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and ed.

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Book Reviews

DEAN C. JESSEE, comp. and ed. *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1984. xxviii + 736 pp. \$18.95.

Reviewed by Marvin S. Hill, professor of history, Brigham Young University.

There is a strange paradox in much of what has been written about Joseph Smith. Believer and disbeliever alike have refused to tolerate human weakness in the man: believers by ignoring or denying any evidence that Joseph ever acted out of human needs or human limitations; disbelievers by disparaging him for imperfection. In the ideological warfare that has largely dominated the historical treatment of the Prophet, one side has seen him as chosen, a saintly spokesman for the Lord whose every word and every act is a divine command or a moral lesson;¹ the other side has reversed that immaculate image and portrayed him as depraved, hedonistic, lustful for power and worldly pleasure, a model of the religious hypocrite and fraud.² In approaching Joseph from this absolutistic perspective, the antagonists have allowed the historical Joseph Smith to nearly vanish. The few attempts to break free of these cast-iron moldings have reached but a small number of readers.³

Dean Jessee's new volume, *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, affords Mormon and non-Mormon readers a chance to look at the sources that Joseph Smith himself produced, material heretofore examined by only a handful of scholars. Here is a perspective of the

¹While Francis M. Gibbons, in his recent biography, introduces Joseph Smith by acknowledging his imperfections (vii), his initial chapter argues that the foundation of Joseph's power was prayer. The implication is that the Lord intervened in answer to those prayers, but more importantly that Joseph, in his conduct, is a role model for the ideal Mormon. No mention is made of the alternative accounts of Joseph's first vision, nor is anything said about Josiah Stowell's comment that in 1825, when he met Joseph, Stowell found him not particularly religious. Any money digging activity is emphatically denied. (See *Joseph Smith: Martyr, Prophet of God* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1977], vii-32, 43-46.)

²To this day the most widely read biography is Fawn M. Brodie's *No Man Knows My History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945; 2d ed., 1971), which uses the Church's position on several issues as a foil against which to present contradictory evidence.

³Donna Hill's *Joseph Smith, the First Mormon* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1977) attempts a more neutral interpretation. At present her book has sold only 20,000 hardbound copies and an additional 2,000 in paperback. Francis Gibbons's more traditional biography of Joseph Smith has sold over 40,000 hardbound copies. At this writing, Jessee's book has sold about 12,000 copies in two printings, and a third has been ordered.

Prophet that has largely escaped us, and it is not surprising that this Joseph does not fit entirely into either of the dichotomous molds. For this reason, *The Personal Writings* constitutes the most important source book on the Mormon Prophet to be published since B. H. Roberts edited Joseph's *History of the Church* just after the turn of the century.

The new volume includes unpublished holographs, dictated manuscripts, and material previously printed but now somewhat inaccessible. Jessee begins by reproducing Joseph's personal diaries written between 1832 and 1839 and enhances their significance by designating in large type those parts actually written by Joseph himself. As Jessee argues, these afford us a more direct insight into the mind and spirit of the Prophet than do the dictated passages or excerpts lifted from the diaries of others, which make up so much of the *History of the Church*.

Joseph's personal notations in his diary hardly support the allegation that he was disingenuous. Rather, they show him to have been deeply committed to his prophetic calling, a missionary, a millennialist, and a leader concerned about his flock, a man dependent upon the Lord in his every undertaking. Some short excerpts illustrate his strongly religious orientation:⁴

[November 27, 1832] Oh may God grant that I may be directed in all my thoughts Oh bless thy Servent Amen
(P. 16)

[October] 6th, [1833] arrived at Springfield [Erie County, Pennsylvania] on the Sabbath. . . held a meeting at Brother Ruds had a great congregation paid good attention Oh God Seal our te[s]timony—to their hearts Amen—
(P. 17)

Sunday the 13th [October 1833] held a meeting at freeman Nickerson[']s had a large congregation Brother Sidney preached & I bear record to the people the Lord gave his spirit in [a] marvilous maner for which I am thankful.
(P. 18)

November 13th [1833] in the morning at 4 Oh clock I was awoke by Brother Davis knocking at <MY> door saying Brother Joseph come git <UP> and see the signs in the heavens I arrose and beheld to my great Joy the stars fall from heaven yea they fell like hail stones a litteral fullfillment of the word of God as recorded in the holy scriptures and a sure sign that the coming of Christ is clost at hand.
(Pp. 20–21)

⁴Angle brackets in the quoted passages indicate marginal or interlinear additions to the original manuscript. Dean Jessee's editorial interpolations are in square brackets. I have omitted manuscript page numbers and line ending indications.

