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Early Mormonism and the Magic World View by D. Michael Quinn

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QUINN, D. MICHAEL. *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987. xxii; 228 pp.; 94 figures. \$14.95.

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In the past several years there has been a noticeably growing interest in alternative explanations for Mormon origins. Perhaps this is due to a certain lingering uneasiness that the present theories of cause are inadequate to explain the magnitude of the effects. At any rate, the most recent attempt to find a more satisfying explanation for Joseph Smith and the religion he founded is D. Michael Quinn's *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*. The major strength of Quinn's book is the incredible breadth of its research. The bibliography appended to the main text is no less than sixty-seven pages in length and lists a multitude of arcane and often inaccessible volumes, including even rare medieval manuscripts. A second strength of the book for the non-Mormon reader is a total lack of any pro-Mormon bias. Although he is a Latter-day Saint, and despite his modest statement of faith in the introduction (xviii–xix), Quinn is clearly no LDS apologist. There is not a single page of the main text that would appear to be motivated by loyalty to the LDS church or its doctrines or to be apologetic of the Church's interests.

Despite these strengths, Quinn's book suffers from major flaws. Time and again his thesis shapes his data rather than the other way around. For example, in chapter 2 Quinn argues that Oliver Cowdery's rod was a forked divining rod, even though he himself admits (204) that the other rods we know of in the early Church were probably straight and that "use of a straight divining rod was virtually unknown in Joseph Smith's America" (34). This being the case, the natural assumption would be that Oliver's rod was like the others not a divining rod at all, but a staff on the model of the biblical rod of Aaron. Yet Quinn holds out for the forked rod—not because of any independent evidence, but because that is what supports his hypothesis.

Quinn attempts to establish that Joseph was controlled by astrological considerations, even to the point of begetting children only when Jupiter was favorable. However, Joseph was a Capricorn, whose ruling planet is *Saturn* (as Quinn admits on page 62). But since Quinn's theory needs Jupiter rather than Saturn, Quinn shows merely that "Jupiter had enormous significance for Joseph Smith" (63), and thereafter refers to Jupiter, not Saturn, as Joseph's ruling planet. To transform Saturn into Jupiter truly is magical, but it is also a distortion of the facts. If Joseph was indeed controlled by astrological considerations, why was he so totally unconcerned with his *actual* ruling planet?

What Quinn does not reveal, but what every astrologer knows, is that *any* date can be made astrologically significant, propitious or ominous, by using different guides, systems, and criteria. The beauty of astrology as a confidence game is that there are enough variables to produce any desired result for a given date or to explain any outcome in retrospect merely by manipulating the various systems and criteria according to the needs of one's client. In tying Joseph's marriage dates to astrologically propitious days, Quinn himself lists (60–62) the new moon, three days after the new moon, seven days after, thirteen after, fourteen after, twenty-eight after, twenty-nine after, the first day the moon was in Gemini, the second in Virgo, the second in Aquarius, the second in Pisces, the first in Aries, the first in Leo (plus six other "Mansions of the Moon" listed in the guides but not specified) and *every* Thursday. This gives a possible total of twenty-four different days of any month that could be considered astrologically significant marriage dates for Joseph according to Quinn's cited sources alone. Can the fact that Joseph married some of his wives on some of these days seriously be proposed as evidence of his being astrologically controlled?

Quinn also proposes that the birth dates for Joseph's children are astrologically significant since "all of Smith's children were conceived in either February or September" (and were therefore born in November or June). This statement is simply, as a matter of record, untrue. The Smith family Bible lists the birth of "The 7th son, Feb. 6th, 1842." The Prophet's cousin Almyra Mack Covey refers to this birth in a letter dated 24 February 1842 to Harriet Whittemore: "Joseph's wife has had a babe but has buried it." This is confirmed by a second letter from Jacob Scott to Mary Warnock in March of 1842. The full references are in Quinn's own sources (Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery, *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith, Prophet's Wife, "Elect Lady," Polygamy's Foe* [New York: Doubleday, 1984], 103, 324 n. 29). This is a clear case of omitting the child whose birth didn't fit the theory. Quinn also dismisses the April births of Thaddeus and Louisa by telling us they must have been a month or two premature, but how does he know? There is, in fact, no historical evidence of prematurity, and Quinn offers none (beyond the requirement of his theory that it be so). Any theory that ignores or arbitrarily dismisses contrary evidence lacks credibility.

