

# Of Joseph Smith

## THE ACHIEVEMENT OF JOSEPH SMITH

\* \* \* \* \*

The long, long silence was broken by an angel from on high. At once the whole world exploded in one long hoot of derision—adequate witness to the total novelty of the thing. Here was something utterly alien and retrograde to everything the world taught and believed. It wasn't only that the boy Joseph Smith had an idea about an angel. It was the clear, detailed, factual, clinical account of the visits that left his fellowmen incoherent with rage.

Even more outrageous was his vision of the Father and Son. The mere idea of it was astoundingly original, but again, the simple, straightforward, noble manner in which he reported it left no room for contention; it was “yea, yea, and nay, nay,” for as the only witness to the most astonishing of his experiences, Joseph could not be confounded by any contrary evidence; and by the same token neither could anyone be asked to take him seriously were it not that he came before an unbelieving world with boundless riches in his hands.

“To Open the Last Dispensation,” 3

\* \* \* \* \*

The astonishing fulfillment of Moroni's prophecy to a country kid living out in the backwoods, that his name would be known for good and evil among men everywhere, is enough in itself to prove that Joseph Smith was a true prophet. . . . It was mostly Moroni's fault. The night he visited Joseph Smith, he widened the yawning gulf which the First Vision had placed between Joseph and normal people, and removed him from the sphere of established theology and rational thinking.

“Criticizing the Brethren,” 1

\* \* \* \* \*

Some kind of an inspired super-devil might have gotten away with some of the things he did, but no blundering, dreaming, undisciplined, shallow, and opportunistic fakir could have left behind what Joseph Smith did, both in men's hearts and on paper.

“No Ma'am, That's Not History,” *CWHN* 11:5

\* \* \* \* \*

Everybody says Joseph Smith was lazy because of the things he didn't do, but what about the things he did do? What good does it do to say that you, with your tiny routine of daily busywork, think another man is lazy if that man happens to accomplish more than ten ordinary men in a short lifetime? Joseph Smith's activities are a matter of record and they are phenomenal. You might as well claim that Horowitz doesn't know how to play the piano to a man who owns a library of Horowitz recordings, or that Van Gogh couldn't paint to the owner of an original Van Gogh, or that Dempsey couldn't fight to a man who had fought him, as to maintain that Joseph Smith was a lazy

loafer to the historian who gets dizzy merely trying to follow him through a few short years of his tremendous activity.

I think this constantly reiterated unflinching charge that Joseph Smith was a raggle-taggle, down-at-the-heels, sloppy, lazy, good-for-nothing supplies the best possible test for the honesty and reliability of his critics. Some of them reach almost awesome heights of mendacity and effrontery when, like Mrs. Brodie, they solemnly inform us that Joseph Smith, the laziest man on earth, produced in a short time, by his own efforts, the colossally complex and difficult Book of Mormon.

“Myth Makers,” *CWHN* 11:144-45

\* \* \* \* \*

As Christianity has been deeschatologized and demythologized in our own day, so in the fourth century it was thoroughly dematerialized, and ever since then anything smacking of “cosmism,” that is, tending to associate religion with the physical universe in any way, has been instantly condemned by Christian and Jewish clergy alike as paganism and blasphemy. Joseph Smith was taken to task for the crude literalism of his religion—not only talking with angels like regular people, but giving God the aspect attributed to him by the primitive prophets of Israel, and, strangest of all, unhesitatingly bringing other worlds and universes into the picture.

“Treasures in the Heavens,” *CWHN* 1:171

\* \* \* \* \*

Why should Joseph Smith have waited so long to tell his story officially? From his own explanation it is apparent that he would not have told it publicly at all had he not been “induced” to do so by all the scandal stories that were circulating.

It was a rule among those possessing the gospel in ancient times that the greater teachings be not publicly divulged. Even at the risk of serious misunderstanding and persecution, the early Christians and Jewish sectaries before them would not reveal the secrets of their religion to the world. The constant charge against the Mormons from the beginning, and especially against Joseph Smith, was that they clothed their affairs and doings in secrecy.

The injunction to secrecy is more a desire to mystify; it is fundamental to all eschatological thinking: “To you it is given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven,” Christ told a few elect disciples behind locked doors, “but to them it is *not* given.”

