



4-1-1996

Images of the Prophet Joseph Smith by Davis Bitton

Susan Easton Black

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq>



Part of the [Mormon Studies Commons](#), and the [Religious Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Black, Susan Easton (1996) "*Images of the Prophet Joseph Smith by Davis Bitton*," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 36 : Iss. 2 , Article 19.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol36/iss2/19>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *BYU Studies Quarterly* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

DAVIS BITTON. *Images of the Prophet Joseph Smith*. Salt Lake City: Aspen Books, 1996. viii; 198 pp. Bibliography, index. Paperback, \$11.95.

Reviewed by Susan Easton Black, Associate Dean of General Education and Honors and Professor of Church History and Doctrine, Brigham Young University.

Historian Davis Bitton earned his academic spurs during his graduate years at Princeton and his professorial tenure at the University of Utah. Of the ten books he has written, best known to LDS scholars are his co-authored work with Leonard J. Arrington, *The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints* (1979), and his detailed reference book, *Guide to Mormon Diaries and Autobiographies* (1977). As a past president of the Mormon History Association and as an emeritus professor, Bitton is widely respected for his contribution to Latter-day Saint history.

Images of the Prophet Joseph Smith is the most recent contribution to Mormon literature by Davis Bitton. It is not a conventional biography of the founder of Mormonism. His perceptive approach to the life of Joseph Smith dramatically differs from the monochrome, but faithful, biography by John Henry Evans, the objective work by Donna Hill, and the biased portrayal by Fawn Brodie.¹ Bitton despairs, "How flawed . . . must be any effort to write the life of another person," but then confesses, "We humans keep trying" (vii).

Bitton's newest book is not a treatise on the life of Joseph Smith or his teachings. The purpose is to present alternative explanations for contrasting perceptions of Joseph Smith from his own time to the present. The author includes a chapter on the views of modern interpretive scholars. Bitton is generous in his applause of the contributions of his colleagues Milton V. Backman Jr., Gordon A. Madsen, Hugh Nibley, and Richard L. Anderson.

The author's discussion of portrayals of Joseph Smith from hostile blackguard to Jacksonian hero captivates the reader of *Images* with a panoply of written portraits. The interpretative views of Joseph as mystic, manic-depressive, and arch-deceiver are balanced with testimonials acknowledging him as prophet, revelator, and friend. Bitton does not challenge the perceptions he

presents, for he believes people see what they want to see. As the mosaic unfolds, the author disclaims any personal bias in the recitations, conveniently avoiding a conflict by dubbing himself just a historian.

However, he is quick to concede that the extreme negative images of Joseph Smith are not the view of contemporary admirers outside of the Mormon faith. And just as quickly, Bitton negates the notion that Joseph Smith was a god to his followers in mid-America in the 1840s, despite one possible reading of these lines from a Latter-day Saint hymn: “Mingling with Gods, he can plan for his brethren; Death cannot conquer the hero again.”²

His stance allows each reader to discern whether the viewpoints presented are deficient, inconsistent, shifting, exaggerated, or consonant with personal beliefs. In such a paradigm of reality, it is expected that the sentiments of the serious reader may shift from one perspective to another until the weight of personal bias sways the pendulum of thought. For, the author believes, “People act not according to the way things are but the way they think they are” (165).

To engage his audience, pithy quotes dot the beginning of each chapter. Since the text includes chapters comparing Joseph Smith to ancient prophets, presents other ennobling views, and is sold “wherever LDS books are sold,” it seems curious that Bitton begins his treatise with the hostile views. His litany of negative, attention-grabbing descriptions of Joseph Smith creates a dramatic effect—impostor, pretender, fanatic, and despot. These labels shape the repetitious drumbeat of the anti-Smith rhetoric. Only one label seems original to Joseph’s opponents—fallen prophet. The other labels can also be attributed to the vagrants, scoundrels, and other undesirables in nineteenth-century America.

The chapters on folklore memory and the physical stature of the Prophet are arguably the most original contributions in the text. The posthumous Joseph Smith, as he lived on in the collective memory of his faithful contemporaries, is portrayed with editorial finesse. The carefully selected examples depict the Prophet with a supernatural glow and enough epic qualities to make him an ideal source of inspiration for embellished folklore. “Tall he may have been,” the author concurs, but he then wonders, “How he could have been ‘thin-favored’ and stout and round at the same time” (107)?

