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Attempting to Situate Joseph Smith

Grant Underwood

Undergirding Richard Bushman's insightful paper is a profound recognition (and a reminder) that histories are the creations of authors, not photographs of the past. Every aspect of writing a history, from the selection of sources to the interpretation of those sources bears the imprint of the author. The profoundly precarious and contingent character of all reconstructions of the past led Roland Barthes to quip that biography is "a novel that dare not speak its name."¹ Clearly, this is an overstatement, but it does warn us away from an unhealthy critical complacency when engaging in studying written histories.

Bushman draws attention to the fact that there are as many histories of Joseph Smith as there are authors, and he highlights representative types from J. B. Turner to Harold Bloom. In the end, some biographies are more detailed or more illuminating than others, but none has captured the man in his fullness. Moreover, Bushman is the first to admit that his long-awaited biography *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, though more comprehensive and nuanced than other studies, is still Bushman's Joseph just as we already have Brooke's Joseph and Brodie's Joseph.²

Bushman draws a contrast between authors who place Joseph solely within an American setting and those who link him to what

Bushman calls “transnational histories.” Bushman argues that it is the transnational history that made Smith significant. “I am advocating global perspectives,” he writes, “I think they are the only way to highlight the nature of Joseph Smith’s achievement. If we tie him down to upstate rural New York, we will miss the expansiveness of his thinking, like explaining Shakespeare from the small town mentality of Stratford.”³ Bushman’s stimulating comments need to be engaged further on at least two levels—in terms of content and methodology.

Additional Situational Histories

To Bushman’s list of histories that have been attached to Joseph Smith, one may highlight several additional contexts that could yield important insights. How, for instance, does Joseph Smith’s socio-economic vision of Zion fit within the international history of utopian theorists and intentional communities around the world?⁴ Or, how do his views on marriage and family look when compared with the many forms of familial organization found in world civilizations and societies?⁵ And what about his notion of religious “restoration,” which, as Richard Hughes has argued, places him in a long line of biblical primitivists in many countries committed to reclaiming the ancient faith and reforming their churches to match the scriptural pattern?⁶

Consider, for example, the complexity of the latter perspective. At the heart of Smith’s primitivism lay the expectation of restoring the vital, charismatic Christianity he believed existed during New Testament times. Prophetic charismata had been officially squelched in the second Christian century in response to the outbreak of the Montanist prophecy.⁷ The ecclesiastical establishment at the time redefined the biblical promise that the Spirit would lead into all truth. Christian theologians decided that the Spirit had uniquely led the original apostles into all truth as they composed the books of the New Testament and that the Spirit would lead subsequent generations of Christians to that same truth—but only through the apostles’ writings rather than through direct, personal communications from God.⁸ As Tertullian quipped, by this interpretation, “The Holy Spirit was chased into a book,” and certain Christians have been trying to free it ever since.⁹

While Joseph Smith may have been among the most successful in seeking to revive a charismatic Christianity, he was not alone in this pursuit. Recent scholarship has documented an astonishingly rich presence of prophets and prophetic religion along the periphery of Anglo-American Christianity in the century before Smith. Historian Susan Juster has identified more than three hundred “prophets” who raised their voices and recorded their visions during this period.¹⁰

Here is another history that may be attached to the Mormon founder. Douglas Winiarski writes that this extensive “visionary culture” has been discovered among groups as diverse as the “English Methodists, New Light Scots-Irish Presbyterians, German sectarians, and African slaves,” and their sons and daughters were prophesying and seeing visions “in the marshlands of Nova Scotia, the northern New England hill country, the ‘Burned-Over District’ of upstate New York, and the borderlands of Kentucky and Ohio.”¹¹ By Joseph Smith’s day, charismatic experience had clearly overflowed the dikes of denominational religion. As historian Gordon Wood states, “The disintegration of older structures of authority released torrents of popular religiosity into public life.”¹² Far from being silenced by the onrush of the Enlightenment, “God had more prophets, tongues, and oracles than ever before,” notes Leigh Schmidt; “thus, the . . . predicament actually became as much one of God’s loquacity as God’s hush.”¹³ “More and more people,” explains Juster, “were seeing and speaking to God directly, without the mediating influence of preachers or churches, and all [the ministers] could do about it was scoff.”¹⁴

