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## *Joseph Smith, the Prophet* Truman Madsen

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TRUMAN MADSEN. *Joseph Smith, the Prophet*. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1989. 202 pp. \$10.95.

Reviewed by Glen M. Leonard, an editor, historian, and museum administrator living in Farmington, Utah.

Books about Joseph Smith abound. Some attempt a full-scale life. Many select an aspect of the Prophet's spiritual career—his teachings, writings, revelations, or prophecies—or significant events, such as the 1820 vision or the 1844 martyrdom. A few focus on his ancestry, his family, or reminiscences of his associates. The Prophet appears in many other books and articles not directly about him but about Latter-day Saints individually and collectively. Thus when another volume about Joseph Smith appears, we need to ask where the volume fits on the shelf of studies of the Prophet and, then, what it contributes to an understanding of the young man whose brief earthly career now impacts the lives of more than seven million people.

Truman Madsen's book is not biography, though it touches upon aspects of Joseph Smith's character and personality. Nor is it primarily a collection of the Prophet's ideas, despite numerous quotations from his discourses and writings. It is not history, although cast into a loosely chronological set of thematic chapters. Simply put, this latest look at Joseph Smith the Prophet is a compendium of faith-promoting reminiscences, combined with snippets of Joseph's own words, all laced into an informed and informal commentary reflecting the insights of one who admires Joseph Smith's humanity and affirms his prophetic calling. The book is a tribute as well as an attempt to profile the personality of Joseph Smith as a religious leader.

The book's content is the product of extensive searching in the sources for the hundreds of anecdotes and little-known details that form the bulk of the eight chapters. Madsen uses quotations from Joseph Smith's writings and sermons to illuminate the Prophet's religious experiences, his everyday interactions, and his approach to doctrine. Madsen also draws extensively from published and unpublished diaries, recollections, reminiscences, and tributes. From these sources come the tantalizing tidbits that are the volume's principal contribution.

*Joseph Smith, the Prophet* originated as a series of eight, hour-long lectures delivered during Education Week at Brigham Young University. These discourses attracted such interest that tape recordings of the lectures were marketed beginning in 1978. From that wider listening audience came repeated encouragements to publish the lectures and provide information on the sources.



It is not surprising that those listening to the tapes would seek documentation for the hundreds of tidbits shared in the loosely organized presentation. Madsen kept the attention of his listeners (as he will with readers) by sharing, one after another, anecdotes of the miraculous, curious, and humorous in Joseph's interactions with others. This amazing collection of "gee-whiz" data holds the reader's attention and, too often, tests even the well-informed student's credulity.

Readers will find themselves turning to the endnotes after each story to discover where this or that tantalizing tidbit had been tucked away. They will discover that many choice stories are original, first-hand reports from journals (or an occasional letter) written soon after the incident occurred. Most date from the Nauvoo period. Other sources contributing extensively to Madsen's compilation are the published accolades and reminiscences from the *Young Woman's Journal*, the *Juvenile Instructor*, the *Contributor*, and autobiographies of the Prophet's contemporaries. The magazine articles—mostly written as faith-promoting literature for youth—and the life stories share a common time and frame of reference. Created between about 1880 and 1930, they were testimonials of a dying generation of witnesses. These Latter-day pioneers were preserving for their sons and daughters selected experiences of the founding generation of the Church. They remembered discrete, personal interactions with a martyred prophet and wished their children to learn to know him vicariously. For many items, only one source records the experience or impression. The information is individual and personal. These single-source reports are historically unverifiable, yet in a spiritually motivating sense they offer incontestable witness.

Madsen molds these memories into themes that flow in broad patterns over time. The book begins with an examination of the First Vision and Joseph's personality—issues centered in the New York years. Next come insights into the revelations and persecutions of Ohio and Missouri. Finally, the book focuses on the themes of Joseph as temple-builder, teacher, and martyr in Nauvoo.

The published chapters are faithful to the spoken word of the lectures, which are only lightly edited to eliminate distracting references. The text thus retains the informality of a live presentation. In addition, though filled with information, the book will reward many readers best through a right-brain reading. They will find that the information is better felt than understood, better heard with the inner ear of inspiration. The anecdotes and tidbits are building blocks to feelings about Joseph Smith. In his concluding testimony, Madsen reaffirms this intention when he reminds his

audience that the person they've been getting to know through his lectures is best understood as a religious figure, a prophet of Christ.

In keeping with this framework, index entries about the Prophet are grouped under four headings: beliefs and opinions, personal characteristics, personal history and experience, and prophetic and other spiritual attributes. From these convenient summaries of the book's thesis, we are reminded that in personal characteristics, Joseph Smith was athletic, charitable, cheerful, courageous, discerning, handsome, hospitable, humble, imaginative, intelligent, kind to children, loving, neat, obedient, open-minded, solicitous for his family, and so on. He was also a leader, a good listener, and a student of the scriptures. His prophetic attributes included possession of every scripturally identified spiritual gift (healing, dreams, faith, tongues, prophecy, visions, etc.), and he was a deliverer of prophecy, a revelator, and a man who was divinely taught.

Madsen uses as his biographical models the Joseph Smiths recreated by Lucy Mack Smith, George Q. Cannon, and John Henry Evans. His bibliography credits as well the tributes by Hyrum L. Andrus and Helen Mae Andrus (*They Knew the Prophet*), Ivan J. Barrett (*Joseph Smith, the Extraordinary*), William E. Berrett (*Joseph Smith, Symbol of Greatness*), Truman G. Madsen (*Joseph Smith among the Prophets*), Edwin F. Parry (*Stories about Joseph Smith the Prophet*), and John A. Widtsoe (*Joseph Smith: Seeker after Truth, Prophet of God*). It is this genre of writing about Joseph Smith that best explains Madsen's *Joseph Smith, the Prophet*. The purpose of Madsen's campus lectures was to motivate his audience to understand, appreciate, and know the man Joseph and, through him, the Man Jesus.

As inspirational literature, the success of that effort must be judged by the responses of individual readers. For many, Madsen's impressionistic generalizations and attention-getting anecdotes will contribute less to an understanding of Joseph Smith than the imperfect offerings of existing histories and biographies. While the amazing revelations of the little-known may captivate, they will not lead to a meaningful acquaintance with the Prophet, who challenged us all in his last months to discover him and his incredibly complex personal history.