March 1th [1834] there is a small church in this place⁵ tha[t] seem to be strong in th[e] faith Oh may God keep them in the faith and save them and lead them to Zion.

(P. 27)

March 3rd [1834] this morning intend[ed] to start on our Journey to <the> east <BUT did not start> O may God bless us with the gift of utterance to accomplish the Journey and the Errand on which we are sent.

(P. 28)

September 23.th [1835] My heart is full of desire to day, to <BE> blessed of the God, of Abraham; with prosperity, untill I will be able to pay all my depts; for it is <THE> delight of my soul to <BE> honest.

(P. 58)

Tuesday 22d [December 1835] At home Continued my studys O may God give me learning even Language and indo[w] me with qualifcations to magnify his name while I live.

(P. 117)

On the other hand, the account of his history written in 1832 shows remarkable candor in Joseph's admission that he had hoped to profit from the gold plates (7) and then from the publication of the Book of Mormon (228). Contrary to his mother's recollections, he indicates that he was well read in the scriptures, beginning serious study at the age of twelve. He tells us that he was intimately acquainted with other denominations, that he pondered the existence of God and was persuaded by the argument of design and purpose in the universe, and that even before his First Vision he had concluded that all men had apostatized from the true faith. In his account he did not claim that he was isolated from or oblivious to the forces at work in his culture, nor that he did not endure a personal struggle to discover his religious destiny (4–6).

In the letters which Joseph wrote from 1829 through June 1844, spiritual and religious forces seem evident, as well as those human limitations that all men suffer. In a letter to Hyrum Smith in March 1831, Joseph marveled at the divine power manifest through him:

this morning after being Colled out of my bed in the night to go a small distance I went and had ~~and~~ an awful strugle with satan <BUT> being armed with the power of god he was cast out and the woman is Clothed in hir right mind the Lord worketh wonders in this land.

(P. 231)

Joseph's humility and dependence on the Lord are shown in a letter he wrote to Emma Smith in June 1832:

⁵Wesleyville, Pennsylvania.

I have visited a grove which is Just back of the town almost every day where I can be Secluded from the eyes of any mortal and there give vent to all the feelings of my heart in meaditation and prayr I have Called to mind all the past moments of my life and am left to morn ~~w~~ <and> Shed tears of sorrow for my folly in Sufering the adversary of my Soul to have so much power over me as he has <had in times past> but God is mercif and has fo[r]given my Sins and I r[e]joice that he Sendeth forth the Comferter unto as many as believe and humbleeth themselves before him.

(P. 238)

A letter to Emma from New York City in October 1832 reflects Joseph's prophetic perspective. Joseph noted the great buildings and material achievements of the city for which he said the Lord could not be displeased: "only aganst man is the anger of the Lord Kindled because they Give him not the Glory." He warned that "their iniquites shall <BE> visited upon their heads and their works shall be burned up with unquenchable fire." Joseph found repulsive the worldliness he saw beneath the surface: "nothing but the dress of the people makes them look fair and butiful all is deformity their is something in every countenance that is disagreeable with few exceptions." Nonetheless he refused to condemn these people prematurely, saying, "When I reflect upon this great city like Ninevah not desearning their right hand from their left yea more than two hundred <thousand> souls my bowels is filled with compasion towards them and I am determind to lift up my voice in this City and leave the Event with God" (252–53).

Joseph's letters reveal his prevailing pessimism about man, society, and government in the nineteenth century. "The plain fact is this," he told N. C. Saxton, editor of a newspaper in Rochester, New York, in January 1833: "the power of God begins to fall upon the Nations . . . and they hastily are preparing to act the part allotted them when the Lord rebukes the nations, when he shall rule them with a rod of iron & break them in peaces like a potters vessel." He warned the editor:

The Lord has declared to his servants some Eighteen months since that he was then withdrawing his spirit from the earth, and we can see that such is the fact for not only the churches are dwindling away, but there are no conversions, or but very few, and this is not all, the governments of the earth are thrown into confusion & division, and distruction to the eye of the spiritual beholder seemes to be writen by the finger of an invisable hand in Large capitals upon almost evry thing we behold—

(P. 272)

Joseph's sense of impending doom and millennial imminence is also evident:

A scene of *bloodshed* as has not a parallel in the hystory of our nation pestalence hail famine and earthquake will sweep the wicked of this generation from off the face of this Land to open and prepare the way for the return of the lost tribes of Israel from the north country— . . . For there are those now living upon the earth whose eyes shall not be closed in death until they see all these things which I have spoken fulfilled Rem- [em]ber these things.

