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Joseph Smith Jr.: Reappraisals After Two Centuries

Terryl Givens

University of Richmond, tgivens@richmond.edu

Reid L. Nielson

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Joseph Smith Jr.

Reappraisals after Two Centuries

EDITED BY

REID L. NEILSON AND TERRY L. GIVENS

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I

Introduction

Reid L. Neilson and Terryl L. Givens

“Joe Smith,” as he is commonly called, will soon find that America is not another Arabia, nor he another Mohammed; and his hope of founding a vast empire in the Western hemisphere must soon vanish away.

—Robert Baird, 1843

The Prophet, Joseph Smith Jr., is unquestionably the most important reformer and innovator in American religious history.

—Robert V. Remini, 2002

In August 2005, we sat among a group of academics and scattered spectators, listening to a series of papers at a scholarly conference at the National Taiwan University in Taipei. Arun Joshi, a respected Hindu journalist from India, was speaking on the relevance of the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith’s 1820 *First Vision* to the conflicts in Kashmir and the Middle East. The confluence of setting, speaker, and subject was more improbable than Joshi’s conclusion: “The message of Joseph Smith is more relevant . . . today than ever before.”¹

The occasion in this instance was commemorative. Joseph Smith’s bicentennial observance, during 2005 and 2006, and a series of conferences around the world attended by scholars both from within and outside the LDS tradition (i.e., the traditions of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), explored Smith’s life and legacy. At sites ranging from Claremont, California, and Washington,

D.C., to Sydney, Australia, and Taipei, Taiwan, presenters weighed in on the impact of this controversial religious figure. Two hundred years should be ample time to assess the accuracy of Josiah Quincy Jr.'s famed prediction: "It is by no means improbable that some future text-book, for the use of generations yet unborn, will contain a question something like this: What historical American of the 19th century has exerted the most powerful influence upon the destinies of his countrymen? And it is by no means impossible that the answer to the interrogatory may thus be written: Joseph Smith, the Mormon prophet."²

Who was Joseph Smith? He burst into the American spotlight as a twenty-four-year-old youth in 1830 with the publication of a book claiming, all in one, to be new scripture, ancient history, and evidence of his call from God. He aroused only local notice at first, as just another one of New York's countless "humbugs of religion," although in his case, he quickly developed a Mormon print culture to spread his message and invite examination of his claims. Angels, gold plates, and mysterious "interpreters" sometimes overshadowed in the public mind the particulars of the message his Book of Mormon and of the revelations he conveyed, just as the size of the cohesive communities he inaugurated in late 1830 alarmed people not attuned to the purported spiritual significance of these latter-day gatherings of what they claimed to be remnants of a scattered Israel. Many people were converted, and many were outraged, but even from the beginning a few dispassionate observers wonderingly pondered the undeniable charisma of this prophet in pantaloons, who was as adept, noted one editor, at "prophecy[ing] [and] preaching" as he was at "building . . . temples[s], and regulating his empire."³

Smith's religion was a curious mix of old and new. He claimed to be recuperating a gospel and ordinances as old as Adam, with temples that invited comparison with Solomon's. Even plural marriage, rumors of which circulated as early as the 1830s, was but a restoration of a practice of the Patriarchs, he insisted. But from the perspective of orthodox Christianity, new scripture—half again the size of the entire Christian Bible—was sufficient departure from *sola scriptura* to warrant condemnation. Republican ideals, as well, were violated in Smith's apparent merging of church and state, and he flouted the public perception of the prophetic vocation in everything—from his name to his earthy deportment to his political aspirations. He was murdered before the last and most daring of his theological pronouncements—those involving an evolved God, human theosis, and marriage for the eternities—ever made it into the court of religious opinion.

But how has the story of Joseph Smith and the religious movement he founded been told since his assassination in 1844? The historical approach has traditionally governed the study of religion in America, although, religious

studies scholar Catherine L. Albanese argues, this has changed in recent decades as sociologists, anthropologists, literary scholars, philosophers, and theologians have joined the field. Moreover, three major methodologies—the *consensus*, *conflict*, and *contact* models—have shaped the guild of American religious history.⁴ As a result, past historians have written about Joseph Smith and Mormonism in predictable ways when making general surveys of the American religious landscape.⁵ But that is beginning to change.