Bitton rightfully asks, “What is the value of these stories?” (99). His answer does not discount any story as less than valuable “not in discovering the life of the Prophet,” but in discovering “the popular mind of his people” (100). As historian Bitton entertains a variety of borderline psychological assumptions; he turns from a mere interpretive recitation of facts to armchair psychology. Choosing to divert into the realms of the mind leaves him an easy prey to criticism. Bitton uses phrases and jargon that are in vogue among popular psychologists—“blown the whistle,” “roller coaster existence,” “landed on his feet,” “carries baggage with it” (4, 5, 13, 21)—but are not so readily accepted by cautious colleagues. Nor are his interpretative comments—“Such is the stuff of hero-worship” or “The words of the Book of Mormon passed through the brain of Joseph Smith” (48, 53)—typical of an empirical scholar. His editorial comment, “But the trauma was doubtless severe and profoundly affected Joseph’s psychic development” (2), introduces more speculative questions than Bitton is prepared to answer.

When writing of Joseph Smith as a Jacksonian hero, the author struggles to find the most appropriate heroic yardstick. The five steps to becoming a hero developed by literary scholar Roy Porter are replaced by the myth-making approach of Joseph Campbell. Campbell’s view is discounted, in turn, in favor of the logic of historians Bill Butler and John William Ward. By the end of the brief chapter, a litany of hero-making definitions are discarded, leaving the author to accept the parsimonious theory of sociologist Robert Nisbet: “Without hostile opposition, above all treachery, one cannot possibly become a hero” (47). The chapter proves to be more of a treatise on the definitions of a hero than a focus on the image of Joseph Smith as a Jacksonian hero.

At first glance, it might be presumed that Davis Bitton is not writing to a traditional scholarly audience although what he is writing about is scholarly. However, his broad-stroke recitations of history and even his caveat that “such bare events are easily recited” (2) are unacceptable to the academician searching for documented details. Rather than provide the reader with verifiable observations, the author intentionally recalls events in generalities; for example, “Smith might be telling X that he should go on a preaching mission, warning Y that he should beware of pride” (8). Adding to his difficulties is a general failure to consistently cite source documents.

Even quotations easily identified in the Doctrine and Covenants are not referenced. The first chapter, comprising the chronological accounting of the life of Joseph Smith, includes only four endnotes. Exhaustive referencing, the hallmark of Bitton's academic prowess, is compromised in *Images* by a nonchalant, historic overview.

The weakest chapter is "The Prophet: 'Like Unto . . .'" Within a brief ten pages, Bitton compares the perceived life of Joseph Smith to the lives of Enoch, Abraham, Joseph of Egypt, Moses, John the Baptist, Paul, and Jesus Christ. The comparisons are made without citing any journal or diary entries to support the archetypal theme. Only in an obscure endnote does Bitton acknowledge the literature of typology: "All prophets to one degree or another are in the similitude of the Savior. Prophets stand as living types or models of the Christ" (80 n. 25).

The question "Who was the Prophet Joseph Smith?" is intentionally not answered in *Images*. Bitton challenges the reader to carefully examine the contrasting perceptions presented and reach a personal conclusion about the man. Whether the decision reached is positive or negative, the process of discussion fulfills prophecy. On September 21, 1823, the Angel Moroni said to young Joseph Smith, "[Your] name [shall] be had for good and evil among all nations, kindreds, and tongues, or that it [shall] be both good and evil spoken of among all people" (JS-H 1:33). According to Bitton, too often the decision reached is based on images or perceptions and not on asking "God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ" and receiving a manifestation "by the power of the Holy Ghost" (Moroni 10:4) as to who Joseph Smith was.

NOTES

¹See John Henry Evans, *Joseph Smith: An American Prophet* (New York: Macmillan, 1933); Donna Hill, *Joseph Smith: The First Mormon* (Midvale, Utah: Signature, 1977); and Fawn McKay Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1945).

²"Praise to the Man," in *Hymns of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), 27.