph Smith, Sr., Family: Farmers of the Genesee,” in *Joseph Smith: The Prophet, the Man*, ed. Susan Easton Black and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1993), 213–25.

were a lazy, shiftless lot. Enders summarized the claims: The Smiths “were ‘lazy,’ and ‘indolent.’ One neighbor claimed that the Smiths’ ‘great objective appeared to be to live without work,’ while another said, ‘It was a mystery to their neighbors how [the Smiths] got their living.’ Some even asserted that the Smiths had no legal claim to [their] property but were mere ‘squatters.’”<sup>26</sup> Enders used a fresh approach to determine whether these claims of laziness were true. Daniel C. Peterson has summarized his approach and findings:

Working from land and tax records, farm account books and related correspondence, soil surveys, horticultural studies, surveys of historic buildings, archaeological reports, and interviews with agricultural historians and other specialists—sources not generally used by scholars of Mormon origins—Enders concludes that, on questions of testable fact, the affidavits cannot be trusted.

The Smiths’ farming techniques, it seems, were virtually a textbook illustration of the best recommendations of the day, showing them to have been, by contemporary standards, intelligent, skilled, and responsible people. And they were very hard working. To create their farm, for instance, the Smiths moved many tons of rock and cut down about six thousand trees, a large percentage of which were one hundred feet or more in height and from four to six feet in diameter. Then they fenced their property, which required cutting at least six or seven thousand ten-foot rails. They did an enormous amount of work before they were able even to begin actual daily farming.

Furthermore, in order to pay for their farm, the Smiths were obliged to hire themselves out as day laborers. Throughout the surrounding area, they dug and rocked up wells and cisterns, mowed, harvested, made cider and barrels and chairs and brooms and baskets, taught school, dug for salt, worked as carpenters and domestics, built stone walls and fireplaces,

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26. *Ibid.*, 214.

flailed grain, cut and sold cordwood, carted, washed clothes, sold garden produce, painted chairs and oil-cloth coverings, butchered, dug coal, and hauled stone. And, along the way, they produced between one thousand and seven thousand pounds of maple sugar annually. “Laziness” and “indolence” are difficult to detect in the Smith family.<sup>27</sup>

What then should we conclude about the reliability and usefulness of the Hurlbut-Howe materials? Are there elements of truth in them? Of course, for some things are known from other sources. Some things Joseph himself said were part of his experience. But what of the very ugly tone and the serious question of exaggeration and extravagant claims about him? At the beginning of his book, Anderson boils down the claims against Joseph’s character:

In affidavit after affidavit the young Smith was depicted as a liar and self-confessed fraud, a cunning and callous knave who delighted in nothing so much as preying upon the credulity of his neighbors. A money digger by profession, Smith spent his nights digging for treasure and his days lounging about the local grocery store [there’s that laziness again!] entertaining his fellow tipplers with tales of midnight enchantments and bleeding ghosts, the affidavits maintained.<sup>28</sup>

The bitter spirit of the affidavits shows through, even in this summary. Their intemperate tone is of great significance to me. I am led to conclude that these documents are of questionable value or reliability in trying to fill out details in the life of young Joseph. And they are even more doubtful in assessing his character and true motivations, for the people of New York did not begin to understand him. In an insightful finish to his book, Rodger Anderson concludes:

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27. Daniel C. Peterson and Donald L. Enders, “Can the 1834 Affidavits Attacking the Smith Family Be Trusted?” in *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon: The FARMS Updates of the 1990s*, ed. John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999), 286–87.

28. R. I. Anderson, *Joseph Smith’s New York Reputation Reexamined*, 2–3.

Nondescript and of little consequence until he started attracting others to his peculiar blend of biblical Christianity, frontier folk belief, popular culture, and personal experience, Joseph Smith was an enigma to his incredulous New York neighbors. For them, he would always remain a superstitious adolescent dreamer and his success as a prophet a riddle for which there was no answer.<sup>29</sup>

Will we today ever master the riddle—the so-called “prophet puzzle”—if we confine ourselves to the western New Yorkers’ myopic and topsy-turvy opinions of young Joseph?

### Studying Joseph Smith’s History “Right Side Up”

If we are to make progress in understanding the young Joseph Smith, it appears that we must give much closer attention to his own explanation and that of his close associates. After all, he knew more about it than anyone else. Much still awaits our consideration. Some have assumed that he did not reply to *Mormonism Unveiled*, or could not reply, but that is far from the truth. Rodger Anderson notes that “to defuse the potentially explosive documents, Smith read them aloud at public meetings, denouncing them as the work of Satan.”<sup>30</sup> But it is the written response that is even more important, and much has survived that can help put the Hurlbut-Howe statements in perspective.