(Pp. 273–74)

So much of what Joseph Smith did in building the political kingdom in Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois grew out of these pessimistic expectations.

Several letters written in 1833 and 1834 suggest how challenging to his prophetic calling was the news from Zion that the Saints had been forced into an agreement that they would leave Jackson County before the turn of the year. Joseph showed initial uncertainty, in August 1833, as to the reason for the persecution and the remedy, saying, of the redemption of Zion, “god is pleased to keep it hid from mine eyes the means how exactly the thing will be done” (285). He wrote that the persecution was not due to wrongdoing in Missouri but “for the sins of the chirch.” The persecution was to serve as a test and a sign “that all the ends of the Earth may know that you are not speculiting with them for Lucre but you are willing to die for the cause you have espoused” (286). He concluded with a somewhat cautious commitment to military intervention:

We have had the word of the Lord that you shall [be] deliverd from you[r] dainger and <SHAll> again flourish in spite of hell . . . we wait the Comand of God to do whatever he plese and if <HE> shall say go up to Zion and defend thy Brotheren by <THE sword> we fly and we count not our live[s] dear to us.

(Pp. 287, 288)

On 10 December 1833, Joseph expressed himself more positively that the Saints would soon be delivered:

God . . . will not fail to exicute Judgment upon your enemies and to avenge his own elect that cry unto him day and night—Behold he will not fail you he will come with ten thousands of his saints and all his advisaries shall be distroyed by the breath of his lips!

(P. 310)

Again, on 30 March, he wrote to Edward Partridge:

God will strike through kings in the day of his wrath but what he will deliver his people; and what do you suppose he could do with a few *mobbors* in Jackson County, where, ere long, he will set his feet, when earth & heaven shall tremble!

(P. 319)

Yet by the time he had organized Zion's Camp and journeyed to the banks of the Mississippi River, in June 1834, Joseph was aware that he and the Saints would have to settle for much less than the restoration of the evicted Church members. He wrote to Emma at that time:

Our numbers and means are altogether too small for the accomplishment of such a great enterprise, but they are falling daily and our only hope is that whilst we deter the enemy, and terrify them for a little season (for we learn by the means of some spies we send out for that purpose that they are greatly terrified) notwithstanding they are endeavoring to make a formidable stand, and their numbers amount to several hundred.

(Pp. 323–24)

Joseph urged at this point that Church members hurriedly send in men and supplies for the redemption of Zion. But when no further help came, and the cholera hit the elders, Joseph had to abandon his effort and return to Kirtland to endure a hostile reaction by many of the Saints. To counter this, he wrote to the Church leaders in Missouri that “two years from the Eleventh of September next . . . is the appointed time for the redemption of Zion” (330). In his diary he wrote, in September 1835, “we . . . Covenan[n]ted to struggle for this thing u[n]till death shall dissolve this union” (59). But circumstances were such in Kirtland and Missouri in 1836 that another attempt at military redemption became impossible, and the matter was deferred to a later day.

There is evidence in these letters of Joseph's continued involvement in treasure hunting. According to Ebenezer Robinson, Joseph was informed by William Burgess that there was money hidden in a cellar of a house in Salem, Massachusetts (349). Worried with debt, Joseph inquired of the Lord and was told, “I will give this city into your hands, that you shall have power over it, insomuch that . . . its wealth pertaining to gold and silver shall be yours” (D&C 111:4). A letter to Emma from Salem, dated 19 August 1836, confirms the accuracy of Ebenezer Robinson's report. Joseph said, “We have found the house since Bro. Burgess left us . . . it will require much care and patience to rent or buy it. We think we shall be able to effect it” (350). Later, in Far West, Joseph encouraged Hyrum Smith to join him in a search for money. Locating an old Indian mound nearby which held promise of treasure, Joseph wrote to Hyrum in May 1838, “Verily thus Saith the Lord unto Hiram Smith if he will come strateaway to Far West and inquire of his brother it shall be shown him how that he may be freed from de[b]t and obtain a grate treasure in the earth even so Amen” (358).

Joseph's letters from Liberty Jail in 1838 reveal his deepest fears of alienation and disloyalty at a time when many of his most faithful

followers were abandoning the faith. He particularly was concerned about Emma's attitude. He wrote her on 4 November 1838, "do not forsake me nor the truth but remember me" (362). In a subsequent letter of 4 April 1839, he told her, "never give up an old tried friend, who has waded through all manner of toil, for your sake, and throw him away becau[se] fools may tell <YOU> he <has> some *faults*" (427).