Bushman has rightly pointed out that the problem with Joseph Smith’s account of his first vision was that it struck local churchmen as merely the latest example in the long and lamentable history of prophetic activity they had come to denounce under the rubric of “enthusiasm.” And Smith’s encounter with Moroni recalls cleric Charles Woodmason’s mocking description of a woman “highly celebrated for her extraordinary Illuminations, Visions and Communications,” who told “of an Angel coming to visit her in the Night thro’ the Roof of her Cabbin—In flames of Fire too!”¹⁵ Yet all the fulminations of the clerical establishment could not change the fact that for many Christians, as Shaker prophet Ann Lee is reported to have declared,

God's work in these "latter days," was to be "*a strange work . . . even a marvellous work and a wonder.*"¹⁶

Lee's comment points to still another history in which the prophet can be situated—the history of millenarianism. A religion is said to be millenarian when its

basic source of energy and momentum [derive] from its sense of being the chosen people of God living in the final days of history. This self-understanding—which lies at the heart of all millenarian movements and distinguishes them from all other forms of religious expression—must be seen as the source of that explosive and transformative power which is characteristic of both early Christianity and early Mormonism.¹⁷

At times, millenarianism can be quite apocalyptic, threatening the spiritually effete religious establishment with imminent destruction and promising ultimate vindication for the beleaguered faithful. A world in the grip of sin can hardly be expected to yield to the entreaties of the righteous. Only God can set things aright, and such divine intervention is expected to come dramatically, even cataclysmically, and soon to introduce the millennial age.¹⁸

Smith's early writings exhibit just such an apocalyptic sensibility. In a letter to his followers in Colesville, New York, in August 1830, he wrote:

Be not faint, the day of your deliverance is not far distant, for the judgements of the Lord are already abroad in the earth, and the cold hand of death, will soon pass through your neighborhood, and sweep away some of your most bitter enemies, for . . . the earth will soon be reaped—that is, the wicked must soon be destroyed from off the face of the earth, for the Lord hath spoken it . . . for the day is fast hastening on when the restoration of all things shall be fulfilled. . . . Then shall come to pass that the lion shall lie down with the lamb &c.¹⁹

In an open letter to the public in 1833, Smith told the American people, "Distruccion to the eye of the spiritual beholder seemes to be written by the finger of an invisable hand in Large capitals upon almost evry thing we behold." For this reason, "I declare unto you the warning which the Lord has commanded me to declare unto this generation . . .

Repent ye Repent, ye and imbrace the everlasting Covenant and flee to Zion before the overflowing scourge overtake you.”²⁰

In time, Smith’s sense of the immediacy of the Apocalypse moderated. Setbacks such as the Saints’ expulsion from their Missouri Zion as well as an increasing awareness of how much they themselves had to do to build the Kingdom of God on earth before Christ returned deepened the Mormon prophet’s understanding of God’s timetable for human history. Especially after an encounter with followers of William Miller, who calculated that the Second Coming would occur about the year 1843, the Prophet’s expectation of an imminent Advent of Christ diminished.²¹

In the latter part of his paper, Bushman turns to the “Prophet puzzle” posed by Jan Shippo and explores Smith’s own efforts to find suitable histories to explain the experiences he had personally witnessed. Only through the Book of Mormon, Bushman suggests, was the young prophet able to find a history that solved the conundrum of his identity as visionary, seer, and translator. Today, other histories are available that articulate a compatibility between involvement with folk magic and religious visions. More than ever, the old Enlightenment dichotomy between magic and religion that used to underwrite critiques of the Prophet is now seen to artificially separate what has long been intermingled in most human societies.²² The great Hebrew prophet Samuel, for instance, was sought for his seeric ability to locate lost donkeys as well as to proclaim the will of Yahweh (1 Samuel 9:1–10). And the use of divinatory aids to revelation, including seer stones and mineral rods, is not uncommon in the history of prophecy.²³ Among certain groups, however, most notably ancient Israel, scholars have noted that as substantive, written prophecies began to dominate, the formerly sanctioned divinatory devices became less common and even illegitimate.²⁴ Similarly, Joseph Smith’s youthful seeric prowess in locating lost objects or discovering treasure was, in time, overshadowed by his more transcendent ability to bring forth God’s works “out of obscurity and out of darkness,” and his history was told accordingly.²⁵