In the church periodical the *Messenger and Advocate*, published at Kirtland, Ohio, Joseph Smith’s close associate, Oliver Cowdery, undertook to prepare and publish “‘a full history of the rise of the church’ in an effort to counter the distorted reports that had circulated.”<sup>31</sup> It appeared concurrently with Howe’s book in 1834 and was specifically intended to be a response to it and like challenges. The history took the form of a series of letters from Cowdery to W. W. Phelps. Oliver noted that “our brother J. Smith jr. has offered to as-

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29. Ibid., 116.

30. Ibid., 3.

31. Jesse, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:12, editor’s note. Oliver had written of his “purpose as to convince the publick of the incorrectness of those scurulous reports which have inundated our land.” Ibid., 1:45.

sist us.”<sup>32</sup> To help at the outset, Joseph prepared a strong statement regarding his youthful behavior:

During this time, as is common to most, or all youths, I fell into many vices and follies; but as my accusers are, and have been forward to accuse me of being guilty of gross and outrageous violations of the peace and good order of the community, I take the occasion to remark, that . . . I have not, neither can it be sustained, in truth, been guilty of wronging or injuring any man or society of men; and those imperfections to which I allude, and for which I have often had occasion to lament, were a light, and too often, vain mind, exhibiting a foolish and trifling conversation.

This being all, and the worst, that my accusers can substantiate against my moral character, I wish to add, that it is not without a deep feeling of regret that I am thus called upon in answer to my own conscience, to fulfill a duty I owe to myself, as well as to the cause of truth, in making this public confession of my former uncircumspect walk, and unchaste conversation: and more particularly, as I often acted in violation of those holy precepts which I knew came from God. . . . I do not, nor never have, pretended to be any other than a man “subject to passion,” and liable, without the assisting grace of the Savior, to deviate from that perfect path in which *all* men are commanded to walk!<sup>33</sup>

Oliver Cowdery published his own forceful defense of Joseph Smith’s character. In a statement that apparently alludes to the Hurlbut-Howe claims, he says:

[Joseph] passed the time as others, in laboring for his support. But in consequence of certain false and slanderous reports which have been circulated, justice would require me to say something upon the private life of one whose character has

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32. *Messenger and Advocate* 1 (October 1834): 13.

33. Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:13–14, irregular spellings and grammar retained in quotations from this source.

been so shamefully traduced. By some he is said to have been a lazy, idle, vicious, profligate fellow. These I am prepared to contradict, and that too by the testimony of *many* persons with whom I have been intimately acquainted, and know to be individuals of the strictest veracity, and unquestionable integrity. All these strictly and virtually agree in saying, that he was an honest, upright, virtuous, and faithfully industrious young man. And those who say to the contrary can be influenced by no other motive than to destroy the reputation of one who never injured any man in either property or person.

While young, I have been informed he was afflicted with sickness; but I have been told by those for whom he has labored, that he was a young man of truth and industrious habits. And I will add further that it is my conviction, if he never had been called to the exalted station in which he now occupies, he might have passed down the stream of time with ease and in respectability, without the foul and hellish tongue o[f] slander ever being employed against him. It is no more than to be expected, I admit, that men of corrupt hearts will try to traduce his character and put a spot upon his name: indeed, this is according to the word of the angel; but this does not prohibit me from speaking freely of his merits, and contradicting those falsehoods.<sup>34</sup>

Oliver's mention of the "word of the angel" alludes to the instruction and warnings given to Joseph Smith by Moroni, which appear in remarkable length and detail in the Cowdery letters and had to have been given to Oliver by Joseph himself. In this account, the angel is quoted as warning Joseph that "the workers of iniquity will seek your overthrow: *they will circulate falsehoods to destroy your reputation.*"<sup>35</sup>

### Moroni and the Ritual Life of Joseph Smith

Many insights regarding Joseph Smith's early life and conduct are suggested by the angel Moroni's instruction as contained in the Cowdery

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34. *Messenger and Advocate* 2 (October 1835): 200.

