



7-1-2001

A Joseph Smith for the Twenty-First Century

Richard Lyman Bushman

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

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

Network Recommended Citation

Bushman, Richard Lyman (2001) "A Joseph Smith for the Twenty-First Century," *BYU Studies Quarterly*.
Vol. 40 : Iss. 3 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol40/iss3/5>

This Article 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.

A Joseph Smith for the Twenty-First Century

Richard Lyman Bushman

Since Henry Caswall published *The Prophet of the Nineteenth Century* in 1843, a year before Joseph Smith's death, nineteen book-length biographies of the Prophet have appeared in print, more than half of them since 1940.¹ They differ wildly in tone and perspective, as might be imagined. Several are still worth considering by serious students of Joseph Smith's life. Among the more notable, I. Woodbridge Riley's *The Founder of Mormonism* is severely critical but ingenious and original, the first biography to attempt a scientific explanation of Joseph Smith's revelations.² Fawn Brodie's *No Man Knows My History* is a magnificent piece of journalism that oscillates between snide skepticism and genuine admiration and is always interesting.³ John Henry Evans's enthusiastic presentation of the Prophet's achievements in *Joseph Smith, an American Prophet* is credited by former Church Historian Leonard Arrington with having attracted him to Church history.⁴ Donna Hill's balanced but noncommittal *Joseph Smith, the First Mormon* tells a good tale with the benefit of her brother Marvin Hill's extensive knowledge of Joseph Smith's life.⁵ Hill's is the biography Latter-day Saints are most likely to recommend to interested friends. Each of these studies deserves attention from anyone seriously interested in Joseph Smith. After more than half a century, *No Man Knows My History* is still considered by most American historians as the best account of Joseph's life. To the surprise of Mormons, many non-Mormon readers think that Brodie presents a sympathetic as well as a revealing picture of Joseph Smith.⁶

We have no reason to think that the writing of biographies about the Prophet will cease as we enter the twenty-first century. Major historical figures always invite reassessment, and interest in Joseph Smith shows no signs of flagging. The relentless growth of the Church makes him more important now than ever. To account for Mormonism's modern success, the mysteries of Joseph Smith have to be plumbed. How are we to understand this extravagant and bold figure whose work has now attracted millions of followers all over the world? How can Joseph be situated in American culture and now in global culture? Why was he so successful? Puzzles such as these are sure to attract biographers in the coming century.

Over the past hundred years, two issues have shaped writing on Joseph Smith, and as we move into the twenty-first century, it may be worth speculating on how these questions will be addressed in the future. May we

expect sharp departures, or will the classic questions be answered in the classic ways? The first of these is the question of belief. Until now, the tone and import of a Joseph Smith biography has depended heavily on whether or not the author believed in Joseph's revelations. Will the author's attitude toward the authenticity of the revelations continue to govern the organization of biographies in the future as they have in the past?

The second issue is the question of significance. What is the place of Mormonism in American history? Where did Mormonism come from? What is its impact? What does Mormonism tell us about America? These questions bear directly on Joseph Smith's life, and the answers are sure to change as our understanding of American culture evolves. The discussion will become even more complicated as Mormonism spreads around the globe. Mormon historians rarely deal with the question of significance, but non-Mormon readers want an answer. Mormon authors should contribute to this speculation as it goes forward rather than leaving the question of significance to outsiders and critics.

Belief and Joseph Smith's Life

The issue of belief was recently posed to me by Alfred Bush, curator of Western Americana at the Firestone Library at Princeton University. Because of his Mormon background, Bush is one of the most attentive observers of the Mormon scene and is responsible for a superb collection of Mormon Americana at the Firestone. When he learned I was writing a biography of Joseph Smith, he told me that I must address the question of the historicity of the Book of Mormon. The historian is responsible, Bush insisted, for determining whether or not the book is true history.

I see this as a version of a question that has dominated writing on Joseph Smith from the beginning: Was Joseph Smith a prophet to whom God actually spoke? Were the Book of Mormon and the other revelations—amounting to over 800 pages of writing—from God or were they the fabrications of a human mind? Although Mormons and their critics answer differently, they all deal with this question of authenticity, and the author's answer determines a great deal about how a biography is put together.

The issue of authenticity can be thought of as a governing question. The writer's position on the revelations has consequences far beyond the passages where the revelations themselves are discussed. If the author believes in the revelations, the story is likely to take the following shape:

1. Joseph's character and personality will be conceived positively (fig. 1). A believing author will tend to see Joseph as possessing a character worthy of a prophet. George Q. Cannon said of the Prophet, "His magnetism was masterful, and his heroic qualities won universal admiration."⁷ For these