With regard to the Book of Mormon, Bushman points out that there was no precedent for Joseph’s role as unlearned translator of an

ancient record other than the account provided in the book itself of the translator-seer King Mosiah. This is certainly true for the world Smith knew, but Bushman's invitation to situate Joseph in broader, transnational histories, beyond the borders of the United States and even beyond a Judeo-Christian heritage, enables us to discover some interesting parallels. In the Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, for instance, a fundamental source of religious teaching is the *termas* (treasures). *Termas* include sacred texts composed anciently, primarily by the great Guru Rinpoche (Padmasambhava), and hidden by him in various secret locations to be discovered at a later date. *Termas* can be located and interpreted only by a special class of spiritually enlightened adepts (*bodishattvas*) known as *tertons* (treasure finders). Only *tertons* can reveal these texts because they are written in the cryptic language of the *Dakini* (supernatural beings).²⁶

Placing these histories side by side, Smith looks like an American terton-seer translating ancient texts written in cryptic Reformed Egyptian by the great prophets of the past, Mormon and Moroni. The prophets' purpose for writing, as it had been for Guru Rinpoche, included keeping the faith on track by making clear the fundamental "plain and precious" principles of the tradition. Further, it is interesting to note that some of the Tibetan *termas* are called "mind treasures" because they are "not physically discovered but are revealed through the mind of the terton."²⁷ This phraseology recalls the prophecies of Enoch or the parchment of John revealed by Joseph Smith. What is interesting here is not to preposterously argue for any organic connection between Joseph Smith and Tibetan Buddhism but to notice the similar mechanisms for authorizing a religious text and to ponder the social and intellectual dynamics that make them effective.

Joseph, of course, was reared in the biblically saturated culture of the Second Great Awakening and found in the Bible his most meaningful links to other histories. In several of his revelations, for instance, he is likened to Moses or identified as an apostle of Jesus Christ.²⁸ Throughout his life he unvaryingly affirmed his status as God's spokesman. While deciding the legitimacy of this claim is beyond the methods of academia, Joseph would be pleased to know that scholars today do not rule it out as a theoretical possibility. Some

Christian historians, such as the evangelical scholar George Marsden, insist that history, “when viewed without a proper awareness of the spiritual forces involved, ‘is as confusing as a football game in which half the players are invisible’ [quoting Richard Lovelace].” While the only possible realm of examination and analysis for an academic methodology remains the visible, natural world,

it would be a mistake to assume that such [an approach] is incompatible with, or even antagonistic to, a view of history in which God as revealed in Scripture is the dominant force, and in which other unseen spiritual forces are contending . . . which we understand only imperfectly and whose true dimensions we only occasionally glimpse.²⁹

Methodological Cautions about Comparative Histories

Marsden’s comments provide a convenient segue into a discussion of methodological concerns. Bushman wants to tap the promise of comparative history and I agree, but religious devotees are sometimes skittish about comparative analysis because it seems to rob their particular religion of its uniqueness. They assume that uniqueness is prime evidence of their faith’s divine origin. Such thinking, however, confuses a religion’s character with its source. Similarity and difference are descriptive categories; they say nothing necessarily about origin. Properly pursued, comparative analysis is useful in drawing attention to larger processes of human behavioral and intellectual development. Comparisons can identify the commonalities of human nature that may be at work across cultures or make the distinguishing aspects of religious belief and practice stand out in bold relief. And, of course, pointing out similarities, like translating from one language to another, facilitates understanding, since, in one sense, all knowledge is analogical.³⁰

However, comparisons can be overdone. What Samuel Sandmel, in a famous 1961 presidential address before the Society of Biblical Literature, called “parallelomania” has given comparative analysis a bad name. The sins of parallelomania are exaggerated similarities and the inappropriate inferences drawn from them about the source and derivation of ideas.³¹ Conceptual parallels do not prove

intellectual provenance. Twenty years ago in the introduction to *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, Bushman wisely wrote:

In the first stages of composition this book was titled “The Origins of Mormonism.” The word “Origins” was dropped when the actual complexities of identifying the sources of Mormon belief and experience bared themselves. An attempt to trace all the images, ideas, language, and emotional structure of a movement as elaborate as Mormonism became more evidently elusive and futile as the work went on.³²

Inappropriate parallels are often a function of not knowing both sides of the comparison equally well. “Two passages may sound the same in splendid isolation from their context, but when seen in context [they] reflect difference rather than similarity,” explains Sandmel. What is crucial is the “genuine comprehension of the tone, texture, and import of a literature.”³³ Through the mistaken practice of parallelomania, notes New Testament scholar David Flusser, “we could easily construct a whole gospel from ancient Jewish writings without using a single word that originated with Jesus.”³⁴

