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Joseph Smith the Man: Some Reflections on a Subject of Controversy

Marvin S. Hill

One of the things the historian learns when he begins to delve deeply into historical sources is that the great men of the past have always been the subject of bitter controversy. While these men have had their defenders, they have had their critics too.

In the 1790s one famous hero of the Revolutionary Era wrote to another, "As to you, sir, the world will be puzzled to decide whether you are an apostate or an imposter, whether you have abandoned good principles or whether you ever had any."¹ The author of this bit of vituperation was Thomas Paine, whose pamphlet *Common Sense* is considered by most historians to have been the catalyst of the American demand for independence from Great Britain in 1776; the recipient of this vitriolic letter was George Washington. According to another political partisan of the 1790s, a leader of the opposition party was guilty of the "most ambitious spirit, the most overweening pride and hauteur, so that the externals of pure democracy afford but a flimsy veil to the internal evidences of aristocratic splendor, sensuality, and Epicureanism."² The slanderer here was a friend of Alexander Hamilton; the person so denounced was Thomas Jefferson, champion of American democracy. Another American who was extremely controversial during his years in public office was excoriated as "illiterate, coarse [*sic*] and vulgar," as a "mobocrat, a Southern hater, a lunatic and a chimpanzee." This belittled man was Abraham Lincoln.³

Like other great Americans, the Prophet Joseph Smith was not exempt from such disparagement. He had friends who spoke well of him, and he had critics who were often embittered. The result was

Marvin S. Hill, a professor of history at Brigham Young University, presented this speech at the Forum Assembly at Brigham Young University, 20 May 1980.

¹James Thomas Flexner, *Washington: The Indispensable Man* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1974), p. 354.

²Dumas Malone, *Jefferson and the Rights of Man* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1951), p. 474.

³Stephen B. Oates, *With Malice Toward None* (New York: Mentor Books, 1979), p. 203.

broad disagreement as to his character and personality. If we consider such traits as his personal appearance, the first impressions he made on others, his treatment of people, his linguistic and oratory skills, and his financial integrity, we find much controversy among his acquaintances. I would like to review part of this argument, to consider some of the reasons for it, and then to suggest some ways the historian can treat the disagreement. Finally, I would like to convey what I think was a wise attitude of the early Saints toward the human side of Joseph Smith.

During his lifetime the Prophet developed from a poor farm boy in Palmyra, New York, to the leader of a large, influential church. In considering his early appearance, we must keep in mind his poverty. One of those who knew him as a young man was Daniel Hendrix, who worked in a store in Palmyra and who said that Joseph came in almost daily. He described him as “the most ragged . . . fellow in the place, and that is saying a good deal.”

David Hendrix said Joseph was

about twenty-five years old, I can see him now, in my mind’s eye, with his torn and patched trousers, held to his form by a pair of suspenders made out of sheeting, with his calico shirt as dirty and black as earth, and his uncombed hair sticking through the holes in his old, battered hat. In winter I used to pity him, for his shoes were so worn out that he must have suffered in the snow and slush.⁴

Pomeroy Tucker, editor of a local newspaper, the *Wayne Sentinel*, said Joseph was remembered in Palmyra from the ages of twelve to twenty as a “dull-eyed, flaxen-haired youth.”⁵ Isaac Hale, Joseph’s father-in-law, described him in 1825 as “a careless young man.”⁶

It is hard to find a description of Joseph in this early period by his many friends. Those that exist do not provide all the details we would like. Parley P. Pratt’s description is a good example. He said that in 1830 “President Joseph Smith was in person tall and well built, strong and active, of light complexion, light hair, blue eyes, very little beard, and of an expression peculiar to himself, on which the eye naturally rested with interest.”⁷ He does not mention Joseph’s apparel, details which would have been helpful in assessing what David Hendrix said.

⁴*Saint Louis Globe Democrat*, 21 February 1897, p. 34.

⁵Pomeroy Tucker, *Origin, Rise, and Progress of Mormonism* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1867), p. 16.

⁶Eber D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled [sic], or a Faithful Account of That Singular Imposition and Delusion, from Its Rise to the Present Time* (Painesville, Ohio: Published by author, 1834), p. 263.