Speaking of the consensus approach, Albanese explains, “Consensus historiography writes the Anglo-Protestant past at the center of U.S. religious history. It sees processes of religious and ethnic blending—the proverbial ‘melting pot’—strongly at work in the nation’s history, and it minimizes any narrative of religious pluralism. . . . Likewise, it minimizes the impact of social, cultural, and religious change over time and stresses a religious culture of continuity with Anglo-Protestantism.” The consensus model began when Robert Baird published *Religion in America* in 1843.⁶ Because Mormonism challenged the Protestant establishment (the very thing Baird was trying to glorify), Baird was not at all sympathetic to Joseph Smith and his followers. “The annals of modern times furnish few more remarkable examples of cunning in the leaders, and delusion in their dupes, than is presented by what is called Mormonism,” Baird wrote. “‘Joe Smith,’ as he is commonly called [“an ignorant but ambitious person” as Baird characterizes elsewhere], will soon find that America is not another Arabia, nor he another Mohammed; and his hope of founding a vast empire in the Western hemisphere must soon vanish away.”⁷

A decade later, in 1855, Philip Schaff’s *America: A Sketch of Its Political, Social, and Religious Character* was translated from German and made available in America. Like Baird, this German historian was antagonistic toward those groups, particularly the Mormons, who seemed to be thwarting or challenging the continued hegemony of European Protestantism in America.⁸ “I confess, I would fain pass over this sect in silence. It really lies out of the pale of Christianity and the church,” Schaff writes. “Nor has it exerted the slightest influence on the general character and religious life of the American people, but has rather been repelled by it, even by force, as an element altogether foreign and infernal.” He dismissed Joseph Smith as “an uneducated but cunning Yankee” to his readers back in Germany, yet despaired over what the growth of Mormonism says about the United States: “I must only beg, in the name of my adopted fatherland, that you will not judge America in any way by this irregular growth.”⁹

Two other authors of major surveys of religion in America followed in the same consensus footsteps.¹⁰ Daniel Dorchester suggested that “Mormonism grew out of popular superstitions for a time quite prevalent among the more

ignorant classes, about one hundred years ago," in *Christianity in the United States* (1888). He spent the next five pages of his book pillorying Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, and all things Mormon.¹¹ In *A History of American Christianity* (1897), Leonard Bacon likewise described Mormonism as "a system of gross, palpable imposture contrived by a disreputable adventurer, Joe Smith." Bacon continued:

It is a shame to human nature that the silly lies put forth by this precious gang should have found believers. But the solemn pretensions to divine revelation, mixed with elements borrowed from the prevalent revivalism, and from the immediate adventism which so easily captivates excitable imaginations, drew a number of honest dupes into the train of knavish leaders, and made possible the pitiable history which followed.¹²

It is important to note, however, that Baird, Schaff, Dorchester, and Bacon were not professional historians of religion. William Sweet, holder of the inaugural chair in American church history at the University of Chicago, helped professionalize the discipline through his historical publications during the early decades of the twentieth century.¹³ He offered a more sympathetic treatment of Joseph Smith and Mormonism in his well-known text *The Story of Religion in America* (1930).¹⁴ One of Sweet's protégés, Sidney E. Mead, in *The Lively Experiment* (1963), put Joseph Smith in the company of antebellum religious leaders like Peter Cartwright, Charles G. Finney, and Henry Ward Beecher, who supplanted more traditional religious figures such as Timothy Dwight, John Witherspoon, and William White.¹⁵ The closing bookend to the consensus historiography was Sydney E. Ahlstrom's tome, *A Religious History of the American People* (1972). The late dean of American religious history makes it clear "that the entire saga of Joseph Smith and Mormonism is a vital episode in American history," yet he struggles to articulate Smith's significance and legacy.¹⁶

During the past three decades, two avant-garde methods have challenged and, in many cases, supplanted the traditional consensus approach: the conflict and contact models. "By the time Ahlstrom's work appeared, . . . especially among younger scholars influenced by postmodernism, postcolonialism, and general critical-studies concerns, there was a general suspicion of grand narratives," Albanese explains. The conflict model "emphasizes contentiousness and contests for recognition, status, and a fair share of the benefits accorded to the various religious traditions and groups in the United States. . . . By definition, conflict historiography does not produce comprehensive narratives." The more recent contact model "seeks to encompass the conflict model but also to include more. Its argument is that conflict has been only one of a series of

exchanges between religious peoples and religious goods when they have met in the United States and that, therefore, any comprehensive narrative of religion in America must examine and explore all of these exchanges."¹⁷