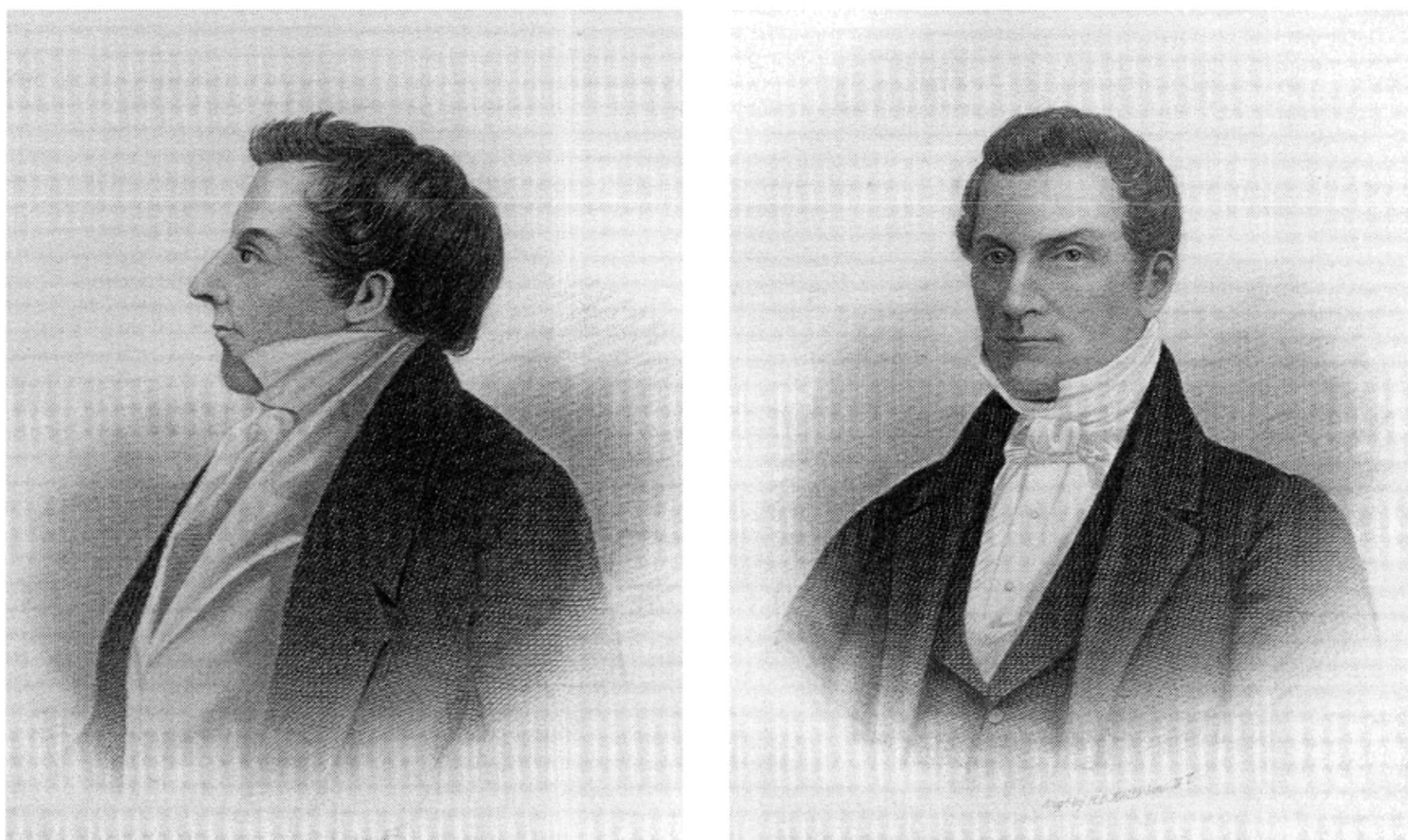


FIG. 1. Joseph Smith and Hyrum Smith. Believing biographers of Joseph Smith are more likely to represent Joseph in words and images consonant with his own stated calling. The engravings shown here, based in part on sketches made in 1842, comprised the frontispiece in George Q. Cannon, *Life of Joseph Smith, the Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1888). These images show the two Church leaders in a dignified, respectable bearing, underscoring the believers' view of Joseph Smith as a sincere witness and martyr. The images evoked the memory of Joseph and Hyrum together, who "in life . . . were not divided, and in death . . . were not separated" (D&C 135:3).

biographers, faults get overlooked and virtues magnified. Critical historians always suspect believing historians of whitewashing Joseph and his family. After my book *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* appeared, I was asked by one colleague why I had not mentioned Joseph Smith Sr.'s bouts of intoxication. Actually it was a slip in my scholarship, but the critics thought I was covering up. Unbelievers would never make such a mistake. They would be sure to notice Father Smith's somewhat demeaning weakness.

2. Believers will see Joseph's doctrines as unique or at least inspiring. His revelations look like new truth bursting on the earth. John Henry Evans inspired Leonard Arrington because Evans was so upbeat about Joseph's teachings. "Joseph Smith's attraction," Evans wrote, "lay partly in his personality, but mainly in the dynamic power of his religious philosophy."⁸ Non-Mormons tend to think that the Book of Mormon is simplistic and easily dismissed.⁹ Believers see its profundities and complexities.

3. Among believers there is an inclination toward providential history, that is, to see the hand of the Lord working on the Saints' behalf. They are likely to play up small miracles in everyday life. The Mormon world is filled with God's presence. Consequently, the biography's overall plot line is

inclined to be triumphalist. Struggle is a form of testing that brings success in the end. This is God's cause, and it will eventually overcome all opposition.¹⁰

Skeptics, on the other hand, give the narrative another form:

1. Joseph has to become in some sense a scoundrel. The reason for this is that he pretended to have revelations that the author believes were fabricated. It follows that Joseph deceived his followers by claiming revelation he was not really receiving. He almost inevitably therefore becomes a showman or a con man. This is the way Brodie puts it:

For Joseph what was a dream one day could become a vision the next, and a reality the day after that. It is doubtful if he ever escaped the memory of the conscious artifice that went into the Book of Mormon, but its phenomenal success must have stifled any troublesome qualms. And at an early period he seems to have reached an inner equilibrium that permitted him to pursue his career with a highly compensated but nevertheless very real sincerity. Certainly a persisting consciousness of guilt over the cunning and deception with which his prophetic career was launched would eventually have destroyed him.¹¹

Starting with such assumptions about Joseph Smith's character, one can expect all sorts of relapses into deceptive behavior because a lie lay at the bottom of his life. Joseph becomes morally ambiguous, doing many noble and heroic things but also capable of base behavior—a divided man at his core.¹²

2. Because Joseph's revelations are thought to be a concoction, the skeptical biographer has to locate the sources of the revelations. Where did all the components of the Book of Mormon and the Book of Moses come from? As Brodie puts it, Joseph Smith's theology was "a patchwork of ideas and rituals drawn from every quarter."¹³ This assertion leads to a survey of all kinds of source materials, sometimes ranging far into the past in search of precedents for his ideas.¹⁴ Since Joseph wrote so much, it is difficult to locate a source for everything, so these biographers content themselves with a few examples and presume the rest could be accounted for by further searching. Strangely, not much credit is given to Joseph's own imagination and certainly none to God. The skeptics show a peculiar reluctance to suggest Joseph might have had independent genius, even though writing the Book of Mormon in three months is surely one of the greatest writing feats of all time.