⁷*Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book Company, 1961), p. 45.

If we consider Joseph's appearance in later life, we find continued variance. Charles Francis Adams, later American minister to Great Britain during the Civil War, said that when he met Joseph in 1844 Joseph was "clad in the costume of a journeyman carpenter when about his work. He was a hearty, athletic looking fellow, with blue eyes standing prominently out upon his light complexion, a long nose, and a retreating forehead. He wore striped pantaloons, and a linen jacket, which had not lately seen the washtub, and a beard of some three days growth."⁸

But Bathsheba Smith, a Church member, remembered Joseph more favorably: "The Prophet was a handsome man—splendid looking, a large man, tall and fair and his hair was light. He had a very nice complexion, his eyes were blue, and his hair a golden brown and very pretty."⁹

If we examine the sort of first impression Joseph made, again we find a polarity. Orlando Saunders, who lived in Palmyra as a boy and worked with Joseph on the Smith farm, said Joseph was a good worker but a "greeny, both large and strong."¹⁰ By "greeny" he meant an awkward, somewhat unsophisticated rustic. One investigator agreed, saying he lost interest in the Church after discovering that Joseph was "not such a looking man as I expected to see. He looked green and not very intelligent. I felt disappointed and returned home."¹¹ On the other hand, Jonathan Crosby, who joined the Church, found Joseph's unpretentiousness refreshing. He said: "I thought he was a quear [*sic*] man for a Prophet, at first, he didn't appear exactly as I expected to see a Prophet of God. . . . I found him to be a friendly, cheerful pleasant agreeable man. I could not help liking him."¹²

Nancy Towles, who met Joseph just after he moved to Kirtland, said that he was an "ignorant plough-boy," a "good natured,—low bred sort of chap."¹³ But Newel Knight, who was Joseph's friend and convert in Chenango County, New York, said that from the first Joseph had made a favorable impression on the Knights. He was a hard worker and, Newel said, "I never knew anyone to gain the

⁸Quoted in William A. Mulder and A. Russell Mortensen, eds., *Among the Mormons* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), p. 133.

⁹*Young Woman's Journal* 16 (1905): 549.

¹⁰Frederic G. Mather, "The Early Days of Mormonism," *Lippincott's Magazine* 26 (1880): 198.

¹¹"Journal of Luman Andrus Shurtliff," p. 19, typescript of journal in Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah; hereafter referred to as BYU Special Collections.

¹²"Autobiography of Jonathan Crosby," pp. 13–14, holograph, Library–Archives, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah; hereafter referred to as Church Archives.

¹³Nancy Towles, *Vicissitudes Illustrated* (Portsmouth, N. H.: John Caldwell, 1833), p. 157.

advantage over him, yet he was always kind and kept the good will of his playmates.”¹⁴

Some non-Mormons, however, remembered Joseph as bad-tempered. Michael Morse, later a brother-in-law, said he recalled that when Joseph was courting Emma some of her brothers were ill-disposed toward him “and took occasion to annoy and vex him.” Finally, Joseph had had enough and “threw off his coat and proposed to defend himself.”¹⁵

Luke Johnson, a Church member, said that when a certain man who had grown up with Joseph came to Kirtland as a minister of another denomination, the man displayed bad manners. After staying overnight at the Prophet’s home, he called Joseph a “hypocrite and imposter.” Luke Johnson reported that Joseph “covered the minister’s ears with both hands and kicked him out with his foot.”¹⁶

Peter H. Burnett, who was Joseph’s lawyer in Missouri, and later governor of California, said he attended a meeting in which a certain John McDaniel said publicly that he did not believe in Joseph’s ability to prophesy. The next day, a Sabbath, when Joseph rose to speak he was enraged and said “nobody could slander him in that way, and that if the brethren present would not do something about it he would.”¹⁷

Again, however, there were those who saw Joseph quite differently. Daniel Tyler, a member, told of a time in Kirtland when William Smith—Joseph’s brother—and some others openly challenged the Prophet’s leadership of the Church, and tempers were hot. Joseph called a special meeting and then opened with prayer, while tears ran down his cheeks. Turning his back so that his sorrow would be less visible, Joseph prayed. Daniel Tyler recorded:

I had heard men and women pray—especially the former—from the most ignorant, both as to letters and intellect, to the most learned and eloquent, but never until then had I heard a man address his maker as though he was present, listening as a kind father would listen to the sorrows of a dutiful child. [The prayer] was in behalf of those who accused him of having gone astray and fallen into sin, that the Lord would forgive them and open their eyes that they might see aright. . . . There was no ostentation, no raising of the voice as by enthusiasm, but a plain conversational tone, as a man would address a present friend. . . . It was the crown of all the prayers I had ever heard.¹⁸

¹⁴“Newel Knight’s Journal,” *Scraps of Biography, Tenth Book of the Faith-Promoting Series* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1883), p. 46.

¹⁵*True Latter Day Saints Herald* 26 (15 June 1879): 190–91.

¹⁶“History of Luke Johnson,” Luke Johnson File, Church Archives.

¹⁷Peter H. Burnett, *An Old California Pioneer* (Oakland: Biobooks, 1946), p. 34.

¹⁸“Recollections of the Prophet Joseph Smith,” *Juvenile Instructor* 27 (15 February 1892): 127–28.

In his treatment of others, some nonmembers thought Joseph abrupt, even rude. William A. West, a visitor to Kirtland, said he went toward the temple one day and saw Joseph talking with several of the brethren. They were “talking bank, money, steam mills and so on, and the Prophet was very busy.” West said that Joseph finally broke away, but then another man caught up with him and asked to speak with him for a moment longer. In frustration Joseph exclaimed, ““O God, I wish I were translated”” and walked away grumbling that “everyone wanted to speak with him for just a minute.”¹⁹

At an outdoor meeting in Nauvoo, Joseph was upset when the congregation was distracted by a flock of geese that flew over while he was giving his address. He stopped his sermon and walked off the stand, saying, ““If you are more interested in the quak [*sic*] of a flock of geese than in what I am saying it’s all right!””²⁰

There are several stories that render an entirely different view of Joseph. Emma recalled to her son, Joseph III, how often the elders sought out the Prophet and how much he enjoyed their company. She said to her son: “Well Joseph . . . I do not expect you can do much more in the garden than your father would, and I never wanted him to go into the garden to work for if he did it would not be fifteen minutes before there would be three or four, or sometimes a dozen men round him and they would tramp the ground faster than he would hoe it up.”²¹

Sister Jane S. Richards said emphatically that Joseph took “a personal interest in all his people.”²² A story which seems to support this is told with regard to his last days in Nauvoo. During a heavy rain some members of the Nauvoo Legion had been out all night on patrol, looking for mobbers that threatened the city. When his men rode in at dawn, foot-sore and tired, Joseph was waiting for them and began inquiries about their work. After a time he noticed that one of the men had bled on a log where they were sitting, and Joseph found that the man’s shoes were worn to ribbons and his feet badly cut. Looking further, he found others in the same condition. He

¹⁹William A. West, *A Few Interesting Facts Respecting the Rise, Progress and Pretentions of the Mormons* (n.p., 1837), p. 14.

²⁰Edwin F. Parry, *Stories about Joseph Smith, the Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1934), pp. 22–23.

²¹Emma Smith to Joseph Smith III, 1 August, n.d., but after 1847, in the Emma Bidamon Papers, Library–Archives, the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, the Auditorium, Independence, Mo.; hereafter referred to as RLDS Church Archives.