35. *Ibid.*, 199, emphasis added.

letters. His instruction bids us to reflect on theological meanings and implications ignored by secular critics. From these enlightening essays, it is apparent that Joseph Smith was paced through special experiences to give him understanding essential to his future work and calling. Here I would observe that because of his prophetic calling and the things he was commanded to do, the arranged circumstances of his unique environment, and the resulting reaction of others and the opposing spiritual power, Joseph Smith was required to live a richly symbolic life—a ritual life, if you will. I say required because, if faithful to his calling, he would be forced through the pattern in many designed circumstances that he could not arrange or control. This is best seen by comparing his life with other prophetic figures whose lives have significant common elements or motifs, and especially with Christ, who was the great exemplar. Striving to understand the meaning behind the symbolic things Joseph exemplified can be a lifetime quest but very instructive indeed. Certainly Joseph Smith’s neighbors did not begin to understand. Nor would I expect our agnostic-atheist detractors to grasp the significance of these subtleties either since they have already chosen to shut themselves off from an appreciation of transcendent things as obvious as the sun. But those who share our knowledge of the reality of spiritual forces—both good and ill—will recognize the supreme importance of such matters.

The ritual pattern is broad indeed, and I can only touch on two or three elements here. However, they are important ones in helping us to understand the meaning of Joseph’s early experience. Surely the first one, which we have mentioned above, would be that of rejection by those who knew him in his youth, followed by contrasting acceptance later by many believers. Latter-day Saints are reminded of this pattern in the life of Christ when they sing in Parley Pratt’s cherished hymn: “Once rejected by his own, Now their King he shall be known.”<sup>36</sup>

Another important element is suggested by a passage in the *Lectures on Faith* that were given in Kirtland: Jesus “was exposed to more powerful contradictions than any man can be.”<sup>37</sup> Surely Joseph Smith was exposed to “powerful contradictions” when his young mind was

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36. “Jesus, Once of Humble Birth,” *Hymns*, no. 196.

37. *Lectures on Faith* 5:2, in *Messenger and Advocate* 1 (May 1835): 122.

troubled over greatly contrasting things—a dilemma he faced of which his neighbors were oblivious or unaware. His attempt to meet this challenge, whether apt or not, can help explain some of the unusual things Joseph did.

A most significant feature in Joseph's early life that meets us very strongly in Moroni's instruction as recorded in the Cowdery letters, and in Joseph's own histories, is the element of *temptation*. Some years ago, while reading Bousset's noted study of Christ, I was struck with his comment on the Savior's temptation. Citing similar "schemata" in the lives of other prophetic figures, he noted that the New Testament relates "the prehistory of the hero before his public appearance according to a definite schema; the hour of illumination is followed by the hour of temptation."<sup>38</sup> Jesus's illumination occurred at baptism, when the Father's voice was heard and the Holy Ghost descended. This was followed with temptation by the devil in the wilderness. I was then strongly impressed that this basic pattern, *illumination followed by temptation*, is also a most significant element in the life of Joseph Smith.

Following the illumination of Joseph's marvelous first vision, he confesses that he "was left to all kinds of temptations; and, mingling with all kinds of society, I frequently fell into many foolish errors, and displayed the weakness of youth, and the foibles of human nature; which, I am sorry to say, led me into divers temptations, offensive in the sight of God" (Joseph Smith—History 1:28). When the angel Moroni instructed him, he "added a caution to me, telling me that Satan would try to tempt me (in consequence of the indigent circumstances of my father's family), to get the plates for the purpose of getting rich" (Joseph Smith—History 1:46).<sup>39</sup> In his earliest history (1832), Joseph said that after the first vision he "fell into transgressions and sinned in many things which brought a wound upon my soul and there were many things which transpired that cannot be written and my Fathers

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38. Wilhelm Bousset, *Kyrios Christos: A History of the Belief in Christ from the Beginnings of Christianity to Irenaeus*, trans. John E. Steely (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970), 82.