These recent historiographical evolutions have freed up space in scholarship for the Mormons and have leveled the rhetorical playing field. As scholars of the American religious past and present continue to move away from the consensus model, in which the upstart Latter-day Saint tradition had no real fit, and embrace conflict, contact, and other methodologies, Joseph Smith is beginning to get a new hearing in scholarly surveys, monographs, textbooks, and articles.

The rationale behind this collection is that the day has come when the founder of Mormonism and his prominent role in American history and religious thought cannot be denied. The attention paid to Smith's teachings, charismatic ministry, and religion-making imagination now comes from scholars in American history, religious studies, sociology, biblical studies, Christian philosophy, literature, and the humanities—all of whose areas of concentration are represented in this collection. It is our intent to reflect in these pages the wide-ranging interest in Joseph Smith that the commemorative conferences only suggested.

One challenge in assessing the historical importance and relevance of Joseph Smith's thought has been related to the difficulty of moving beyond the question that arrests all conversation—the question that asks whether Smith was a prophet or fraud. These essays are rich evidence that a variety of interpretive strategies can bypass this question in order to explore Smith's influence, historical impact, parallels with literary figures, and situatedness in new religious contexts. In addition, at least three of the essays directly address the challenge of transcending the insider/outsider schism in Joseph Smith studies (Maffly-Kipp, Mouw, and Hudson); their authors propose their own solutions.

Together, we have selected fourteen essays for this publication, the majority being previously unpublished papers, which we have organized into three sections: "American Prophet," "Sacred Encounters," and "Prophetic Legacy."¹⁸ In part I, "American Prophet," five scholars situate Joseph Smith within an American setting in particular. In the opening essay, "Prophets in America circa 1830: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nat Turner, Joseph Smith," literary scholar Richard H. Brodhead finds that by contextualizing Smith's history as "prophetic autobiography" alongside Nat Turner's, "uncannily similar" aspects emerge. As a result, what Brodhead calls a history of prophetism takes shape that delineates some of the forms and tragic consequences of prophetic self-assertion. The implications may be translatable across a spectrum of times and cultures.¹⁹

Historian Klaus J. Hansen, in "Joseph Smith, American Culture, and the Origins of Mormonism," argues why the Mormon prophet's contributions must be seen as the intersecting of American culture with Smith's own particular religious imagination. Comparing Smith to Samuel Johnson and Abraham Lincoln, Hansen uses the question of Smith's relationship to his father as a suggestive illustration of how personal loss becomes religious restoration, and a private experience taps universal appeal.

In "'I Love All Men Who Dive': Herman Melville and Joseph Smith," literary scholar Richard Dilworth Rust illuminates Smith's religion-making imagination by juxtaposing him with America's greatest myth-making novelist of the nineteenth century, Herman Melville. Melville revealed a recurrent interest in things Mormon, and the most telling preoccupation that unites him with Smith, Rust finds, is not so much the heights they both achieved as successful creators of epic systems, but the depths they plumb as "thought-divers," exploring the "darkest abysses" of human experience and of the tragic universe.²⁰

Next, religious studies scholar Catherine L. Albanese examines "The Metaphysical Joseph Smith." Noting that American religious history has too often limited itself to mainstream denominationalism and evangelicalism, Albanese has worked to limn the contours of metaphysical religion. This tradition emphasizes the world and human beings as ontologically parallel to, and deriving a stream of spiritual energy from, a higher reality. The consequent worldview "as above, so below" is characteristic of hermeticism and modern mystics like Emanuel Swedenborg. Exploiting Richard Bushman's suggestion that Smith is a protean figure amenable to any number of religious agendas, Albanese finds he fits the bill perfectly as a proto-metaphysician. Extending the arguments of Harold Bloom and John L. Brooke, Albanese argues that in addition to exploring occult antecedents and their influence on Joseph Smith, it is time for American historians "to take account of the debt" that metaphysical religion owes to Joseph Smith.²¹

