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Joseph Smith as an American Restorationist

Richard T. Hughes

Richard Bushman's wonderfully expansive paper "Joseph Smith's Many Histories" reminds us in forceful ways of the historical complexity that helped create the Mormon Prophet, Joseph Smith. Bushman also reminds us that while historical complexity is embedded in history, it embeds itself as well in the hearts and minds of human beings who discover the various realities of history and then appropriate those realities for their own purposes. As an illustration of this point, Bushman tells the story of Christopher Columbus—how his standing as the grandfather of the United States was neither acknowledged nor celebrated until after 1776.¹

A second Columbus anecdote serves to introduce further the point of seeing Joseph Smith in the context of the biblical "restorationism." A few years ago at Pepperdine University, where I teach, Christopher Columbus came very close to being baptized into the history of the American restorationist traditions. Two great restoration movements—movements that sought to restore the purity of the Christian faith—emerged on the American frontier in the early nineteenth century. One was led by Joseph Smith; the other was led by Alexander Campbell. These two movements shared much in common, and one of those commonalities was adult baptism by immersion for the forgiveness of sins. Pepperdine is an institution

intimately related to the restoration efforts of Alexander Campbell, and in this tradition, as well as in that of the Latter-day Saints, baptism by immersion for the forgiveness of sins is valued no less today than it was two hundred years ago.

Some years ago, a donor presented Pepperdine with a statue of Christopher Columbus. This was no ordinary statue. It was a statue of Columbus extending his right arm to its full length and pointing. But pointing to what? The Pepperdine administration installed the Columbus statue on a precipice overlooking the Pacific Ocean, so on our campus, at least, Columbus points to water—indeed, to vast expanses of water.

About a year after the Columbus statue was erected, a friend of mine was visiting Pepperdine for the very first time. Upon seeing the statue, she wryly commented what a fine thing it might be to hang a sign on that outstretched, pointing arm of Columbus, a sign that would read, in the words of the Ethiopian eunuch, “See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized?” (Acts 8:36). That struck me as a splendid suggestion, one that might alter once again the way that Columbus is perceived. But so far no one has mustered the courage to hang that sign on Columbus’s extended arm.

This incident invites us to explore in greater depth the commonalities that tied Joseph Smith to Alexander Campbell, and vice versa. Bushman points out that Alexander Campbell in many ways fathered the non-Mormon perspective on Joseph Smith—a perspective that viewed Smith as a charlatan, a fraud, a fanatic, and, above all, as someone shaped entirely by his own provincial world. Indeed, Alexander Campbell viewed Joseph Smith as purely and simply a “product of his [local] American environment.”² As Bushman points out, Campbell claimed that Smith, “through his stone spectacles, wrote on the plates of Nephi, in his Book of Mormon, every error and almost every truth discussed in New York for the last ten years.”³ This perspective found proponents in a host of critics ranging from J. B. Turner to I. Woodbridge Riley to Fawn Brodie and most recently to Dan Vogel.

Thus, Bushman argues that in the non-Mormon view America created Joseph Smith. He notes that Mormons, on the other hand,

have “linked Joseph to the history of biblical prophets . . . [and have] assigned him the historical role of restoring the pure gospel after a long period of apostasy . . . [and] preparing the world for the Second Coming of Christ.” According to Bushman, therefore, Joseph has an additional history, extending beyond the United States and “back to the New Testament and the loss of Christ’s original gospel.”⁴

I quite agree that Joseph has an additional history that extends beyond the United States. But first I want to explore the explicitly American dimensions of Joseph Smith. Indeed, to juxtapose an American Joseph with a gospel Joseph may be too simple. For the gospel Joseph that Bushman describes—the Joseph who “restor[ed] the pure gospel after a long period of apostasy . . . [and] prepar[ed] the world for the Second Coming of Christ”—was himself a product of two histories. This gospel Joseph was a product of the transnational biblical witness, to be sure. But the gospel Joseph was also a product of powerful forces in American life in the early nineteenth century.