3. Along the same line, the skeptic may have to work out the devious means by which Joseph carried off his deceptions. Having to account for the testimonies of the Three and Eight Witnesses, skeptics speculate about making supposed gold plates out of tin or filling a box with sand to make it heavy enough to feel like gold. The requirement of discovering the magician performing his tricks results in the fabrication of events, comparable to the attenuated explanations of the Spaulding theory in the previous century where Sidney Rigdon had to be shown smuggling the manuscript of the Book of Mormon to Joseph.¹⁵

These contrasting qualities could be elaborated, but they suggest, I hope, how the question of authenticity has shaped the organization and tone of writings about Joseph Smith in the twentieth century. Doubtless the question of authenticity will not die in the twenty-first century, but I believe that this issue has steadily been losing its edge and that a growing body of readers are ready for another depiction of the Prophet. These readers do not want to be caught up in the battles of believers and disbelievers; they are more interested in knowing about an extraordinarily intriguing person.

This group of readers, I suggest, may not be satisfied with the choices that Dan Vogel, one of Joseph's best-informed critics, offers to readers of Joseph Smith biographies. In describing some of the supernatural events in Joseph's early life, Vogel says that we have three choices: (1) Joseph Smith *consciously* deceived people by making up events and lying about them; (2) he *unconsciously* deceived people by imagining events and calling them real; (3) he told the truth. Vogel asserts that we cannot believe that Joseph told the truth without abandoning all "rationalist categories of historical investigation."¹⁶ No one can believe rationally in the actuality of supernatural happenings of the kind Joseph claimed for himself. Therefore, he must have been a deceiver, either consciously or unconsciously. Like Brodie, Vogel leans toward conscious deceit. Vogel believes Joseph Smith knowingly lied by claiming that he translated the Book of Mormon when in fact Joseph was making it up as he went along.

For my hypothetical body of twenty-first century readers, Vogel's alternatives represent a hard choice. Readers are being asked to consider the revelations as either true or a form of deception. Joseph Smith either spoke for God or he duped people. There is no middle ground. Vogel's set of alternatives represents a version of what I would call "the strict Enlightenment," by which I mean a form of Enlightenment thought that forces everything into rational categories of analysis and refuses to admit the validity of any other forms of thought and belief. By this strict standard, Mohammad's vision of Gabriel carrying him to Jerusalem was a form of conscious or unconscious deception. Saint Theresa's transports, Native American vision quests, Saint Paul's encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus—all these and hundreds of other reports of visitations and journeys into heaven are conscious deceptions, or they are the product of the visionaries' imaginations and are thus unconscious deceptions.

The Enlightenment had a word for all these supposed revelations: superstition. Joseph was categorized with a long line of impostors starting with Mohammad and continuing down through the French Prophets and Joanna Southcott, the notorious English prophetess.¹⁷ Enlightened newspaper editors and critics of religion dealt with revelators by classifying

them all as frauds and throwing them all on the trash heap together. For many years, Roget's *Thesaurus* listed the Qur'an and Book of Mormon together under "pseudo-revelation"¹⁸ (fig. 2). Joseph Smith, Mohammad, and other extrabiblical prophets could be understood by putting them in the company of impostors through the ages.

In this postmodern era, when the Enlightenment itself has been discredited, many readers may prefer to be less strict in their rationality. Vogel himself thinks of Joseph Smith as a sincere deceiver. He sympathetically concludes, "I suggest Smith really believed he was called of God to preach repentance to a sinful world but that he felt justified in using deception to accomplish his mission more fully."¹⁹ Many readers want to see human life as variegated, strange, and rife with complex possibilities. These new readers are open to experiences beyond the ordinary. They want to observe lives that are unlike their own, sometimes in astounding ways. As George Eliot said of the visionary Theresa of Avila, "Who that cares much to know the history of man, and how the mysterious mixture behaves under the varying experiments of Time, has not dwelt, at least briefly, on the life of Saint Theresa."²⁰ In other words, Theresa's visions take us to the outer reaches of human capacity to places we don't ordinarily go. This desire to explore the varieties of human experience does not require a dissection of every supposedly supernatural event in order to find its rational, scientific basis. We realize now that dissection kills the animal put under the knife. We grant visionaries the benefit of the doubt and acknowledge that they may have had experiences beyond conventional understanding and knowledge. They are part of a grand human effort to discover meaning through poetry, art, and revelation. We can delight in the diversity of human experience and rejoice in all that God has wrought among his children. Modern readers may be willing to allow that Joseph Smith was sincere in saying he had visions and translated the Book of Mormon, and simply want to know more. To call him a deceiver misses the point of visions. In *The American Religion*, the literary critic Harold Bloom, no believer in revealed religion, relished the genius of Joseph Smith's historical revelations without getting bogged down in questions of scientific authenticity.²¹

986. Pseudo-Revelation.*—N. the -Koran, - Alcoran; Ly-king, Shaster, Vedas, Zendavesta, Vedidad, Purana, Edda; Go-, Gau-tama; Book of Mormon.

FIG. 2. Entry in Roget's *Thesaurus*, 1935. Enlightenment thinking placed the Book of Mormon and other religious texts and words into categories that marginalized them. Entry 986 of Roget's *Thesaurus* puts the Book of Mormon under "pseudo-revelation." Peter Mark Roget, John Lewis Roget, and Samuel Romilly Roget, *Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases, Authorized American Edition* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1935).