²²“Reminiscences of Mrs. F. D. Richards,” p. 11, holograph, Hubert Howe Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley, Berkeley, Calif.

immediately invited the men to his store for a new pair of shoes. When the storekeeper told him there were no shoes but only expensive boots, Joseph said, ““Let them have boots then.””²³

Another story provides further support. While Joseph was conversing with some of the brethren, near his home in Nauvoo, a man came up who said that his home had just been burned down by a mob. Joseph took out five dollars, looked at the other men, and said, ““I feel sorry for this brother to the amount of five dollars; how much do you feel sorry?””²⁴

Not only have some of the Prophet’s critics said Joseph was rude to strangers, they have even affirmed that he was contemptuous toward his father. Isaac Hale said that Joseph was ““very sassy and insolent toward his father.””²⁵ Yet a story which Joseph Knight, an early Church member, relates suggests a bond of love between Joseph and his father. When the Prophet saw Martin Harris and Joseph Smith Senior baptized, he was almost overcome with emotion. Joseph Knight related: “Joseph was filled with the spirit to a great degree to see his father and Mr. Harris that had been with him so much [baptized]. He burst out with . . . joy and appeared to want to get out of sight of everybody and would sob and cry and after a while he came in, but he was the most wrought that I have ever seen any man.”²⁶

The author of the *History of Wayne County, New York*, said he had heard reports that indicated Joseph was taciturn unless spoken to.²⁷ Daniel Hendrix, however, remembered that Joseph had a “jovial, easy, I-don’t-care way about him that made him a lot of friends.” Hendrix said “he was a good talker, and would have made a fine stump speaker, if he had the training.”²⁸ Peter H. Burnett said that in “conversation he was slow, and used too many words to express his ideas, and would not generally go directly to the point.” Burnett affirmed that Joseph was an “awkward but vehement speaker.”²⁹ Yet Christopher Crary, a non-Mormon, said “His language, so far as I was qualified to judge, was correct, forcible, and right to the point and convincing.”³⁰ Wandle Mace said the Prophet

²³Parry, *Stories about Joseph Smith*, pp. 126–28.

²⁴Ibid., p. 22.

²⁵E. D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, p. 263.

²⁶“Autobiography of Joseph Knight,” p. 10, MS, Church Archives.

²⁷*History of Wayne County, New York* (Philadelphia: Everts & Ensign, 1877), p. 150.

²⁸*Saint Louis Globe Democrat*, 21 February 1897, p. 34.

²⁹Burnett, *An Old California Pioneer*, p. 40.

³⁰Christopher Crary, *Pioneer & Personal Reminiscences* (Marshalltown, Iowa: Marshall Printing Company, 1893), p. 21.

was “very interesting and eloquent in speech,”³¹ while Job Smith said he was “powerful in invective and occasionally sarcastic.”³²

A Universalist minister who met Joseph complained that he disliked the Prophet’s “swagger and brag.”³³ But David Whitmer, close friend of the Prophet, said that when he first met Joseph “he was a very humble and meek man.”³⁴

There is another discrepancy between the Wayne County historian who said that Joseph was “never known to laugh”³⁵ and Congressman Elisha Potter who said that the Prophet had “a keen wit.”³⁶ And still another between Benjamin F. Johnson who said that no man made greater mistakes in his choice of associates than did Joseph,³⁷ and Peter H. Burnett who said that Joseph was a good judge of men.³⁸

A resident of Kirtland, Sam Brown, claimed that near the end of the Mormon stay in Kirtland he was unwilling to lend more money to Joseph for fear he would not get it back.³⁹ Christopher Crary, on the other hand, said that Joseph was always scrupulously honest in paying debts owed to Crary.⁴⁰ While temporarily estranged from the Prophet following the failure of the Kirtland Safety Society Bank, Apostle Parley P. Pratt accused Joseph of charging “extortionary prices” for three lots of land.⁴¹ David Osborne, however, said that on another occasion Joseph was very upset at some of the rich brethren who bought government land cheaply and resold it in small lots to the poor for a high price. He said Joseph was not pleased with such conduct.⁴² Whatever the matter at hand regarding Joseph Smith, one can find contradictory testimony.

With so much that is controversial about the Prophet, how does the historian go about finding the truth? How does he separate fact from fiction? To start with, let us consider the matter of Joseph’s appearance and the initial impressions he made upon people. In trying

³¹“Autobiography of Wandle Mace,” p. 37, typescript, BYU Special Collections.

³²“Diary of Job Smith,” p. 6, holograph, Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, Calif.