I mean precisely this: that the restoration vision which so thoroughly informed the work of Joseph Smith flourished in antebellum America in ways that it has seldom flourished at any other place or any other time in the past two thousand years.

I understand that the restoration vision is a venerable vision that emerged as early as the second century with Irenaeus. It emerged again in the Middle Ages with sectarian movements that sought to recover the heart of New Testament Christianity. It emerged in the early sixteenth century with the Anabaptists and later in that century with the Puritans. But in America in the early nineteenth century, the restoration vision flourished as never before. More than this, virtually every restoration movement of that time imagined that by restoring the primitive church, or some feature of the primitive church, they were helping to usher in the Millennium or, as Bushman puts it in his paper, they thought they were “preparing the world for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.” One thinks, in this context, not only of Joseph Smith, but also of Alexander Campbell, who firmly believed that “just in so far as the ancient order of things, or the religion of the New Testament, is restored, just so far has the Millennium commenced.”⁵ This is the great commonality that Alexander Campbell

shared with Joseph Smith, in spite of the fact that Campbell thought Joseph a fraud and an imposter and a product not of inspiration but of his local environment in New York State. Indeed, for some thirty-five years, Alexander Campbell edited a journal devoted to what he called the “restoration of the ancient order of things” but bearing the title *The Millennial Harbinger*.⁶

One could argue, as I did in the *Journal of Mormon History* in 1993, that while Joseph Smith and Alexander Campbell were both committed to the restoration of the ancient order of things, what divided them was the way they envisioned the task of restoration. Joseph was essentially a romantic, informed by the spirit of American Romanticism.⁷ He therefore wrote and spoke about how God, in the days of prophets and apostles, spoke directly to humankind. In those days, he said, the heavens were opened. But apostasy reared its head and the heavens closed and God no longer spoke to men and women as he did in the golden age of the saints. Joseph viewed himself, therefore, as God’s chosen vessel, commissioned to usher in a restoration of that golden age of direct revelation, and in that restoration, God once again would speak to humankind, just as he had in the days of old.

On the other hand, Alexander Campbell was a child of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. He had no use for the romantic notion that God might speak to men and women through dreams and revelations. For him, God spoke only through a book that rational people could read and understand in rational ways. And only on the basis of a rational approach to a rational text could one possibly hope to restore the glories of the ancient church. At least that was Campbell’s claim, and from this highly rational perspective, he imagined Smith both a fraud and a charlatan.

Joseph Smith and Alexander Campbell, therefore, clearly shared a vision of the restoration of the ancient order of things, but they parted company on how that vision should be understood and implemented.

Even more important is the fact that these two restorationists—Smith and Campbell—led the two most successful new religious movements in America in the early nineteenth century. The question

we must ask is this: why did so many Americans find the gospel of the restored church and the gospel of the coming Millennium so incredibly attractive?

In nineteenth-century America, Joseph Smith and Alexander Campbell were not the only ones who advocated the restoration of the ancient faith, nor were they the only ones who claimed that the restoration of the ancient church would usher in the Millennium—the final golden age. One finds the very same perspective, the very same conviction that restoration leads to millennium, in the Shakers and even in John Humphrey Noyes's Oneida Community.

The Shakers believed that what stood at the core of the ancient church was sexual purity. After all, had Paul not advised the early Christians to remain celibate, even as he was celibate? And so the Shakers thought that if they could recover the purity of the ancient church in that respect, they would herald the Second Coming of Christ. This is precisely why the official name of the Shakers was the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, or Millennial Church.

It is important to realize that in England Mother Ann Lee was able to win only a handful of converts to the gospel of a restored, celibate church. Once in America, however, she won to her cause not tens or hundreds but thousands. And once again, we must ask the question, what was it about the gospel of the restored church that Americans found so compelling?