Quinn seems constitutionally unable to view the evidence apart from a prior commitment to his hypothesis. A prime illustration of this is afforded by his discussion of the dove medallion (fig. 39). On pages 73–74, Quinn's logic moves from (1) that "an inscription on the back of the medallion reads, 'Fortitude [Masonic] Lodge No. 42,' " to (2) that "ten of the fifty-one grand lodges in the United States report having adopted the dove and olive branch as a Masonic jewel," to (3) that "the dove occupies a high place among our Masonic symbols," to (4) that

“in the early nineteenth-century grand lodges of England and Pennsylvania, the dove medallion was to be suspended from the neck outside the clothing,” and then concludes that for Joseph, a Mason who had lived in Pennsylvania, “if the dove medallion had any symbolic significance to him, that meaning was probably outside of Freemasonry.” This appears to be willful obfuscation, and the objective reader is put off by the forced imposition of Quinn’s theory on evidence which clearly contradicts it. A second medallion (fig. 40) is discussed in the chapter on talismans (75–76), but Quinn offers no reasons why this piece of jewelry should be considered a “talisman” any more than my wife’s opal pendant or grandma’s brooch. Why it is pertinent to his thesis remains a mystery.

A further example will show how Quinn’s imposition of his hypothesis on incompatible data extends even to misrepresenting the physical evidence. On pages 72–73 Quinn interprets the symbols on Joseph’s cane (fig. 38) to be a Jupiter symbol, above a crown, above the initials J. S. These, he suggests, convey the message “Jupiter—reigns over—Joseph Smith.” However, a close look at the photograph (fig. 38) reveals to anyone not previously committed to the “magic” theory that the “Jupiter symbol” is not in fact the Jupiter symbol at all, but merely an x standing on a quarter circle, and that it does not stand above the crown, but rather *within* it. It is in fact “the jewel in the crown.” The physical evidence claimed for the “Jupiter connection” is simply not there. Quinn even admits that the jewel only “resembles” (72) or is “similar to” (fig. 38) the Jupiter sign, but when one’s method is to work backward from conclusion to evidence, even a chance resemblance will do.

Quinn often fails to give the full scope of his evidence or to explain its context adequately. For example, he uses a single clipped sentence from Brigham Young’s Office Journal—“an effort was made in the days of Joseph to establish astrology”—no fewer than three times (58, 63, 216), yet the reader is never given a larger context for the statement. It is never explained. But who made the attempt? Who resisted it? When was it made, and why did it fail? Does Quinn know the answers? If so, why doesn’t he give us the information? If not, why does he return again and again to this carefully sanitized and trimmed little snippet as though it were evidence for his theory? In an unguarded moment, Quinn reveals a little more (but still not all) of this sentence, just enough of a glimpse at the larger context to see that it was actually hostile to astrology, and therefore to Quinn’s thesis: “it would not do to favor astrology—an effort was made in the days of Joseph to establish astrology” (216).

Another major flaw in Quinn’s work is his overly generous sense of what constitutes evidence and proof. For example, he takes Lucy Mack Smith’s *denial* of magical practices to be proof of such

practices. Lucy's exact words were, "let not my reader suppose that because I shall pursue another topic for a season that we stopt our labor and went at trying to win the faculty of Abrac, drawing Magic circles or sooth saying to the neglect of all kinds of business" (54). This Quinn ingenuously interprets as an admission that they *did* practice these very things, but without stopping their labors and neglecting all kinds of business! If I suggest the reader need not suppose I spend my entire summer vacation lying on a beach in Tahiti eating bon-bons, that hardly constitutes testimony that I spend any part of my vacation so doing. The ironic character of such statements has to be obvious to anyone not desperate for evidence—any evidence.

Another example of Quinn's strange sense of what proves what is provided by chapter 4 on magic parchments and occult mentors. Quinn concludes from the fact that Hyrum Smith may once have owned a dagger and two parchments with magical symbols on them that Hyrum, Joseph, and generations of the entire Smith family must have believed in and practiced magic. Even if these items were Hyrum's—and that provenance is by no means certain—it proves only that Hyrum once owned them, nothing more. It does not tell us why he had them, how he got them, what he thought of them, whether or how he may have used them, or what his brother Joseph may have thought about them. To refer to these artifacts as the "Joseph Smith family parchments" (97) is a willful distortion, and Quinn's conclusions about the possible meaning of these artifacts are pure speculation. I happen to have among my cherished possessions a St. Christopher medallion, but that does not make me a practicing Roman Catholic any more than my menorah makes me Jewish or my Egyptian religious papyri make me a closet pagan. Moreover, my possession of these objects certainly does not prove that my brother, Reid, is a Catholic, Jew, or pagan. Such "proof" violates logic, wouldn't stand up in court, and shouldn't stand up in historical research.