Historian James B. Allen begins his essay, "Joseph Smith vs. John C. Calhoun: The States' Rights Dilemma and Early Mormon History," with a discussion of the 1832 secession crisis involving South Carolina, reminding us that the popular violence enacted against the Mormons occurred in the immediate context of national debates and crisis over the states' rights question. Constitutional interpretation unfolded against—and under the influence of—this backdrop. The same prevailing views favoring state autonomy over federalism that facilitated eventual civil war also facilitated Mormon oppression. Allen thus offers a rare political and constitutional context for understanding the Mormons' difficulties, the development of Joseph Smith's political views, and Smith's own involvement in the national presidential campaign of 1844.²²

Part II, "Sacred Encounters," addresses more directly the religion-making imagination of Joseph Smith. In "Joseph Smith and Creation of the Sacred," historian Richard Lyman Bushman proposes a simple fundamental in his accounting for Joseph Smith's religious appeal: Smith "met a human need for the sacred." So, of course, do all religions, but Smith was different, Bushman argues, in constructing the LDS faith around two potent loci: new sacred words, and new sacred places. His additions to scripture blend audacity and a self-effacing quality. The sacred words summarily annihilate the principle of *sola scriptura*, even as the personality delivering this coup de grâce, for Mormons, is subsumed in the voice of God. As for place, Smith literalized the concept of Zion and introduced into Christian worship the concept—and physical reality—of the temple. In the process, he became the first American religious figure to exploit the power of sacred space.²³

Literary scholar Terryl L. Givens, in "Joseph Smith: Prophecy, Process, and Plenitude," connects Joseph Smith's religion making, in both its scope and its method, to the intellectual revolution called Romanticism. Like all intellectual revolutionaries of that era, from Thomas Malthus to Karl Marx to Charles Darwin, Joseph Smith rearticulated the fundamental vision of his field of influence in terms of contestation, struggle, and dynamism. His collapsing of sacred distance, his rupturing of the canon, his doctrines of preexistence and theosis, and his gestures toward a comprehensive, scriptural Urtext—all betoken an emphasis on process over product and a precarious tension between the searching and certainty that characterized both his personality and the faith he founded.²⁴

Applying the analytical insights of Paul Tillich and William Whyte to the revelatory production of Joseph Smith is sociologist Douglas J. Davies in "Visions, Revelations, and Courage in Joseph Smith." His choices are intended to further the project of an interdisciplinary, rather than a provincial or academically ghettoized, approach to Mormon studies. Specifically, Davies considers the traumas of the young Smith, the psychodrama of his First Vision, and echoes of both in the Gethsemane theology Smith developed. The courage that is revealed in these contexts is embodied by Joseph Smith, personally, and institutionally in such forms as vicarious baptism and countercultural practices like plural marriage. Finally, Davies explores the paradox of the LDS emphasis on both courageous individualism and membership in a church that makes corporate belonging and corporate rites salvifically indispensable.²⁵

Biblical scholar Margaret Barker, in "Seeking the Face of the Lord: Joseph Smith and the First Temple Tradition," comes to Mormonism as something only tangentially related to her own work in radically reformulating our understanding of ancient Jewish religion. She has elsewhere assessed the Book

of Mormon in the context of preexilic Israelite religion. For this collection, she extends that interest by considering the temple worldview of early Israel before the reforms of King Josiah. Noting the primacy of this same temple-dominated vision in the prophetic career of Joseph Smith, she writes the first of a two-part essay on that subject, leaving to Kevin Christensen the job of more fully elaborating the specifics of Smith's visionary production. Specifically, Christensen applies to the Mormon case Barker's claim that "the rise of Christianity can only be understood if we recognize that Jesus' own visions drew upon and exemplified the First Temple tradition." From his translation of the Book of Mormon through the corpus of his own visions, Joseph Smith similarly established continuity with the Bible as text and Jerusalem as sacred space. Equally important is Smith's pattern of both chronicling sacred theophanies and urging their possibility in contemporary religious practice. That is why Christensen can argue that "Joseph Smith's restoration converges on the key time, place, institutions, and issues involved in Barker's reconstruction."