³³W. S. B. was a Universalist who visited Nauvoo in 1844. See the *Universalist Union*, 27 April 1844, p. 393.

³⁴*Deseret News*, 16 August 1878.

³⁵*History of Wayne County*, p. 150.

³⁶Mulder and Mortensen, *Among the Mormons*, p. 134.

³⁷“An Interesting Letter from Benjamin F. Johnson to George F. Gibbs,” p. 17, typescript, BYU Special Collections.

³⁸Burnett, *An Old California Pioneer*, p. 40.

³⁹James H. Kennedy, *Early Days of Mormonism* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1888), p. 158.

⁴⁰Crary, *Pioneer & Personal Reminiscences*, p. 21.

⁴¹Reproduced in Richard Livesey, *An Exposure of Mormonism* (Preston, England: J. Livesey, 1838), p. 9.

⁴²*Juvenile Instructor* 27 (15 March 1892): 173.

to assess Daniel Hendrix's remarks about how destitute Joseph looked, we must keep several things in mind. Daniel Hendrix was eighty-seven years old when he was interviewed as to his recollections of Joseph Smith, and it is difficult to determine how accurate his memory might have been. He indicates that Joseph was habitually dressed in old, tattered clothes. This seems possible in these years, for we know that the Smith family was having a hard time financially.⁴³ Yet, on the other hand, some of the things Hendrix says are not born out by other facts that are firmly established. He says Joseph was lazy, but this is contradicted by other testimony from the period when Joseph was in Palmyra; it is also contradicted by much direct evidence that comes from a later period.⁴⁴ Consequently, one must be careful with an account like Hendrix's, written at a time when it was popular to say disparaging things about Joseph Smith.

It is significant, I think, that when Parley P. Pratt described Joseph in 1830 he said nothing of what Joseph wore but indicated his general size, complexion, and personality. When Parley P. Pratt told us Joseph was a person his eye rested upon with interest, he was saying that he responded affirmatively to Joseph and that he was more interested in his character and personality than in his outward appearance. This would appear to be characteristic of a follower. Bathsheba Smith, a Church member, remembered that Joseph's hair was "pretty" but said nothing about his clothing. One might surmise from this oversight that Joseph's apparel was not unusual so far as Bathsheba was concerned. When Charles Francis Adams saw Joseph as rather careless in his personal appearance, he was probably judging him by the standards of the Boston elite, not by western standards.

When it comes to Joseph's treatment of others, the negative evidence often seems biased. Isaac Hale remembered that Joseph was unkind to his father. But one must ask, how many times did Isaac Hale see Joseph with his father? It could not have been many. Lucy Mack Smith reports only two occasions Joseph and his father were together in Harmony, Pennsylvania.⁴⁵ Thus Isaac Hale may have

⁴³Lucy Mack Smith recounts some of the financial difficulties of the family in her *History of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954), pp. 65, 85, 93-99. Orlando Saunders of Palmyra told William H. Kelly that they were poor. See his testimony in "The Hill Cumorah, and the Book of Mormon," *Saints Herald* 28 (1 June 1881): 165.

⁴⁴"Journal of Newel Knight," p. 46; and Orlando Saunders to William H. Kelly, *Saints Herald* 28 (1 June 1881): 165. Joseph's history cites several occasions where he worked in the fields with the elders, or on the temple, etc., while William Walker says on many a day Joseph cut hay in Nauvoo for ten-hour stretches (*Life Incidents and Travels of Elder William Holmes Walker* [1943], p. 8).

⁴⁵Smith, *History of Joseph Smith*, pp. 93, 133.

made a broad generalization based on a few brief encounters. Other evidence suggests strongly that throughout most of his life Joseph went out of his way to care for his father, that he loved him deeply. If there were some temporary estrangement between them in 1825, when Isaac Hale knew them, there is no evidence it continued. Isaac Hale's purpose when he wrote his affidavit for Hurlbut in 1833 was to discredit Joseph. He was angry about Mormonism in general, and about Joseph's moving away with his daughter. His assertion therefore cannot be taken at face value.