In the case of the Jupiter coin, this same extrapolation error is compounded with a very uncritical acceptance of the artifact in the first place. If the coin *were* Joseph's, that fact alone would tell us nothing about what it meant to him. But in fact there is insufficient evidence to prove that the artifact ever belonged to the Prophet. The coin was completely unknown until 1930 when an aging Charles Bidamon sold it to Wilford Wood. The *only* evidence that it was Joseph's is an affidavit of Bidamon, who stood to gain financially by so representing it. Quinn uncritically accepts Bidamon's affidavit as solid proof that the coin was Joseph's. Yet the coin was not mentioned in the 1844 list of Joseph's possessions returned to Emma. Quinn negotiates this difficulty by suggesting the coin must have been worn around Joseph's neck under his shirt. But in so doing Quinn impeaches his only witness for the coin's

authenticity, for Bidamon's affidavit, the only evidence linking the coin to Joseph, specifically and solemnly swears that the coin was in Joseph's pocket at Carthage (66). The real empirical evidence here is just too weak to *prove* that the coin was really Joseph's, let alone to extrapolate a conclusion from mere possession of the artifact that Joseph must have believed in and practiced magic. The recent Hofmann affair should have taught us that an affidavit from the seller, especially a 1930 affidavit to third hand information contradicted by the 1844 evidence, just isn't enough "proof" to hang your hat on.

Another example of Quinn's idiosyncratic sense of what constitutes evidence or proof is his tortuous argument for "occult mentors" (89–96). His chain of logic runs like this: "it is possible that . . . would be consistent with . . . may have resided . . . it is possible that . . . is more likely that . . . would have been interested . . . it is reasonable to expect that . . . would have been acquainted . . . suggests that . . . could have been . . . other possible connections . . . may have been . . . would help explain . . . apparently followed . . . and possibly with . . . Although there is no information . . . It may also be significant that . . . may have had . . . apparently was . . . evidently knew . . . may also link . . . apparently was . . . may have facilitated . . . may have had . . . apparently accompanied . . . is also possible . . . is also possible . . . possibly . . . apparently . . . were probably . . . possibly . . . it is not clear . . . could have easily met . . . would therefore have been . . . would have possessed . . . is consistent with . . . could have left . . . would have lasted." All of this is followed by the conclusion, "But in view of the above evidence, the accuracy of statements by both nineteenth-century neighbors and recent Mormon historians must be reconsidered." I fail to see how any train of argument containing thirty-nine subjunctives, qualifiers, maybe's, and weasel words can be called "evidence" for anything!

Perhaps the most serious methodological abuse in Quinn's argument for Joseph's use of astrology occurs in his discussion of how Joseph's physical characteristics and the events of his life are just what astrology prescribed (63–65). In his search for occult correlations, Quinn points out that Joseph's infected leg and chipped tooth, even his height and the color of his eyes and hair all correlate to what the magic books predicted, "fulfilling traditional astrological expectations." However, in his eagerness to list another "correlation" Quinn apparently didn't notice that this correlation is significant only if one accepts the validity of astrology!

Another major weakness of Quinn's thesis is that the Book of Mormon, written at a time when Joseph was supposedly most influenced by the magical world view, contains only six references to magic in more than five hundred pages, and two of these are merely quotations from the Bible. Nevertheless, even these few references condemn magic in clearly

hostile terms. Quinn attempts to overcome this obstacle by first referring to the 1828 edition of Webster to show that in Joseph's day the words "secret" and "hidden" were synonyms for "occult." Then by substituting "occult" wherever "secret" and "hidden" occur in the Book of Mormon text, he is able to show that many passages really are concerned with the occult after all (160). But while the word "occult" might have meant "secret" or "hidden" in 1828, according to the same edition of Webster it was not a synonym at that time for "magic." Quinn wants to use nineteenth-century meanings to get from "secret" and "hidden" to "occult," and then use twentieth-century meanings to get from "occult" to "magic." In other words A equals B, B sounds like C, and C equals D; therefore A equals D. In logic this is called the error of the ambiguous middle. The same method applied to the King James Version of the Bible would make Paul the purveyor of "the *occult* [hidden] wisdom which God ordained" (1 Cor. 2:7), and Jehovah the bestower of the "*occult* [hidden] riches of *occult* [secret] places" (Isa. 45:3). The actual fact is that the Book of Mormon simply shows no interest in magic except to condemn it. And this, by the way, is the real Achilles heel of Quinn's theory. The primary sources, that huge collection of writings and ideas that actually came from the mind and pen of Joseph Smith in 1829 and after, are absolutely barren ground as far as any connection with magic or the occult is concerned. In any academic discipline I know of, a theory that does not deal with, cannot adequately explain, or is not supported by the primary sources ought rightly to be rejected.