Part III, "Prophetic Legacy," our final section, expands the discussion to a consideration of Joseph Smith in a global context. Religious studies scholar Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, in "Tracking the Sincere Believer: 'Authentic' Religion and the Enduring Legacy of Joseph Smith Jr.," furthers the project of an intellectually rich account of Mormonism by offering a critique of the centrality of sympathy in the polemics that have engulfed Mormon historical studies from their inception, and proposing an alternative. Her critique is situated in a largely postmodern, antiessentialist conception of identity as a malleable and fluid concept. At the same time, she sees, in Smith's own turn to ritual, a validation of appearances over essence, of doing over being. A focus on the epic of Mormonism's narrative rather than its characters, on popular rather than elite Mormon history, and on the geographical varieties of Mormonism, with their correspondingly different accounts—all are presented here as powerful antidotes to the snares of an approach that links, and therefore reduces, Joseph Smith and the religion he founded to an irresolvable debate over human motives.²⁶

"The Possibility of Joseph Smith: Some Evangelical Probing" is Christian philosopher Richard J. Mouw's contribution. The interest of evangelical scholars in Mormonism has tended to be in the context of apologetics rather than scholarly inquiry. Mouw breaks new ground in this regard by responding to Richard Bushman's probing question "Is Joseph Smith *possible* for you?" Like Maffly-Kipp, Mouw stakes out an alternative to the facile either/or approaches that refuse to relinquish the burden of judgment. Turning the study of Joseph Smith in the direction of reception theory enables both a richer dialogue and the possibility of real insight into the religious yearnings and preoccupations

of religious communities. As a tentative gesture in this direction, rather than a full examination of the subject, Mouw's essay makes history in a modest way.²⁷

It would be hard to imagine a solution more different in tone from Mouw's than the argument advanced by humanities scholar Wayne Hudson in "The Prophethood of Joseph Smith." His premise, flatly stated, is that Joseph Smith is "a genuine prophet of world historical importance." In a bold reversal (for a non-Mormon), he takes such status for Smith as a historical given and as a starting point that can enrich our study of various prophethoods, rather than as a laurel to be disputed in religiously provincial and self-serving ways. Hudson takes a position based largely on the enduring consequences of Smith's prophetic output, and then turns to analyze the constituent elements of Smith's prophetic vocation: intelligibility, sincerity, charismatic force, cognitive complexity, and effectiveness. Hudson's main contribution in this regard is to probe the possibilities of taking prophecy seriously as an aspect of religious experience and of cultural import, an aspect both "objective and culturally mediated," but to do so without lapsing into "irrationalism."²⁸

In "Joseph Smith and Nineteenth-century Mormon Mappings of Asian Religions," historian Reid L. Neilson turns to the subject of what Joseph Smith himself had to say about Mormonism's relationship to other religions, and ways of accommodating religious pluralism. Neilson traces the trajectories of Mormon thought on Eastern religious traditions, following the death of Smith, during the balance of the nineteenth century. Rather than fitting neatly into conventional religious studies paradigms, Neilson argues that the Latter-day Saints warrant their own categorization as "restoration inclusivists."²⁹

Lastly, archivist David J. Whittaker provides an invaluable bicentennial bibliographical essay of the Mormon founder in "Studying Joseph Smith Jr.: A Guide to the Sources." Thankfully, he divides the voluminous manuscript sources on Smith into the various categories of journals, sermons and discourses, revelations, correspondence, personal history, administrative records, legal documents and judicial history, early Mormon publications, the papers of Smith's associates, and accounts of Smith's contemporaries. Whittaker also separates the hundreds of published sources on Smith into sections on bibliographical guides and sources, diaries and personal writings, sermons and discourses and writings, personal history, revelations, and biographical studies.³⁰

It is our hope to provide between these two covers an assemblage of statements on the place of Joseph Smith in American history and religious thought that is more wide-ranging than any collection previously available. The most important consequence of this effort is simply a retrospective assessment of his legacy, but the cumulative weight of the evidence here presented suggests that

greater attention to his contributions will enrich those fields and disciplines that are beginning to write him into their respective histories.

We appreciate our editor, Cynthia Read, and the board of Oxford University Press for sensing that there is more to Joseph Smith than the stories that have been told. We also thank Gwen Colvin of Oxford University Press for guiding the book through production.