The common presumption nowadays is that visionaries should not be called “pious frauds,” Vogel’s term.²² That broad tolerance has come about partially because of developments outside of Mormon historiography. In a postcolonial time, the accusation that strange religions are superstitions has been discredited by our experience with native peoples. Imperialists once applied the term “superstition” to the religions of colonized populations. Discrediting their religion as superstition was one step in subjecting them. Now, in our effort to see these colonized people on their own terms, we want to give their religions full credit. That transformation in the study of world religions has prepared an audience to give more credence to Joseph Smith. Rather than colonizing him in the name of Enlightenment rationality, we listen more sympathetically. Contemporary readers will look upon Joseph Smith as if they were tolerant ethnographers going among native people. Interested students will want to learn about the world of early Mormonism without disrupting it and get as close as they can to the experience of revelation as Joseph experienced it.

I have presented the passing of the old twentieth-century issue of authenticity as if this were a gain for Mormons. Biographers of Joseph Smith now can write for an audience with broad sympathies who will want to know more about revelation and will not require that it be explained as pious deception. But I wish now to reverse direction and ask if Mormons will be happy with this outcome. Is it an improvement to end the war between believers and unbelievers that raged in the biographies of the twentieth century? The new tolerance permits a believing biographer like myself to present more of Joseph’s revelations without fear of running up against a wall of hostile disbelief, but is that advantage counteracted by a blurring of the real issues? Wouldn’t believing biographers prefer to have the question of authenticity laid squarely before our readers, even at the cost of having the revelations disputed? Do we want Joseph Smith’s challenge to the world to be lost in a haze of a patronizing kindness?

By giving in to tolerance, there is a danger that Mormonism will be treated like voodoo or shamanism—something to examine in excruciating detail and with labored respect, while privately the ethnographers believe these religious manifestations are the product of frenzied minds and a primitive, prescientific outlook. Wouldn’t we prefer to be taken seriously enough to be directly opposed rather than condescended to? Right now, the Book of Mormon might aspire to be classed with the Qur’an as the inspired book of a great world religion. Many readers would go with us that far. But are Mormons willing to accept that judgment, or do we want a more exclusive claim on revelation? Many Mormons believe that Joseph Smith and the scriptural revelations are in a class of their own, distinct from Saint Theresa and Mohammad and would be unhappy to be put on such a list, no matter how distinguished the other visionaries.

One fact in Joseph Smith's history may prevent his complete absorption into the muffling embrace of liberal tolerance, and that fact is the existence of the gold plates. Many modern readers will acknowledge Joseph's sincerity in his more ordinary run of revelations. They can imagine holy words coming into his mind as he wrote, "Hearken, O ye people of my Church" (D&C 1:1). Most of the Doctrine and Covenants fits within the limits of believable revelation—though privately the readers may feel the words came from no greater distance than Joseph's own subconscious. But gold plates, sitting on the table as Joseph translated, shown to witnesses to feel and examine, touched by Emma as she cleaned house? Such a tangible artifact is hard to attribute to a standard religious experience, even in an extraordinary person such as Joseph. With the gold plates, we cross into the realm of deception or psychotic delusion. In the minds of many readers, to see and touch forty pounds of gold plates with ancient writings on them, people had to be either tricked or confused. Joseph turns back into the impostor or self-deluded fanatic.²³

Here the old issue, then, reasserts itself. The broad-minded reader has to ask, Can it be possible that Joseph Smith did receive the gold plates from an angel? Was he guided by heaven, or was he not? There is no hiding behind the marvelous workings of the human spirit in explaining the plates. Either something fishy was going on, or Joseph did have a visitor from heaven.

The believing biographer here must abandon his tolerant readers to their own devices. The believer cannot help the unbeliever understand and sympathize with Joseph recovering the plates from the hillside. In that moment the issue is joined, the old issue that has hovered over accounts of Joseph's life from the beginning: Did God speak to him or not?

The Significance of Joseph Smith in American History

The second issue, the question of significance, has never been satisfactorily addressed by twentieth-century Mormon biographers. What do Joseph Smith and Mormonism mean in American history? We call him an American prophet; what is his place in American history? What was the impact of his religion? What do Joseph Smith and Mormonism reveal about the nature of American culture?

Mormons have fiddled with answers, but we rarely address the question seriously because it is of little concern to us. The Restoration is of such immense importance in world history that it carries its meaning on the surface as far as we are concerned. In the Restoration, God enters history to prepare the world for the Second Coming of Christ. Compared to that transcendent purpose, Mormonism's place in American history is of secondary concern.

In fact, Latter-day Saints are inclined to reverse the order and place American history in the history of the gospel. We think that Western civilization has been shaped in preparation for the Restoration. The breakup of the medieval church, the rise of learning and free inquiry, the separation of church and state, even a technology like printing are seen as providential preparation for the Restoration. The United States, in the Mormon view, was founded to make a home for the Church.²⁴

Unbelievers, of course, are not satisfied with this view of events. They want to wrench Mormonism out of our conspectus and fit it into their own historical schemes, a task that, unfortunately, is not easily accomplished.²⁵ The trouble is not a paucity of explanations but an overabundance. With so many being offered, how do we choose from among them? They are so diverse, we feel in danger of losing intellectual coherence. Mormonism appears to be so many things it goes out of focus.

Without going into details or evaluation, let me list some of the alternatives for situating Joseph Smith in American history, most of them of recent vintage. Interest in the question of significance has grown as Mormon and non-Mormon historians have become less combative.