A similar error (A=B, B is similar to C, C=D, therefore A=D) occurs when Quinn defines the apocryphal literature of the Bible and even the writings of Josephus as "the occult traditions of Judaism and Christianity" (172). If he is using "occult" here in its archaic meaning of "secret" or "esoteric," he would probably get an argument from Josephus's publisher, or from the Essenes at Qumran, or from the author of Jude and other early Christians who used 1 Enoch as commonly accepted scripture. Certainly there is no evidence that anyone tried to keep the Apocrypha a secret. If, however, Quinn means "occult" here in its modern sense to mean "magical," his contention would be hotly disputed by virtually every authority in the field of biblical literature. Roman Catholics, Greek and Coptic Orthodox, Falasha Jews and others might take offense at the suggestion that their acceptance of the Apocrypha or Pseudepigraphical books implicates them in "occult" practices. The Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, New Testament Apocrypha, and Josephus may have presented a minority view at times, but they had little or nothing to do with magic and the occult. This is another of Quinn's switches, using "occult" in one sense to create data, then using it in a completely different sense to make the data part of "the magic world view."

A final example of this distortion by definition is the equation of phrenology with the “occult.” There isn’t any reason in the world to connect the nineteenth-century belief in phrenology with magic, the supernatural, or the occult. Phrenology was an empirically based, though later discredited, scientific view. Modern herbalists or chiropractors may or may not be correct in their views as to how the human body works, but those views are based on an empirical rather than a supernatural model, and the rejection of their views by mainline medicine hardly makes them devotees of magic and the occult. The case is no different with the phrenologists. Views are not “occult” just because they are not accepted by mainline science.

The best part of Quinn’s book is the chapter on rods and seerstones, although here Quinn merely repeats information that has long been available. Clearly use of these objects was a part of early Mormonism. But the vital question is did these practices have their origin in magic? Since there are clear biblical precedents of the use of rods and seerstones, or at the very least since Joseph believed there were, and since there is an ocean of evidence that Joseph Smith was influenced by the Bible, is it not more economical to suppose the origin of these practices to be biblical? To ignore the possible biblical origins, where proven precedents exist, in favor of speculative magical origins, where they do not, violates Occam’s Razor and introduces another hypothesis that is itself not proven.

Throughout this entire book Quinn is clutching at straws and reaching too far. The arguments are a collection of random anomalies that usually lack any real cohesion. I have not always agreed with Michael Quinn’s conclusions in the past, but the method of his earlier work was at least respectable. The real mystery, then, is why this book is so fragmented, so out of proportion, so very bad? The answer, I believe, is in the timing of its publication. Quinn must have begun his research when he still had the Hofmann letters and the salamander to serve as the rock of his hypotheses. It was those solid, indisputable historical documents that would give credibility to the rest of his data and make his case come together. Quinn’s speculative notes would merely hang like decorations on the solid mass provided by the Hofmann documents, and the greater would justify the lesser. However, as Quinn approached publication, the Hofmann materials were pulled out from under him, leaving a huge salamander-shaped hole in the center of his theory. In chapter 5, on the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, one can still see remnants of the intended central argument. Even without the Hofmann material, Quinn still discusses salamanders and toads for no fewer than ten pages (124–33). But since he can’t demonstrate any *connection* between Joseph Smith and the salamander, the whole discussion is erudite irrelevance.

With the salamander letter and other Hofmann materials, Quinn had a respectable argument; without them he had a handful of fragmented and highly speculative research notes. It appears to me that when he was faced with the choice of seeing months of research go down the drain for lack of a credible context to put it in or of putting the best face on it and publishing anyway, Quinn simply made the wrong choice. This would explain why his remaining arguments are so strained and the scanty evidence so overworked. This would explain why the book is such a methodological nightmare. Having lost the turkey at the last minute, Quinn has served us the gravy and trimmings, hoping we won't notice the difference.

Moreover, I would guess that Quinn knows his work is flawed. He says that the evidence is "diverse and fragmentary" (226), "subtle" (191), and "can be demonstrated only circumstantially and inferentially" (78). The basic weakness can be illustrated by merely stating the thesis in different terms: Quinn asks us to believe that a twenty-four-year-old New York farmer spent his entire youth and early adulthood immersed in the study of magic, to the extent of marrying his wife and begetting his children out of occult considerations, and then at the peak of this occult involvement, and motivated by it, he founded a religious movement and penned an extensive literature that were both so barren of magical doctrines, terms, or practices that no one noticed the true origins for 158 years.

As I read *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* I was reminded over and over again of the style and methodology of Erich von Däniken's *Chariots of the Gods?* Both books are entertaining and exciting. Both books argue a sensational new theory of origins at odds with the traditional view. Like von Däniken, Quinn focuses on a handful of anomalies, shapes his data to fit his theory, and works backward from his conclusions to his evidence. Like von Däniken, Quinn rejects obvious, simpler, and more economical explanations for phenomena in favor of speculative and tortuously hypothetical possibilities. Von Däniken's logic, like Quinn's, often goes from "could have," "maybe," and "possibly" to "therefore" and QED. Neither distinguishes well between plausibility and proof. Like von Däniken, Quinn often fails to provide a complete and satisfying context for his data and misrepresents or misinterprets not only the data but the physical evidence as well. In short, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, like von Däniken's books, makes for titillating reading but as history does not fare well.