There is enough evidence from what Joseph's friends have said, and from admissions by the Prophet himself, however, to make it evident that he did have a temper. One of his most intimate friends, Benjamin F. Johnson, said Joseph "would allow no arrogance or undue liberties; and criticisms, even by his associates, were rarely acceptable; and contradictions would arouse in him the lion, at once."⁴⁶ We know from newspaper accounts and court records that Joseph was involved in more than one fight. Yet the evidence is plentiful that he had to be provoked by direct insult before he would resort to any use of violence. We must remember it was customary in this period of American history for direct confrontations and even duels to be fought over personal differences. Andrew Jackson, Henry Clay, and Senator Thomas Hart Benton, to name but three, were involved in duels to protect their honor, or public image.⁴⁷ Many a frontier preacher took to brawling when heckled from the crowd. This was a rough age by our standards. As for Joseph, we know that he did not relish fighting, that he felt deep remorse over it. He told Allen Stout in Nauvoo on one occasion that he had been too quarrelsome at times, that "in his youth he had learned to fight much against his will," and "whenever he laid his hand in anger on a fellow creature it gave him sorrow and a feeling of shame."⁴⁸ Apparently Joseph sought repentance in this area.

Nonetheless, evidence of his temper does not offset the many examples we have of his general tendency to treat people with courtesy and consideration. Peter H. Burnett said in this regard: "There was a kind, familiar look about him, that pleased you. He was very courteous in discussion, admitting what he did not intend to controvert, and would not oppose you abruptly but had due deference to your feelings."⁴⁹

⁴⁶"Benjamin F. Johnson to George F. Gibbs," p. 4.

⁴⁷See Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Americans: The National Experience* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), p. 208.

⁴⁸Cragun Cox, "Reminiscences of Joseph Smith," MS, Utah State Historical Society, Salt Lake City.

⁴⁹Burnett, *An Old California Pioneer*, p. 40.

If the occasion in Kirtland when he dismissed the plea of the elder for another minute of his time is accurately reported, it would not be sufficient evidence by itself of his general impatience or lack of consideration. He may have been extremely tired or under pressure to start working upon something else. All of us have had such moments when our patience runs thin.

Negative or positive impressions about Joseph's language and manners are, again, dependent upon who is doing the observing. Joseph was not nor did he pretend to be an educated man. Still, his skills seem suitable for his time and place. This was an age when Andrew Jackson reached the White House, and Jackson was neither polished nor educated.

So far as the Prophet's sense of humor goes, the Wayne County historian says Joseph was "good natured," thus contradicting himself on this point. We have an example of Joseph's humor preserved for us by Willard Richards, who said that one day Joseph told him he was going to "study in some law books and become a great lawyer." It might have been that Emma had been encouraging his studying law, for she told her son, Joseph III, after the Prophet's death that Joseph would have avoided many legal entanglements had he known more about the law. In any case, on the occasion described by Willard Richards, Joseph's way of studying "was to put his head down on the law book and fall asleep." Willard Richards said that "he went to snoring."⁵⁰ Joseph did not think much of lawyers, which was a widely held attitude in the early nineteenth century.

On the question raised by Parley P. Pratt and Sam Brown on the matter of Joseph's financial integrity, Professor Larry Wimmer of the Economics Department, Keith Rooker, then of the law school, and I have spent several years in research.⁵¹ The financial issue was the subject of much controversy at the time and still is among a few historians. Many accused Joseph of reckless speculation and even financial fraud. They maintained that the Prophet had imprudently invested in land and charged exorbitant prices for it, that he had established an illegal bank with intent to print worthless currency and exchange it for valuable goods, that he ran up an enormous debt and fled from Kirtland to avoid paying it. We found that these charges were made on insufficient evidence and without an understanding of the economic forces operating in Kirtland. It is true the Prophet bought land in Kirtland and resold it, but Kirtland land prices were

⁵⁰See Joseph Smith's Journal kept by Willard Richards, 18 March 1843, MS, Church Archives.