1. Dan Vogel argued in *Religious Seekers and the Advent of Mormonism* (1988) that Mormonism derived many of its doctrines and a basic attitude from a tradition of religious seeking going back to Roger Williams. In his later years, Williams believed authority had been lost and people must wait for God to bring back revelation and authority. Closer to Joseph Smith's time, the Irvingites or Catholic Apostolic Church in England searched for prophetic utterance and appointed apostles according to revelation. Vogel believed Mormons branched out of this Seeker movement.²⁶

2. In another study, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (1987), Michael Quinn suggested that many early Mormons saw the world under the spell of magic. Building on the work of Jon Butler and Keith Thomas, historians of American and European magic, Quinn made Joseph Smith into a practitioner of magic whose magical worldview infused his teachings and writings.²⁷

3. John Brooke's widely acclaimed *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644–1844* (1994), discovered in Mormonism a strange brand of philosophy and religion supposedly traceable to Hermes Trismegistus, the mythical ancient-Egyptian theologian. Many scholars have shown how early modern Hermeticism, intermixed with alchemy, flowed into the Rosicrucian movement and Free Masonry. Brooke tried to find Hermeticism in Mormonism (fig. 3) and in fact argued for its dominant influence on Joseph Smith's distinctive doctrines.²⁸

4. In another vein entirely, Kenneth Winn wrote a volume on Mormonism and Republicanism, *Exiles in a Land of Liberty* (1989), at a time

when the social and political ideology of the Revolution seemed to be a key to the understanding of American history.²⁹

5. In *Illusions of Innocence: Protestant Primitivism in America, 1630–1875* (1988), Richard Hughes and C. Leonard Allen link Joseph Smith to the Restorationists—those who wished to return to the practices and beliefs of primitive Christianity.³⁰ Mormons themselves are comfortable with this category. An article of faith states that “we believe in the same organization that existed in the Primitive Church.”

6. Earlier, Alice Freeman Tyler’s *Freedom’s Ferment* (1944) placed Joseph Smith among utopian reformers because of the Prophet’s plans for the City of Zion, putting him in a class with the Shakers and the founders of Brook Farm. In his massive *Religious History of the American People* (1972), the Yale scholar Sydney E. Ahlstrom accepted Tyler’s categorization and inserted a discussion of Mormonism in a chapter titled “The Communitarian Impulse.”³¹

7. In *The Democratization of Christianity* (1989), Nathan Hatch made Mormons exemplars of a democratic impulse among early national Christians. Mormonism attacked cultural elites and returned religious power to ordinary people, linking Joseph Smith to the democratic forces coming out of the Revolution.³²

8. Grant Underwood’s *The Millenarian World of Early Mormonism* (1993) made a persuasive argument for Mormonism as a form of millenarianism.³³

I have doubtless overlooked explanations, but the list of eight is long enough to make the point. Mormonism cannot be accounted for simply, any more than can the Constitution or other complex phenomena in our history. Each of these books standing alone seems to locate Mormonism satisfactorily, but taken together they show the elusiveness of significance. After reading them all, we see that no simple answer to the initial question can be given. Mormonism is multifaceted, diverse, baroque in its effulgence of meanings.

The problem is further complicated by Mormonism’s estrangement from American society. For a movement that purportedly incorporated so many elements from the surrounding culture, Mormonism found itself at odds with that culture over and over again. I don’t mean arguments, I mean violence. None of the Saints’ American neighbors accepted them for very long. Wherever the Latter-day Saints settled in the nineteenth century, they were rejected like a failed kidney transplant. In New York, Missouri, Illinois, and even Utah, the Saints were attacked by force and compelled to change or die. Far from being fundamentally American, something about Mormonism repulsed large numbers of Americans.³⁴

Every attempt to assimilate the Restoration into some schema has to face the possibility that Mormonism was more un-American than American.