39. Compare the blandishment of offered riches as an important feature in the temptation of Christ.

family have suffered many persecutions and afflictions.”<sup>40</sup> In that early history, Joseph explained that he “had been tempted of the adversary” to seek the plates for riches and that Moroni had explained that he was “left unto temptation that thou mightest be made acquainted with the power of the adversary therefore repent and call on the Lord.”<sup>41</sup>

This last point from Moroni in Joseph’s earliest history (1832)—that the process of temptation is instructive—is also given emphasis by Moroni as related in the Cowdery letters. Oliver Cowdery summarizes this concept, as it applied to Joseph Smith, as follows:

You see the great wisdom in God in leading him thus far, that his mind might begin to be more matured, and thereby be able to judge correctly, the spirits. . . . God knowing all things from the beginning, began thus to instruct his servant. And in this it is plainly to be seen that the adversary of truth is not sufficient to overthrow the work of God. . . . In this, then, I discover wisdom in the dealings of the Lord: it was impossible for any man to translate the book of Mormon by the gift of God, and endure the afflictions, and temptations, and devices of satan, without being overthrown, unless he had been previously benefitted with a certain round of experience: and had our brother obtained the record the first time, not knowing how to detect the works of darkness, he might have been deprived of the blessing of sending forth the word of truth to this generation. Therefore, God knowing that satan would thus lead his mind astray, began at that early hour, that when the full time should arrive, he might have a servant prepared to fulfil his purpose.<sup>42</sup>

Much additional instruction appears in these letters about the training of Joseph Smith to discern between the influences of the two spiritual forces.

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40. Jesse, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:7.

41. *Ibid.*, 1:8.

42. *Messenger and Advocate* 2 (October 1835): 199–200.

## Joseph Smith's Environment and the Two Powers

My thoughts here are suggested by Oliver Cowdery's observation, reiterated by him elsewhere, that "two invisible powers were operating upon the mind of our brother while going to Cumorah."<sup>43</sup> The basic concept is that all persons are influenced by both the good and evil powers or spirits and must learn to judge, discern, and make choices between them. The doctrine is prominent in the Book of Mormon, especially in Lehi's teaching of the necessity that there be an "opposition in all things" and that God has given man to "act for himself," which requires that he be "enticed by the one or the other" (2 Nephi 2:11–16). The two powers are real, not imaginary, although the Book of Mormon says that it would come forth at a time when the devil would whisper "in their ears" that there is no devil (2 Nephi 28:22).

What has this to tell us about the environment in which Joseph did his work? There would be persons around him who were strongly influenced by God, and others by the devil—with most showing varying degrees of both. There would be things remaining from the two influences in the past, whether it be, for example, in traditions, institutions, literature, or other things. How would these affect perceptions about the restored gospel? Some things would bear witness of the coming restoration, and other things were planted to embarrass the new revelation and cause confusion. Many have thought they could judge Joseph Smith's work by comparing his revelations or teachings with ideas found in the environment, and when they find similar ideas, think that is the source of them rather than revelation. This is a mistaken assumption, for it is not necessarily so. It is interesting to find such correspondences, but even if everything had its counterpart somewhere in the environment, that still would not prevent God from revealing things to Joseph, calling him to a work, giving him authority and direction, and helping him discern what in the environment is sound and what is not. This simple truth seems to have escaped many anti-Mormon writers.

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43. *Ibid.*, 199.

Latter-day Saints have often seen the hand of God in preparing for the restoration, whether it be in the Protestant Reformation, aspects of the Renaissance, or the development of free government to make possible freedom of religion. Perhaps we should be more aware of things the evil power has done to prepare the groundwork for his opposition to the restoration. Surely the devil is capable of long-range planning. Joseph was confronted by such things, as are we today. It is the duty of everyone today to strive to discern between the two spirits.

### Editor's Picks, by Daniel C. Peterson

In accordance with tradition, and on behalf of the *FARMS Review*, I now offer my rating of some of the books discussed in the present issue of the *Review*. My (inescapably subjective) evaluations emerge from personal examination of the books, coupled with a reading of the relevant reviews and after conversations either with the reviewers or with those who assist in the production of the *Review*. The final judgments, however, and the final responsibility for making them are mine. Here is the scale that I use in this rating system:

- \*\*\*\* Outstanding, a seminal work of the kind that appears only rarely
- \*\*\* Enthusiastically recommended
- \*\* Warmly recommended
- \* Recommended

Of the books treated in the present issue of the *FARMS Review*, we feel that we can recommend:

- \*\*\*\* Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and Thomas A. Wayment, eds., *From the Last Supper through the Resurrection: The Savior's Final Hours*
- \*\*\* Grant Hardy, ed., *The Book of Mormon: A Reader's Edition*
- \*\*\* George W. E. Nickelsburg, *1 Enoch 1: A Commentary on the Book of 1 Enoch, Chapters 1–36; 81–108*
- \*\*\* Jeffrey A. Trumbower, *Rescue for the Dead: The Posthumous Salvation of Non-Christians in Early Christianity*

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