“Censoring the Joseph Smith Story,” *CWHN* 11:61-62

\* \* \* \* \*

Constantly beset by the designing and overcurious, Joseph Smith was often obliged to put his questioners off, just as the Lord himself did. Whether it was the sly schoolmen ever striving to catch him in a contradiction or his earnest disciples seeking to know the mysteries, Jesus would put them off, sometimes with a flat rebuke, sometimes with half-answers, but most often with words of hidden meaning: “He who has ears to hear, let him hear!” As a result, people were constantly puzzled and offended by what he taught them. His disciples wrangled, and the public rioted.

The trouble was, as Brigham Young often points out, that Christ was speaking of the things of eternity to people wholly in thrall to the things of this world. It was utterly impossible to understand the Son without the spirit of revelation from the Father. Once one has that spirit, the truth of things [becomes] clear no matter how deplorable the state of the documents may be; without it, all the “scholarship” in the world is of no avail to determine what really happened.

“Censoring the Joseph Smith Story,” *CWHN* 11:95-96

#### APPRAISING JOSEPH SMITH

\* \* \* \* \*

The Joseph Smith controversy is silly for the same reason the Shakespeare controversy is silly. Granted that a simple countryman could not have written the plays that go under the name of Will Shakespeare, who could? If that man is hard to imagine as their author, is it any easier to imagine a courtier, or a London wit, or a doctor of the schools or, just for laughs, a committee of any of the above, as the source of that miraculous outpouring?

Joseph Smith’s achievement is of a different sort, but even more staggering. He challenged the whole world to fault him in his massive sacred history and [in] an unprecedented corpus of apocalyptic books. He took all the initiative and did all the work, withholding nothing and claiming no immunity on religious or any other grounds. He spreads a thousand pages before us and asks us to find something wrong.

And after a century and half with all that material to work on, the learned world comes up with nothing better than the old discredited Solomon Spaulding story it began with. What an astounding tribute to the achievement of the Prophet—that after all this time and with all that evidence his enemies can do no better than that!

“To Open the Last Dispensation,” 1-2

\* \* \* \* \*

From the first deriding of the Book of Mormon before 1830, to the latest attacks on the book of Abraham, the approach has always been the same: “Considering who Smith was and the methods he used, it is hardly worth the trouble to examine the writings which he put forth as holy scriptures and ancient histories.”

And so his work remains unread by his critics, and the greatest of all literary anomalies remains not only unexplained but unexamined. But why should his critics not see in Joseph Smith only what they choose to see, since the Mormons themselves do the same?

“Their Portrait of a Prophet,” 213-14

\* \* \* \* \*

Joseph Smith was either telling the truth or he was a criminal—not just a fool—and no sentimental compromises will settle anything. It is base subterfuge to refuse to apply the fair tests which the Prophet himself freely invited and which will just as surely condemn him if he is lying as they will vindicate him if he is telling the truth.

“New Approaches to Book of Mormon Study,” *CWHN* 8:65

\* \* \* \* \*

It is no small feat . . . simply to have picked a lot of strange and original names out of the air. But what shall we say of the man who was able to pick the *right* ones?

“Men of the East,” note 7, *CWHN* 5:132

\* \* \* \* \*

I cannot help recalling that for Eduard Meyer, who made by far the profoundest study of Mormonism of any non-Mormon, the most striking thing about Joseph Smith is the uncompromising, unwavering, explicit certainty of the things he taught and especially of the histories he introduced. Everything is concrete and straightforward, Meyer finds; whereas every other major religious founder went through a mandatory period of uncertainty and self-doubt, there is in Joseph Smith’s behavior never a moment of doubt or hesitation as to what is what.

“One Eternal Round,” *CWHN* 12:422

#### JOSEPH SMITH AS TRANSLATOR

\* \* \* \* \*

The problem of Joseph Smith as an inspired prophet never enters into the discussion at all, since that lies entirely beyond the province of scholarship. The experts must judge him as a translator or not at all.

“Phase One,” 99

\* \* \* \* \*

All his life Joseph Smith dealt with ancient documents, constantly stretching his own mind to bridge the gap to the unknown, and then calling upon the Lord when a problem exceeded his powers. It is thus that we grow in knowledge and understanding.

“The Meaning of the Kirtland Egyptian Papers,” 365

\* \* \* \* \*

I’ve always said it was far harder for Joseph Smith to translate with the Urim and Thummim than it is by using a dictionary and grammar because you can master those any time; but to use the Urim and Thummim, that’s another dimension, that’s something else.

\*\*\*\*\*

Why then did Joseph Smith need a Urim and Thummim, and why did he go through the greatest pains and perils to get and keep the plates if he didn't really need them? Can't we forget all the hardware and be guided by the Spirit alone? No, because God does not want it that way.