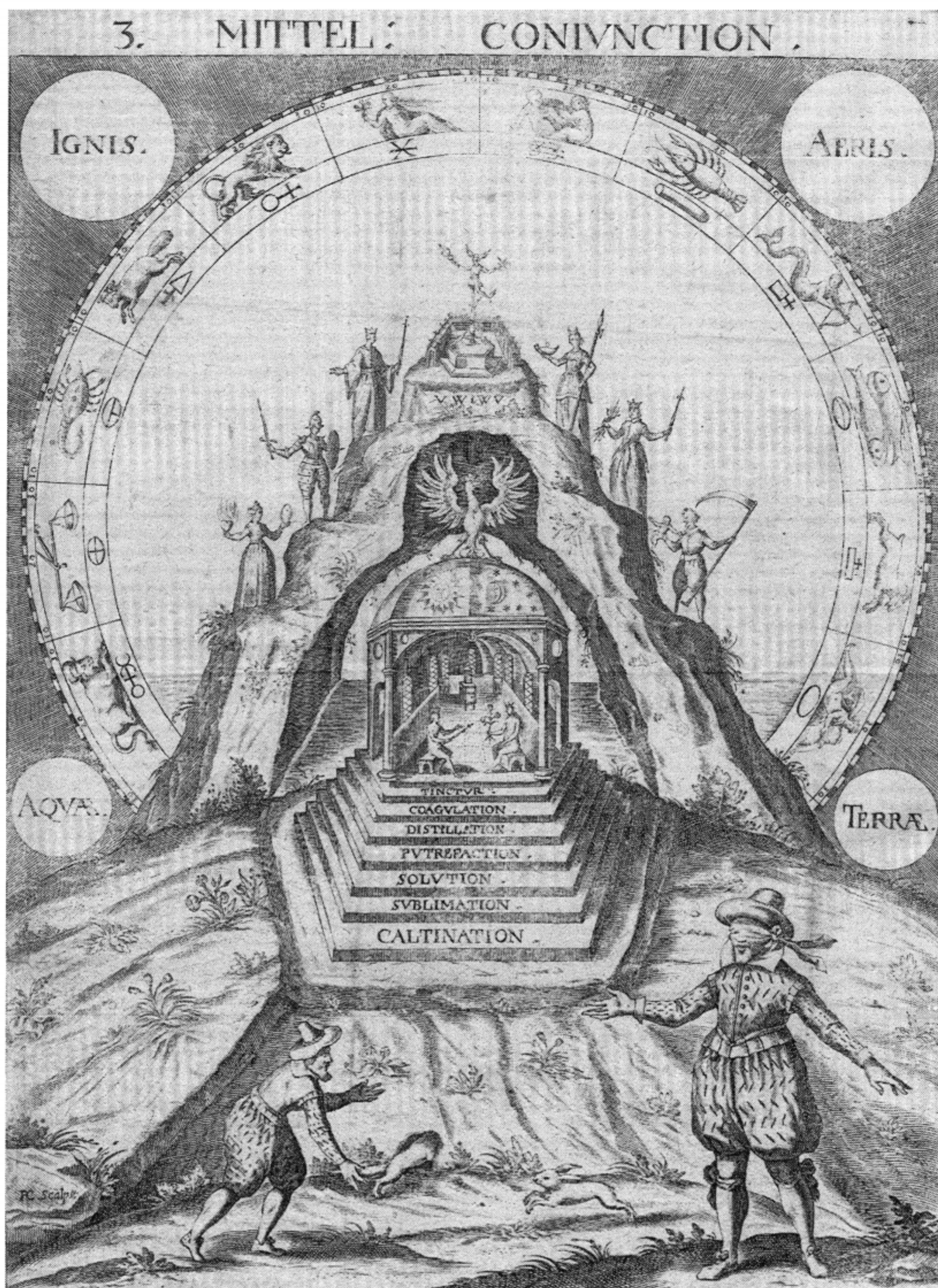


FIG. 3. Mountains of the Adepts, ca. 1667. Recent attempts at situating Joseph Smith's revelations in history have led some historians to arcane sources greatly separated in time and distance from Joseph Smith's early home in upper state New York. Historian John L. Brooke's *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644–1844* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), reproduces this seventeenth-century Rosicrucian drawing in his discussion of some of the "formative influence[s] on the young Joseph Smith" (19). The drawing, which shows a blindfolded initiate ready to be taught the seven alchemical stages of perfection, was originally published in a Steffen Michelspacher, *Cabala, Speculum, Artis et Naturae, in Alchemia* (Augsburg, Germany, 1667). Courtesy of Department of Special Collections, Memorial Library, University of Wisconsin, Madison.

There is more evidence of Mormonism's alienation from the nineteenth-century United States than of it being a natural outgrowth of American culture. The American connection grows ever more tenuous as Mormonism is increasingly viewed as a world religion. If Mormonism is so American, why the immediate success in nineteenth-century Europe and the rapid twentieth-century growth in Latin America and the Philippines?

I see no way to resolve this problem. I am inclined to increase the confusion rather than clarifying it by adding still another dimension, but one that explains the conflicts with Americans. One place to start on the question of significance is with the single most important principle of the Restoration—revelation. With the Restoration, God began directing his Church again, speaking to prophets, actively engaging in a work. We cannot say Joseph was the only one who laid claim to revelations. The Free Will Baptists, the Universalists, the Shakers—all had founders who received open visions of God when they were called to their work. But among all these, Joseph was preeminent in the extent of his claims, in the number of his revelations, and in the success of his movement.³⁵ What was the significance of his reliance on revelation?

All these visionaries, and Joseph most of all, discerned what orthodox Christianity had forgotten—that biblical authority still rests, as it always has, on revelation. The Bible's cultural influence was based on the belief that God revealed himself to prophets. The reason for embracing the Bible was that its words had come from heaven. Christianity had smothered this self-evident fact by relegating revelation to a bygone age, making the Bible an archive rather than a living reality. The significance of Joseph Smith—and other prophets of his time—was their introduction of revelation into the present, renewing contact with the Bible's God.

Reliance on revelation made Joseph Smith appear marginal in American Christianity, but like marginal people before him, Joseph aimed a question at the heart of the culture: Did Christians truly believe in revelation? If believers in the Bible dismissed revelation in the present, could they defend revelation in the past? By 1830 when Joseph came on the scene, the question of revelation had been hotly debated for well over a century. Since the first years of the eighteenth century, rational Christians had been struggling with deists, skeptics, and infidels over the veracity of miracles and the inspiration of the prophets and apostles. In 1829, Alexander Campbell debated with the atheist Robert Owen for an entire week on the question of revelation and miracles.³⁶ Campbell believed he had proven God's presence in the Bible, but doubt lingered on, and over the course of the nineteenth century, belief in revelation eroded among the educated classes. Through the intellectual wars with skeptics and higher critics, believers steadily lost ground. The loss was only dimly perceived by everyday Christians

in Joseph Smith's time, but in the half-century to come, the issue divided divinity schools and shook ordinary people.³⁷

Joseph stood against that ebbing current. He prophesied and received revelation exactly as Christians thought Bible prophets did. In effect, he reenacted the writing of the Bible before the Christian world's eyes.³⁸ Most dismissed him as a charlatan without even bothering to evaluate his doctrine. The people in Palmyra decided the Book of Mormon was bogus before they saw it. Their precipitous condemnation betrayed their doubts about the possibility of revelation. If revelation in the present was so far out of the question that Joseph's claims could be discounted without serious consideration, why believe revelation in the past? After one incredulous visitor marveled that the Mormon Prophet was "nothing but a man," Joseph remarked that "they look upon it as incredible that a man should have any intercourse with his Maker."³⁹ That was exactly the point. People had lost faith that a person could receive revelation. Joseph's life posed the question: Does God speak to man?⁴⁰

In this sense, Joseph was among the "extremist prophets," as one pair of historians have called them.⁴¹ He forced the question of revelation on a culture struggling with its own faith. Joseph's historical role, as he understood it, was to give God a voice in a world that had stopped listening. "The Gentiles shall say," Nephi wrote in the Book of Mormon, "A Bible! A Bible! We have got a Bible, and there cannot be any more Bible." "O fools," the Lord rejoins, "know ye not . . . that I am the same yesterday, today, and forever; and that I speak forth my words according to mine own pleasure" (2 Ne. 29:3–4, 7, 9). Not only does the Book of Mormon show that God does "inspire men and call them to his holy work in this age and generation, as well as in generations of old" (D&C 20:11). But the reality of revelation in the present also proves the reality of revelation in the past. One reason for restoring the Book of Mormon, an early revelation said, is to prove "that the holy scriptures are true" (D&C 20:11). In reply to a minister's inquiry about the distinguishing doctrine of Mormonism, Joseph told him, "We believe the Bible, and they do not."⁴²

At some level, Joseph's revelations indicate a loss of trust in the Christian ministry. For all their learning and their eloquence, the clergy could not be trusted with the Bible. They did not understand what the book meant. It was a record of revelations, and the ministry had turned it into a handbook. The Bible had become a text to be interpreted rather than an experience to be lived. In the process, the power of the book was lost. In Joseph Smith's 1839 account of the First Vision, that was the charge against the churches. "They teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof" (JS–H 1:19). It was the power thereof that Joseph and the other visionaries of his time sought to recover. Not getting it from the ministry, they looked for it themselves.