John Humphrey Noyes and his followers in the Oneida Community also thought of themselves as restoring the heart and soul of New Testament Christianity. But Noyes defined the golden age of the church in terms precisely opposite those embraced by the Shakers. If the Shakers thought the essence of biblical Christianity consisted in celibacy, Noyes thought the core of biblical Christianity consisted in the rejection of selfish thoughts and selfish ways. And for Noyes, what could be more selfish than monogamous marriage? And so, in his attempt to restore biblical religion, he brought together men and women who were prepared to renounce the selfishness of the marriage bed and to practice instead what Noyes described as "complex marriage"—a euphemism, really, for what amounted to free love. But

we should not allow the shocking nature of Noyes's experiment to obscure the fact that Noyes viewed himself, first and foremost, as a biblical restorationist.

Noyes never claimed that this restoration would usher in the final millennial age. Instead, he believed that the Millennium had already come in AD 70, and the possibility of millennial perfection, he argued, was precisely what allowed him and his followers to embrace the restoration of a selfless society, centered on the practice of complex marriage. So even in John Humphrey Noyes, one finds the close connection—even the interdependence—of the restoration and millennial motifs, even as one finds that same interdependence in Joseph Smith, Alexander Campbell, and the Shakers.

John Humphrey Noyes never attracted converts by the thousands as Joseph Smith, Alexander Campbell, and the Shakers did. But the fact that he attracted hundreds to his community of restored, selfless perfection is once again a tribute to the enormous popularity of the restoration vision in antebellum America.

The question we must ask ourselves now is, why? And how can we account for the popularity of the restoration vision in early nineteenth-century America? The restoration vision—especially the notion that a restoration of a golden age of the past would herald the Millennium or the golden age of the future—was an important theme built into the heart and soul of American culture in the early nineteenth century.

Where, for example, do we find the notion of restoration in the broader American culture of that period? We need look no further than the Declaration of Independence and the “self-evident” truths it proclaims. Those truths were self-evident because they were grounded, not in human history or human invention, but in nature, in the way things were meant to be, and were based on the original design one finds in the Garden of Eden. No wonder Thomas Paine announced that “the case and circumstances of America present themselves as in the beginning of the world.” Or again, he wrote that when we view America “we are brought at once to the point of seeing government begin, as if we had lived in the beginning of time. The real volume, not of history, but of facts, is directly before us, not mutilated by contrivance, or the errors of tradition.”⁸

But if Americans in the nineteenth century thought their nation was a restoration of the principles of nature, grounded in Eden at the dawn of time, they also imagined that this same nation, precisely because it had restored those truths, would usher in a final golden age for all humankind. For example, Lyman Beecher, a contemporary of Joseph Smith and a prominent evangelical preacher, claimed in 1827 that America

will throw its beams beyond the waves; it will shine into darkness there and be comprehended; it will awaken desire and hope and effort, and produce revolutions and overturnings, until the world is free.

. . . Then will the trumpet of Jubilee sound, and earth's debased millions will leap from the dust, and shake off their chains, and cry, "Hosanna to the Son of David."⁹

The great seal of the United States makes precisely the same point. There, an unfinished pyramid grows from arid desert sands. Inscribed on the pyramid's base is that notable date, 1776. Clearly, the pyramid represents the new nation. The barren desert terrain, above which the pyramid towers and from which it seems to grow, signifies all human history prior to 1776. For all their glories and achievements, past civilizations were essentially barren compared to the glories that would mark the new American state. The pyramid is unfinished since other nations have not yet emulated the American example and thrown off the yoke of tyranny. But as the American example penetrates the dark places of the world and as nation after nation and tribe after tribe rise up and reject the rule of tyrants, the world will become increasingly free, and when the world is free, the Millennium will have dawned. God clearly approves of this vision since above the pyramid we find his eye and, above that eye, the Latin phrase *annuity coeptis*, "He has smiled on our beginnings." And beneath the pyramid stands the most critical phrase of all, *novus ordo seclorum*, "a new order of the ages."

That is precisely what America was—a new order of the ages. But in a very real sense, it was also the most ancient nation of all, for it had sunk its deepest root into the beginning of time when the world came fresh from the hand of God.