⁵¹Marvin S. Hill, Keith Rooker, and Larry T. Wimmer, *Kirtland Economy Revisited: A Market Critique of Sectarian Economics* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1977).

not out of line with the general demand for land, nor with land prices in nearby communities. Joseph had large debts as a result of his business transactions, but he also had large assets with which he could have paid his debts, had the economy not collapsed. Joseph started his bank to transfer landed wealth into ready capital and, had he been able to secure a charter from the state legislature, he could have established a modest but successful bank. But in 1836–37, for political and economic reasons, the state legislature granted no new charters for banks, and Joseph had to improvise. He set up an anti-banking society that was in fact a simple corporation with note-issuing powers. He may have acted on bad legal advice here, but similar banks were being established elsewhere in the state at this time.⁵² The number of currency notes issued were not nearly as many as critics have said, and when Joseph learned that the notes would not circulate at face value he withdrew his support from the bank. Joseph sustained larger personal losses here than did any other person, so that in no sense did he risk other people's money where he would not risk his own. Joseph was a capitalist, but an honest one. When he reached Nauvoo, he tried to settle many of his Kirtland debts.

Careful historical research can help us to understand why the Prophet did many things and can offset the negative interpretations some try to impose. The existence of such contradictory evidence, however, should make us hesitate to jump to hasty or unwarranted conclusions or to claim definitiveness for historical studies that are more in the nature of interim reports.

If a look at the human side of Joseph Smith seems at times somewhat unflattering, it comes from no desire to diminish him. It comes rather from the belief that at times in the Church we tend to expect too much of him, to ask him to be more than human in everything he did. This may lead to some disillusionment, if occasionally we find that he did not measure up to all our expectations. The early Saints usually avoided that kind of mistake. Brigham Young said of Joseph: "Though I admitted in my feelings and knew all the time that Joseph was a human being and subject to err, still it was none of my business to look after his faults."⁵³ Brigham chose to stress the positive side.

Parley P. Pratt said that Joseph was "like other men, as the prophets and apostles of old, liable to errors and mistakes which were

⁵²Crary, *Pioneer & Personal Reminiscences*, p. 37.

⁵³*Journal of Discourses*, 4:297.

not inspired from heaven, but managed by . . . [his] own judgment.”⁵⁴

These brethren knew Joseph as a man with human weaknesses, yet they believed in his divine calling and in his greatness. It seemed to them that what he had achieved as a prophet far outweighed his imperfections. In the long run their love of him and their faith in his calling were decisive in shaping their lives. Seeing Joseph in his various moods, they still called him a prophet of God. That seems to me to be the right attitude for a Latter-day Saint. I do not like to see potentially good Church members alienated when they find that Joseph had human limitations. There are certain nonmembers who would try to take advantage of these for their own purposes. But the faithful will see the Lord’s will at work in his Church, even though He must effect that will by the means of earthen vessels. Aware of some things earthen in Joseph, Benjamin F. Johnson still had this to say of him: “From my early youth to the day of his martyrdom I was closely associated with the Prophet Joseph Smith, was his trusted friend and business partner, his relative, and bosom friend. And I knew him as the purest, the truest and noblest of manly men.”⁵⁵

Joseph said of himself, “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 Saviour, to deviate from that perfect path in which all are commanded to walk.”⁵⁶ He also said: “God is my friend, in him I shall find comfort. I have given my life unto his hands. I am prepared to go at his call and desire to be with Christ. I count not my life dear to me only to do his will.”⁵⁷ And he said: “The Lord does reveal himself to me. I know it.”⁵⁸

Those who would understand the Prophet must give consideration to his spiritual side as well as his human side. It was his strong commitment to things spiritual which made him so aware of his human failings, so desirous to overcome his weaknesses and to give his all to the work of the Lord.

⁵⁴*Elders Journal* 1 (July, 1838): 50.

⁵⁵Benjamin F. Johnson, “Mormonism as an Issue: An Open Letter to the Editor of the Arizona Republican,” n.d.

⁵⁶*Latter-day Saints Messenger and Advocate* 1 (December, 1834): 40.

⁵⁷Joseph Smith to Emma Smith, 6 June 1832, Joseph Smith Letters Collection, RLDS Church Archives.

⁵⁸Quoted in the *New York Spectator*, 23 September 1843.