



10-1-1984

Editor's Introduction

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Recommended Citation

Studies, BYU (1984) "Editor's Introduction," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 24 : Iss. 4 , Article 2.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol24/iss4/2>

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Editor's Introduction

In past decades Mormon scholars have intensified efforts to learn everything possible on the setting and events of the early Restoration. In its Spring 1970 issue, *BYU Studies* published an earlier collection of articles focusing on the New York backgrounds and treating, among other topics, Joseph Smith's reputation among his Palmyra neighbors, the translation of the Book of Mormon, and the early impact of the Church. In his editorial introduction, guest editor Truman G. Madsen expressed a sense of having "opened some territory" and suggested that additional studies were needed of such areas as Joseph Smith's involvement with the Stowell silver-mining venture, of his early legal trials, and of Smith family activities in the years from 1823 to 1827. Study of this formative period has steadily continued. During the last fifteen years, in addition to work appearing elsewhere, *BYU Studies* has published articles on Joseph Smith's 1826 trial (Winter 1972), the archaeology of the Peter Whitmer farm (Winter 1973), Joseph Knight's recollections of Joseph Smith (Autumn 1976), and the pre-translation events that the Hofmann "Anthon transcript" claimed to illuminate (Summer 1980).

A surge of interest in Mormon origins was stimulated when LDS officials made public what were assumed to be authentic letters associating the pre-Mormon Joseph Smith with searching for treasure by means of seer stones and hazel wands: one dated 18 June 1825 purportedly from Joseph Smith to Josiah Stowell, the other dated 23 October 1830 purportedly from Martin Harris to W. W. Phelps. Texts were printed in the *LDS Church News* in the spring of 1985, and much debate followed among Latter-day Saint scholars, the national press, and the anti-Mormon publicity mills. As this issue of *BYU Studies* goes to press in late April 1986, court hearings continue on the violent events involving key persons in the acquisition of the previously mentioned letters and also on charges of document fraud. But no matter what the legal verdict on the treasure letters released last year, the underlying historical issues deserve close study com-

mensurate with the extensive publicity given the problem of Mormon origins.

Since history is the ongoing evaluation of the meaning of records, it may expand with new discoveries or retract its base if sources prove unreliable. History also discloses parallels, often not the result of borrowing but of reflecting the common aspirations of humanity and the uniqueness of personal experience.

BYU Studies here presents a special issue collecting Mormon scholarship on the mythic folk religion and money digging that surrounded the Smith family in early New York years. Dean C. Jessee reviews the discovery and information made available to scholars on the 1825 letter of Joseph Smith and the 1830 letter of Martin Harris. Next, Ronald W. Walker offers a survey of the extensive tradition that lies behind the folk-magic practices alluded to in the letters, followed by an essay expressing a more personal response to the implications. Marvin S. Hill probes the range of supernaturalism around the Prophet and also the larger religious context of his reaction to it. And Richard L. Anderson moves to the question of whether Joseph Smith was involved in searching for treasure after Book of Mormon translation.

We present these essays, not as the final word on the questions of early Mormon history, but as contributions from different points of view within the range of faithful Latter-day Saint historical scholarship, contributions to our understanding of Joseph Smith in the context of his own time. For it is only by coming to understand the ways in which the Prophet of the Restoration was a man of his own time and place that we can hope to gain an appreciation of the extent to which he transcended those conditions.