To me, that is Joseph Smith's significance for our time. He stood on the contested ground where the Enlightenment and Christianity confronted one another, and his life posed the question, Do you believe God speaks? Joseph was swept aside, of course, in the rush of ensuing intellectual battles and was disregarded by the champions of both great systems, but his mission was to hold out for the reality of divine revelation and establish one small outpost where that principle survived. Joseph's revelatory principle is not a single revelation serving for all time, as the Christians of his day believed regarding the incarnation of Christ, nor a mild sort of inspiration seeping into the minds of all good people, but specific, ongoing directions from God to his people. At a time when the origins of Christianity were under assault by the forces of Enlightenment rationality, Joseph Smith returned modern Christianity to its origins in revelation.

For that reason, rationalists today are required to attack Joseph Smith's revelations. Mormonism revives all the claims to heavenly authority that the Enlightenment was invented to repulse. Since the Enlightenment is far from dead, a biographer of Joseph Smith cannot escape its skepticism. Even if general readers momentarily suspend disbelief, in the end most of them will not believe. That is a fact in our modern world. Educated believers are in a small minority. We write under a different constellation of intellectual moods and fashions in the twenty-first century, but the rationalist doubts of the twentieth century are still with us.

Despite the prevailing disbelief, some modern readers will enjoy the story of an old-fashioned prophet rising once more. Appalled by the miseries of our time, they may feel that the world is desperate for revelation from a caring God. Rather than dismiss Joseph out of hand as a blatant fraud, they will listen and observe. Is it possible that biblical revelation could be renewed? Could the Enlightenment have shut up the heavens through its disbelief? Must we foreclose the very possibility of divine communication? Those questions, raised by this "modern" prophet, may seem worth pondering by at least a few.

Richard Lyman Bushman (rlb7@columbia.edu) is Gouverneur Morris Professor of History Emeritus at Columbia University and Chair of the Executive Committee at the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History, Brigham Young University. He is currently writing a cultural biography of Joseph Smith. An earlier version of this essay was presented at Lives of the Saints: Writing Mormon Biography and Autobiography, a conference sponsored by the Smith Institute on March 17, 2001, at Brigham Young University. The author thanks Jed Woodworth and others of the *BYU Studies* staff for extensive help in preparation of this essay.

1. Henry Caswall, *The Prophet of the Nineteenth Century; or, The Rise, Progress, and Present State of the Mormons, or Latter-day Saints* (London: J. G. F. and J. Rivington,

1843). For a review of Caswall's career, see Craig L. Foster, "Henry Caswall: Anti-Mormon Extraordinaire," *BYU Studies* 35, no. 4 (1995–96): 144–59.

2. I. Woodbridge Riley, *The Founder of Mormonism: A Psychological Study of Joseph Smith, Jr.* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1902), based on his earlier dissertation, "A Psychological History of Joseph Smith, Jr., the Founder of Mormonism" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1902).

3. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945). A revised and enlarged edition was published in 1971. The many book reviews of *No Man Knows My History* are digested in Louis Midgley, "F. M. Brodie—'The Fasting Hermit and Very Saint of Ignorance': A Biographer and Her Legend," *FARMS Review of Books* 8, no. 2 (1996): 147–230.

4. John Henry Evans, *Joseph Smith, an American Prophet* (New York: Macmillan, 1933); Leonard J. Arrington, *Adventures of a Church Historian* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 21.

5. Donna Hill, *Joseph Smith, the First Mormon* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1977).

6. Newell G. Bringhurst, "Applause, Attack, and Ambivalence: Varied Responses to *No Man Knows My History*," in *Reconsidering No Man Knows My History: Fawn M. Brodie and Joseph Smith in Retrospect*, ed. Newell G. Bringhurst (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1996), 53–55.

In addition to the five biographies of Joseph Smith already mentioned, my list, arranged chronologically, includes Edward W. Tullidge, *Life of Joseph the Prophet* (New York: Tullidge and Crandall, 1878); George Q. Cannon, *Life of Joseph Smith, the Prophet* (1888; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986); Thomas Gregg, *The Prophet of Palmyra* (New York: John B. Alden, 1890); Harry M. Beardsley, *Joseph Smith and His Mormon Empire* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1931); Preston Nibley, *Joseph Smith, the Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1944); Daryl Chase, *Joseph Smith the Prophet: As He Lives in the Hearts of His People* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1944); Norma J. Fischer, *Portrait of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1960); John J. Stewart, *Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Hawkes, 1966); Carl Carmer, *The Farm Boy and the Angel* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970); Francis M. Gibbons, *Joseph Smith: Martyr, Prophet of God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1977); Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984); Norman Rothman, *The Unauthorized Biography of Joseph Smith, Mormon Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Norman Rothman Foundation, 1997); William D. Morain, *The Sword of Laban: Joseph Smith, Jr., and the Dissociated Mind* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Press, 1998); and Heidi S. Swinton, *American Prophet: The Story of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Shadow Mountain, 1999).