Whether we find it agreeable and rational or not, God makes use of both human agents and physical implements in carrying out his purposes in the earth, not because he needs to but because he wants to help us help ourselves.

We are here among other things to learn, and we will learn precious little if we get all our solutions from the answer book. We must have our faith tested and our skills improved. Being here to gain mastery of new dimensions of existence, we need practice and training in subduing the strange and difficult medium of the flesh, with which, thanks to the resurrection, we are destined to live forever. We cannot ignore physical bodies and physical things.

Let those who are still shocked at the proposition that the Spirit works with and through physical devices consider the visits of the Lord to his disciples after the resurrection. There he stands before them, the source of all knowledge and the wellspring of the scriptures themselves. He could well push the dusty books aside and admonish his listeners to heed him alone, from whom all the books came in the first place.

Instead of that, "beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:27). Among the Nephites he called for the records and personally inspected them for errors and omissions, admonishing the people to spend their days reading the words of a prophet who had been dead for seven hundred years, "for great are the words of Isaiah!" (3 Nephi 23:1). If the Holy Ghost brings all things to our remembrance, one may well ask, why do we need to record anything at all? Because God has so commanded "for our profit and learning" (1 Nephi 19:23).

We must not think that the Lord in giving his servants special devices to assist them was letting them off easy. He did not hand them the answer-book but only a slide rule. It takes far more formidable qualifications and far more intense concentration and cerebration to use a seer-stone than it does to use a dictionary. The existence in our midst of computers does not mean, as some fondly suppose, that mathematicians and translators and genealogists no longer have to think—they have to think harder than ever. A Urim and Thummim, like a dictionary, is only an aid to the translator who knows how to work it and may be gradually dispensed with as he becomes more proficient in his spiritual exercise.

Admittedly, translating with a Urim and Thummim is not the normal way. It does not require philological training but training of a far more exacting sort since, like the seer-stone, it shows "things which are not visible to the natural eye" (Moses 6:35-36). It operates, as Buckminster Fuller would say, by the mind and not by the brain. That requires even greater effort and discipline. "When a man works by faith," said the Prophet, "he works by mental exertion, instead of exerting his physical powers." It is the exertion of the mind, and it is the most strenuous and exacting work of all. Certainly the documents with which Joseph Smith was dealing could be translated in no other way than by the Spirit.

\*\*\*\*\*

After all has been said about the art of selecting, censoring, rewriting, and interpreting the records of the past, the fact remains that the greatest opportunity for exercising control over the documents lies not in these mechanical chores but in the business of translating the strange and unfamiliar idioms in which the texts are written. As Joseph Smith knew so well, next to revelation it is language that holds the key to the past.

“The Way of the Church,” *CWHN* 4:245

\* \* \* \* \*

In every case in which he has produced a translation, Joseph Smith has made it clear that his inspiration is by no means bound to any ancient text but is free to take wings at any time. To insist, as the critics do, that “translation” may be understood only in the sense in which they choose to understand it while the Prophet clearly demonstrates that he intends it to be taken in a very different sense, is to make up the rules of the game one is playing as well as being the umpire. To stick to the same specifications would brand either Pope’s or Chapman’s or Rouse’s *Iliad*, or all three of them, fraudulent, so wide is their range.

“As Things Stand at the Moment,” 71

\* \* \* \* \*

What the philologists have always overlooked is the *positive* contribution of Joseph Smith as a translator . . . in the grand manner, whose calling was to convey the thoughts of the ancients to his own generation by any and all means which the Spirit put at his disposal. The work of restoring all things and “bringing all things together in one,” the last great summing-up in which nothing should be lost, entails a great meeting of cultures and languages, and needs above all things an inspired interpreter. Joseph Smith’s proper title is “Prophet, Seer, Revelator, *and Translator*,” the last referring to his unique and particular work and calling. He understands “translating,” in its broad and proper sense, as the handing on of any part of the heritage of the past from one generation or culture or language to another, in which the rendering of written texts is only part of the process.

*Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri*, 49

\* \* \* \* \*

To bridge the cultural and linguistic gap between the hider and the finder, thousands of years apart, special *gifts and implements* are provided, notably the seer-stones and Urim and Thummim. These are no mere mechanical gadgets but “work not among the children of men save it be according to their faith” (2 Nephi 27:23), requiring far greater moral and intellectual qualifications than the manipulation of grammars and dictionaries. They work by “the same power . . . and the same gift” as those by which men wrote the words in the beginning (D&C 17:7, 9:2, 8:11; Moses 6:5).