What I am saying is simply this, that in the early nineteenth century, popular American culture thrived on the cosmic rhythm of restoration and millennium. And these are the very themes that informed not only Joseph Smith and his Latter-day Saints but a host of other new religions as well, including Alexander Campbell's Churches of Christ, Ann Lee's Shakers, and John Humphrey Noyes's Oneida Community.

This suggests that when I. Woodbridge Riley claimed that Joseph's Book of Mormon embodied popular American themes like "anti-Masonry, anti-Catholicism, Methodism, attacks on infidelity, theories of Indian origins, anti-Calvinism, and Baptist doctrine,"¹⁰ he missed the most important theme of all, and that was the cosmic rhythm of restoration and millennium that defined both the nation and most of the nation's new religions.

In making this argument, I have no doubt come across as a reductionist with a vengeance, as the typical non-Mormon who wants to argue that "America created Joseph Smith." But in my view, there is far more to Joseph than this. For as Bushman has argued so eloquently, Joseph has a history that extends beyond the United States. That history, in my view, is preeminently the biblical saga.

In the first place, it would be hard to celebrate the cosmic rhythm of restoration and millennium apart from the biblical vision where those themes are most deeply rooted. And second, Joseph clearly draws on the biblical vision in ways that dwarf every other nineteenth-century American preacher or would-be prophet. For Joseph refused to confine himself to the New Testament or the Old Testament or to certain sections of the Bible that he found most useful. Instead, Joseph ranged throughout the Bible and drew from it all. What I wrote almost twenty years ago of early Mormons is also true of Joseph—indeed, is preeminently true of Joseph:

Unwilling therefore to confine themselves to a single book or to a single sacred epoch as did traditional restorationists . . . [e]arly Mormons sought "the restoration of all things." Like bees sucking nectar first from this flower and then from the next, early Mormons moved at ease from the primitive church to Moses to the prophets to Abraham to Adam and finally to the coming millennium.¹¹

Here is the history that, in Bushman's words, extends beyond the United States "back to the New Testament."¹² For this is a cosmic history that shaped the Prophet in cosmic ways. But even as that cosmic, biblical history shaped the Prophet in cosmic ways, it did so in a profoundly American context. In this way, Joseph Smith emerges as the dialectical prophet, the man with one foot in American culture and the other in biblical culture, and the man who fused the two in a profound act of creative genius. Bushman is exactly right: Joseph is American, but any attempt to understand Joseph exclusively in terms of his American setting is bound to fail.

Notes

1. Richard Bushman, "Joseph Smith's Many Histories," in this volume, 3.
2. Bushman, "Joseph Smith's Many Histories," 5.
3. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith the Mormon Prophet*, 2d ed. (New York: Knopf, 1971), 69, quoted in Bushman, "Joseph Smith's Many Histories," 5.
4. Bushman, "Joseph Smith's Many Histories," 6.
5. Alexander Campbell, "A Restoration of the Ancient Order of Things. No. I," *Christian Baptist* 2, no. 7 (February 7, 1825): 128.
6. Alexander Campbell, "Preface," *Millennial Harbinger* (January 3, 1831): 5.
7. Richard T. Hughes, "Tanner Lecture: Two Restoration Traditions: Mormons and Churches of Christ in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of Mormon History* 19 (Spring 1993): 34–51.
8. Thomas Paine, "Rights of Man," in *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, ed. Philip S. Foner, 2 vols. (New York: Citadel Press, 1945), 1:376.
9. Lyman Beecher, "The Memory of Our Fathers," in *Nationalism and Religion in America*, ed. Winthrop S. Hudson (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 104–5.
10. Bushman, "Joseph Smith's Many Histories," 8.
11. Richard T. Hughes and C. Leonard Allen, *Illusions of Innocence: Protestant Primitivism in America, 1630–1875* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 146.
12. Bushman, "Joseph Smith's Many Histories," 6.