At times, parallelomania has been a problem in Joseph Smith studies as well. Was Joseph Smith (per Brooke) really a Renaissance magus redivivus? Is Mormonism (per Emerson) really an afterclap of Puritanism? Is the Book of Mormon (per Brodie or Vogel) just thinly veiled autobiography?³⁵ Sometimes similarities can be so imaginative, they are imaginary. At least when Harold Bloom likens Smith’s Nauvoo doctrines to the Jewish kabbalah, he is doing so comparatively, not genetically.³⁶

As has been noted, what is too often lacking in these comparisons is an adequate immersion in both the extant Smith sources and those on the other side. Mormon historians tend to know Smith well but do not command the comparative sources. Non-Mormon scholars know their own fields but sometimes misstep because they lack a deep and contextualized grasp of Smith. As a result, superficial or wrongheaded comparisons are regularly made. The Mormon doctrine of deification is just one example. Upon close examination, divinization in Smith’s thought looks quite different than what is taught in the kabbalah or hermetic mysticism. To believe that a

resurrected, glorified human being with body of flesh and bones may eventually become a separate, autonomous god is something qualitatively distinct from believing that perfect creatures can be mystically united with and/or reabsorbed by a transcendent, wholly other Creator, or that such perfection is achievable in the present state as it was for mystic Nat Smith (no relation of Joseph Smith), who “wore a cap with the word GOD inscribed on its front.”³⁷

Intellectual historians emphasize that one can grasp the full meaning of an idea only by carefully recreating the religious idiom or culture from which it emerges. In doing transnational comparisons or studies of *longue duree*, we must ever keep our feet firmly planted in Joseph Smith’s own time. Ideas are not things that move unchanged in and out of minds across the decades or across cultures. Careful attention must be paid to the immediate communities of discourse in which Joseph Smith participated in order to disclose the repertoire of possible meanings for his words. In one of Smith’s revelations, God explains that the divine messages “were given unto my servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language, that they might come to understanding” (Doctrine and Covenants 1:24). The more the cultural as well as verbal language of Joseph Smith is understood in all its depth and breadth, the more nuanced and compelling will be the comparative histories that are attached to the prophet.

Joseph Smith once quipped that “no man knows my history.”³⁸ Although present studies on Joseph Smith situating him in various contexts constitute the mere tip of a huge and growing iceberg of Joseph Smith scholarship, his history—or, in truth, the multiple histories that illuminate the Mormon prophet—will continue to enrich our understanding of his life and thought.

Notes

1. Roland Barthes, quoted in *Difference in View: Women and Modernism*, ed. Gabriele Griffin (London: Taylor and Francis, 1994), 41.
2. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Knopf, 2005); John L. Brooke, *The Refiner’s Fire: The Making of Mormon*

Cosmology: 1644–1844 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith* (New York: Knopf, 1945).

3. Richard Bushman, memo to author, April 22, 2005.

4. For broad historical context, see Frank E. Manuel, *Utopian Thought in the Western World* (Cambridge: Belknap, 1979); Roland Schaer and others, *Utopia: The Search for the Ideal Society in the Western World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). U.S. communitarian history is reviewed in Robert P. Sutton, *Communal Utopias and the American Experience: Secular Communities, 1824–2000* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2004); and Sutton, *Communal Utopias and the American Experience: Religious Communities, 1732–2000* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2003). The ideals and activities of contemporary intentional communities are covered in *Communities: A Journal of Cooperative Living*.

5. One may find access to the vast literature on this subject by consulting Gwen J. Broude, *Marriage, Family, and Relationships: A Cross-Cultural Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 1994). See also Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage: A History* (New York: Viking, 2005); G. Robina Quale, *A History of Marriage Systems* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988).

6. Richard T. Hughes, ed., *The American Quest for the Primitive Church* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988); and Richard T. Hughes and C. Leonard Allen, *Illusions of Innocence: Protestant Primitivism in America, 1630–1875* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 133–52.

7. David E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1983).

8. On Montanism, see Dennis E. Groh, “Montanism,” in *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, ed. Everett Ferguson (New York: Garland, 1990), 622–23; and Christine Trevett, *Montanism: Gender, Authority and the New Prophecy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

9. Quoted in Bruce L. Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1982), 80. On Tertullian and Montanism generally, see Timothy David Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), and Cecil M. Robeck Jr., “Prophetic Gifts in the Writings of Tertullian,” in *Prophecy in Carthage: Perpetua, Tertullian, and Cyprian* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1992), 95–145.