“A Strange Thing in the Land,” *CWHN* 2:132-33

\* \* \* \* \*

The coming forth of some of the Joseph Smith Papyri in our time is a reminder that many channels of light and truth are open to us and that the Spirit chooses its own methods. Latter-day Saints are constantly asking, How did Joseph Smith translate this or that? Do we still have a seer-stone? Will we ever get the Urim and Thummim back?

What about the sealed parts of the plates? Do we have the original text of the book of Abraham? Where is the book of Joseph?—etc., etc. . . .

This writer views all such questions as totally irrelevant to establishing the bona fides of the Prophet. They do not even make sense as expressions of normal human curiosity, since Joseph Smith made it perfectly clear that the vital ingredient in every transmission of ancient or heavenly knowledge is always the Spirit, which places his experiences beyond the comprehension and analysis of ordinary mortals.

But if the Prophet can never be pinned down in matters of sources and method, it is from the nature of the thing and not from any desire on his part to escape examination. Far from it; he was always inviting his critics to put the inspired writings to all such valid and established tests as may be applied to any purportedly ancient document, and he gave them a hundred times more evidence than they would need to determine the measure of their authenticity.

If it mattereth not by what imponderable method Joseph Smith produced his translations, as long as he came up with the right answers, it matters even less from what particular edition of what particular text he was translating.

It is enough at present to know that the Prophet was translating from real books of Abraham, Moses, Enoch, Mosiah, and Zenos, whose teachings now reach us in a huge and growing corpus of newly discovered writings. But instead of matching Joseph Smith's bold and explicit images of the past, "regardless of the way in which they were arrived at," with what is now being found, his critics can still think of no better attack than to go on chanting their monotonous and forlorn refrain: "He was no scholar, he was not one of us, he did not use our methods!"

*Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri, 54*

\* \* \* \* \*

Go up to the man in the car (it used to be the man in the street) when he stops at a red light and deliver this sober message to him: "Osiris shall be towed toward the interior of that great Pool of Khonsu," which is the first line of the Joseph Smith Papyrus No. XI. If the man gives you a blank look or starts an ominous muttering, explain to him that the great Lake of Khonsu is "probably a liturgical designation of the portion of the Nile that has to be crossed in order to reach the Theban cemetery on the west bank," and that Khonsu or Khons is a youthful moon-god. When the light changes your new friend may proceed on his way knowing as much about the first line of our Book of Breathings as anybody else does, namely, nothing at all. Though as correct and literal as we can make it, the translation . . . is not a translation. It is nonsense.

*Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri, 47*

## THE FOLLIES OF TRANSLATION

\* \* \* \* \*

Let us consider briefly the crippling disadvantages of trying to study church history through the medium of translations.

1. Destroying the clues: . . . The translator is like an officious detective who hands us his written report of the case but refuses to let us see the evidence for ourselves. Granted that the constable is smarter than we are and more experienced at his business, still we want to see the clues for ourselves, for in them lie the charm, challenge, and instruction of the game. . . . He places before us his own handiwork from which all possible interpretations but his own have been removed.

2. Opinions for evidence: There are two things that no translation can convey, namely *what* the author said and *how* he said it. . . . This means that any translation is at best only an *opinion*—one man’s opinion of what another man had in mind. . . . The translator has no right to go beyond the writer’s intent; but the reader of an original is bound by no such obligation—there is no limit to the things that the text might legitimately convey to him. This is no mere rationalization: the experience of any teacher of the classics will confirm the observation, made with wonder and amazement by each succeeding generation, that every reading of an ancient author is a new experience full of the most surprising discoveries. . . .

3. The substitute flavor: . . . Most translations are made by the last men in the world who should be allowed to make them—academic drones who render the text in a stilted and artificial classroom jargon no matter who is speaking it. . . .

4. The illusion of the literal translation: . . . If two words in two different languages had exactly the same meaning in all contexts, then it would be possible to translate the one by the other in any operation. But it is almost impossible to find two words in any two languages that have this perfect one-to-one relationship! . . .

5. The search for shortcuts: Most of the energy and determination that should go into surmounting the language barrier between us and the past is at present being expended in ingenious efforts to circumvent it. A widespread recognition of the limitations of translation has, for example, produced a continual outpouring of bilingual editions, with the original text on one page and the English facing it on the other. Such texts are a pernicious nuisance: if one can read the original, the translation is an impertinence; if not, the original is a rebuke. . . . We are told exactly how to react to every word, when the whole purpose of our study is to enjoy an independent action.

“The Way of the Church,” *CWHN* 4:248-52, 255