Joseph's deep-seated fear that many might abandon him and the faith led him to be more than generous to wayward Saints who had betrayed him in Missouri. In June 1840, he told W. W. Phelps, who had testified against him in Richmond at the preliminary hearing:

Inasmuch as long-suffering patience and mercy have ever characterized the dealings of our heavenly Father towards the humble and penitent, I feel disposed to copy the example. . . .

It is true, that we have suffered much in consequence of your behavior—*the cup of gall already full* . . . was indeed *filled to overflowing* when you turned against us.

(P. 472)

But, Joseph added, "having been delivered from the hands of wicked men by the mercy of our God, we say it is your privilage to be delivered from the power of the Adversary—" (472–73).

However, Joseph had small sympathy for any who directly questioned his authority or would seem to undermine his leadership. When he heard that Almon W. Babbitt was drawing some Saints away to Kirtland, rather than guiding them to Nauvoo, Joseph wrote indignantly: "It is in consequence of aspiring men that Kirtland has been forsaken. How frequently has your humble servant been envied in his office by such characters who endeavoured to raise themselves to power at my expense" (476).

While the early 1840s in Nauvoo were years of progress materially and spiritually, with some of Joseph's greatest revelations coming at this time, still they were also years of trial and inner turmoil. Joseph introduced plural marriage to an increasing number of his most faithful followers and added to the number of his own polygamous relationships. No development in this period has had a greater influence in convincing skeptics that Joseph Smith was a worldly, lustful man. His letter to Sarah Ann Whitney, a new plural wife, written in August 1842, will no doubt be seen as confirmation by some readers. It shows Joseph caught up in a relationship which he seemingly sought to conceal from his wife Emma. In hiding because of a writ issued by Lilburn W. Boggs, Joseph was evidently beset with a terrible loneliness. He wrote to

Brother and Sister Newel K. Whitney and their daughter, Sarah Ann, “my feelings are so strong for you since what has passed lately between us, that the time of my absence from you seems so long, and dreary, that it seems, as if I could not live long in this way.” He urged them to visit him at Carlos Grainger’s: “all three of ~~y~~ you ~~come~~ <can> come and see me in the fore part of the night . . . it is the will of God that you should comfort <ME>.” Clearly Joseph’s desires were not primarily sexual, for he invited the parents to the rendezvous. He desperately needed companionship. But he knew of Emma’s increasing jealousy and warned his friends: “the only thing to be careful of; is to find out when Emma comes then you cannot be safe.” He added, “Only be careful to escape observation, as much as possible.” His fears of exposure were so intense because his life was threatened. He advised, “Burn this letter as soon as you read it; keep all locked up in your breasts, my life depends upon it” (539–40). Plural marriage was a nightmare for Joseph as it generated fears, dangers, and conflicting loyalties which made his prophetic role that much more difficult.

Increasing tension had developed between the Prophet and Emma by 1844, so that it may be that he felt closer to some of his other wives than he did to her. This is suggested by the contrast between what he wrote to Emma and to the Lawrence sisters on the same day, 23 June. He told Emma, “If god ever opens a door that is possible for me I will see you again. I do not know where I shall go, or what I shall do. . . . If you conclude to go to Kirtland, Cincinatti, or any other place, I wish you would contrive to inform me, this evening.” He told Maria and Sarah Lawrence, “I want for you to tarry in Cincinnati untill you hear from me” (598). He seemed much more certain that he would see Maria and Sarah Lawrence than that he would ever see Emma again.

It is clear from this letter, and another which he wrote to employ lawyer Orville H. Browning for his hearing on 29 June (612), as well as his desperate note to Legion commander Jonathan Dunham, on 27 June, to fly to his rescue (616–17), that Joseph was not resigned to martyrdom on that fateful day. As implacable as were his enemies, as helpless as he was in their midst in Carthage Jail, he still hoped and expected to survive. Joseph Smith was not a quitter, and he relished living too much to surrender it without a fight. When the mob charged up the stairs at Carthage Jail, he fired his pistol three times into the crowd and tried to escape by the window. Never a fatalist, he went down as he had lived, fighting for his rights, his religion, his life, with no quarter given.

Dean Jessee has provided us through this splendid collection a more complete, more complex but also more appealing Joseph. One

does not find evidence here that Joseph Smith was omniscient, that he had overcome all his human limitations. He was beset with uncertainties about the future, about his friends and enemies, about the success of his cause, about the preservation of his life. But neither does one find here any evidence that Joseph was a religious pretender, so wicked that the Lord could not have used him as an instrument of gospel restoration. This is a Joseph Smith from whom all may benefit by knowing him better. Dean Jessee has made the quest for the historical Joseph less difficult than it has been.