One might also include essay collections such as Hyrum L. Andrus, *Joseph Smith, the Man and the Seer* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1960); Leon R. Hartshorn, *Joseph Smith: Prophet of the Restoration* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1970); Larry C. Porter and Susan Easton Black, eds., *The Prophet Joseph Smith: Essays on the Life and Mission of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988); Truman G. Madsen, *Joseph Smith the Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1989); Susan Easton Black and Charles D. Tate Jr., *Joseph Smith: The Prophet, the Man* (Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1993); and Davis Bitton, *Images of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Aspen Books, 1996).

7. Cannon, *Life of Joseph Smith*, 20.

8. Evans, *Joseph Smith, an American Prophet*, 211.

9. Paul Conkin concludes that "in a sense, the book is rather simple." Paul K. Conkin, *American Originals: Homemade Varieties of Christianity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 168.

10. Concluding his account of Joseph's death, Cannon wrote, "The enemies of truth were sure that they had now destroyed the work. And yet it lives, greater and stronger after the lapse of years! It is indestructible for it is the work of God." Cannon, *Life of Joseph Smith*, 527.

11. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, 84–85.

12. Beginning with I. Woodbridge Riley at the beginning of the century, the reflections on Joseph's character took the form of scientific psychological labels. Riley couched "the Final question" as being "Was He Demented or Merely Degenerate?" Riley, *The Founder of Mormonism*, xix. In *Joseph Smith and His Mormon Empire*, Harry Beardsley built on and magnified Riley's speculations about epileptic visions, but he also thought that Joseph was "lazy, tricky, and thoroughly unscrupulous" (42).

13. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, 403.

14. No one has stretched further than John L. Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644–1844* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), but it began in earnest with Riley, *The Founder of Mormonism*, 105–73.

15. Among many examples are Beardsley, *Joseph Smith and His Mormon Empire*, 48–52; Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, 37; Dan Vogel, "The Prophet Puzzle' Revisited," in *The Prophet Puzzle: Interpretive Essays on Joseph Smith*, ed. Bryan Waterman (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999), 53.

16. Vogel, "The Prophet Puzzle' Revisited," 53.

17. J. F. C. Harrison, *The Second Coming: Popular Millenarianism, 1780–1850* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1979), 180–88.

18. Compare Peter Mark Roget, *Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1909), item 986, and Peter Mark Roget, John Lewis Roget, and Samuel Romilly Roget, *Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases*, Authorized American Edition (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1935), item 986.

19. Vogel, "The Prophet Puzzle' Revisited," 61.

20. George Eliot, *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life* (London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1881), prelude.

21. Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992).

22. Vogel, "The Prophet Puzzle' Revisited," 61.

23. My argument here relies heavily on the forthcoming work by Terryl L. Givens, "By the Hand of Mormon": *The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

24. Joseph Fielding Smith, *The Progress of Man*, 3d ed. (Salt Lake City: Genealogical Society of Utah, 1936), 196–288.

25. For example, Daniel Walker Howe calls the recent attempts of Mormon historians to contextualize their studies in American religious history a "maturation." Daniel Walker Howe, "Protestantism, Voluntarism, and Personal Identity in Antebellum America," in *New Directions in American Religious History*, ed. Harry S. Stout and D. G. Hart (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 219.

26. Dan Vogel, *Religious Seekers and the Advent of Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988).

27. D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987). A revised and enlarged edition was published in 1998.

28. Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire*, 3–29, 209–61. See also Lance S. Owens, "Joseph Smith: America's Hermetic Prophet," *Gnosis* 35 (spring 1995): 56–64. For a review of responses to *The Refiner's Fire*, see Jan Shipps, *Sojourner in the Promised Land: Forty Years among the Mormons* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 204–17. Reviews

include Richard L. Bushman, "The Mysteries of Mormonism," *Journal of the Early Republic* 15, no. 3 (fall 1995): 501–8; William J. Hamblin, Daniel C. Peterson, and George L. Mitton, "Mormon in the Fiery Furnace; or, Loftes Tryk Goes to Cambridge," *FARMS Review of Books* 6, no. 2 (1994–95): 3–58; and the reviews by William J. Hamblin and Davis Bitton in *BYU Studies* 34, no. 4 (1994–95): 167–92.

29. Kenneth H. Winn, *Exiles in a Land of Liberty: Mormons in America, 1830–1846*, Studies in Religion, ed. Charles H. Long (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989).

30. Richard T. Hughes and C. Leonard Allen, *Illusions of Innocence: Protestant Primitivism in America, 1630–1875* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 133–52.

31. Alice Felt Tyler, *Freedom's Ferment: Phases of American Social History to 1860* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1944), 86–107; Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 501–9.

32. Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

33. Grant Underwood, *The Millenarian World of Early Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

34. This ambiguity is well stated in the summary of early Mormonism in David Brion Davis, *The Great Republic: A History of the American People* (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath, 1977), 532–41.

35. See Richard Lyman Bushman, "The Visionary World of Joseph Smith," *BYU Studies* 37, no. 1 (1997–98): 183–204.

36. *Debate on the Evidences of Christianity; Containing an Examination of "The Social System," and of All the Systems of Skepticism of Ancient and Modern Times, Held in the City of Cincinnati, Ohio, in April 15, 1829; Between Robert Owen and Alexander Campbell* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Robinson and Fairbank, 1829).

37. James Turner, *Without God, without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).

38. This line of reasoning is taken from Terryl L. Givens, *The Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 82–93.

39. Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989–92), 2:66.

40. 2 Nephi 27:23; 28:6; Jacob 4:8; Mormon 8:6; 9:11, 20; Doctrine and Covenants 11:25; Givens, *Viper on the Hearth*, 82–93; Turner, *Without God, without Creed*, 141–67. The philosopher Richard Rorty, representing a modern mentality, has said that over the past three centuries we have learned that "the world does not speak. Only we do." Rorty, quoted in Andrew Delbanco, *The Death of Satan: How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), 221.

41. Paul E. Johnson and Sean Wilentz, *The Kingdom of Matthias* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 6, 173.

42. Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2:155, capitalization added.