10. Susan Juster, *Doomsayers: Anglo-American Prophecy in the Age of Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003). “The total figure,” comments Juster, “surely underrepresents the actual number by a considerable margin; it is based on a survey of published sources (pamphlets, broadsides, newspapers, literary journals, and evangelical memoirs), sources which do not capture the full range of unorthodox religious activity but only those individuals and practices thought noteworthy by churchmen and the educated elite,” 64.

11. Douglas L. Winiarski, "Souls Filled with Ravishing Transport: Heavenly Visions and the Radical Awakening in New England," *William and Mary Quarterly* 61, no. 1, 3d ser. (January 2004): 41. See also Ann Kirschner, "'Tending to Edify, Astonish, and Instruct': Published Narratives of Spiritual Dreams and Visions in the Early Republic," *Early American Studies* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 198–229.
12. Gordon S. Wood, "Evangelical America and Early Mormonism," *New York History* 61, no. 4 (October 1980): 368.
13. Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 11, quoted in Juster, *Doomsayers*, 23.
14. Juster, *Doomsayers*, 23.
15. Richard J. Hooker, ed., *The Carolina Backcountry on the Eve of the Revolution: The Journal and Other Writings of Charles Woodmason, Anglican Itinerant* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969), 104.
16. Benjamin Seth Youngs, *The Testimony of Christ's Second Appearing: Containing a General Statement of All Things Pertaining to the Faith and Practice of the Church of God in This Latter-day* (Albany: Hosford, 1810), 9, quoted in Juster, *Doomsayers*, 54.
17. John G. Gager, "Early Mormonism and Early Christianity: Some Parallels and Their Consequences for the Study of New Religions," *Journal of Mormon History* 9 (1982): 56.
18. An excellent synthesis of the several-thousand-year history of apocalypticism is Bernard McGinn, John J. Collins, and Stephen J. Stein, *Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, 3 vols. (New York: Continuum, 1998).
19. Joseph Smith and John Whitmer to Beloved in the Lord, August 20, 1830, copied in Newel Knight, "Autobiography," 132–34, original manuscript in possession of Robert Allen, Salem, Utah.
20. Joseph Smith to N. C. Saxton, editor of the *American Revivalist*, and *Rochester Observer*, January 4, 1833, reproduced in Dean C. Jessee, ed. and comp., *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (1984; repr., Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2002), 297–98.
21. Grant Underwood, *Millenarian World of Early Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 112–26.
22. Classic studies include James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, abridged ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1958), and Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Scribner, 1971). For a contemporary reflection, see Randall Styers, *Making Magic: Religion, Magic, and Science in the Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).
23. Convenient historical summaries can be found in Ronald W. Walker, "The Persisting Idea of American Treasure Hunting," *BYU Studies* 24 (Fall 1984, actually published in 1986): 429–59, and D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987), 1–52.

24. Scott B. Noegel and Brannon M. Wheeler, *Historical Dictionary of Prophets in Islam and Judaism* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2002).

25. The quote is from the “preface” to Smith’s compilation of his revelations known as the Doctrine and Covenants. See Doctrine and Covenants 1:30. The sentence’s argument echoes Bushman’s interpretation first laid out in *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 69–80.

26. Yeshe Tsogyal, *The Lotus-Born: The Life Story of Padmasambhava* (Hong Kong: Rangjung Yeshe Publications, 2004); Sogyal Rinpoche, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993); and Rebecca McClen Novick, *Fundamentals of Tibetan Buddhism* (Freedom, Calif.: Crossing Press, 1999).

27. Novick, *Fundamentals of Tibetan Buddhism*, 180.

28. See Doctrine and Covenants 28:2; 107:91; 21:1. For a broader discussion of Smith’s relationship with the Bible, see Philip L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in American Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3–73.

29. George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism, 1870–1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 229.

30. A good overview of the comparative enterprise is William E. Paden, “Comparative Religion,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones, 2d ed., 15 vols. (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2005): 3:1877–81.

31. Samuel Sandmel, “Parallelomania,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 81 (1962): 1–13.

32. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, 3.

33. Sandmel, “Parallelomania,” 2, 9.

34. David Flusser, “Sanders’ *Jesus and Judaism*,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 76, no. 3 (January 1986): 249.

35. Brooke, *Refiner’s Fire*; Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*; Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Mormon Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004).

36. Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 79–128.

37. Brooke, *Refiner’s Fire*, 56.

38. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph*, Religious Studies Monograph Series, no. 6 (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980), 355.