

# Among Historians

By Dean Jessee

Even though Joseph Smith was warned by a heavenly messenger at an early age that his name would be known for both good and evil among all nations, he was not quite prepared for the intensity of the scorn that was heaped upon him. It was a source of “serious reflection” to him that one so obscure as he was, whose circumstances made him of “no consequence in the world,” should attract such bitter opposition. (See *History of the Church*, 1:7, 11.)

But so it was. Few historical figures have confronted more antagonism during their lives than did Joseph Smith. Practically everything written about him in the public print of his time was colored by a spirit of malice. Yet much of this writing was contradictory in detail, though it may have agreed in tone. On the other hand, those contemporaries who knew him best wrote sympathetic and praiseworthy accounts of his life. Such widespread disagreement makes the Prophet an intriguing subject for historians’ scrutiny. But the careful examination of original sources has to a great extent resolved the puzzles, shedding helpful light on the Prophet and his critics.

Joseph Smith said that the condemnation of him began about the time of his First Vision:

“Some few days after I had this vision, I happened to be in company with one of the Methodist preachers, who was very active in the before-mentioned religious excitement, and, conversing with him on the subject of religion, I took occasion to give him an account of the vision which I had had. I was greatly surprised at his behavior; he treated my communication not only lightly, but with great contempt. ... I soon found ... that my telling the story had excited a great deal of prejudice against me among professors of religion, and was the cause of great persecution.”<sup>1</sup>

As the Prophet’s notoriety increased, so did the opposition. Upon receiving the plates of the Book of Mormon, “the persecution became more bitter and severe than before, and multitudes were on the alert continually” to get them, he wrote. The situation finally became so bad that he was forced to leave his home in Manchester.

But wherever he went, the reaction was the same. In Pennsylvania he was compelled to keep secret the circumstances of the priesthood restoration and his baptism. When the Book of Mormon came off the press, “great opposition and much persecution followed the believers of its authenticity.” And following the organization of the Church in 1830, “many false reports, lies, and foolish stories, were published in the newspapers, and circulated in every direction.” So embittered became the public mind “that the Press [was] universally ... arrayed against us.” (*History of the Church*, 1:18, 43, 84, 158, 273.)

A point of focus in the early published reports was the personality and character of Joseph Smith. The Prophet noted that “rumor with her thousand tongues was all the time employed in

circulating falsehoods about my father's family, and about myself" (*History of the Church*, 1:19). Among the earliest descriptions of Joseph were those published by Abner Cole, over the name of Obadiah Dogberry, editor of the Palmyra, New York, *Reflector*. Using the E. B. Grandin press, the moonlighting Cole gained unauthorized access to the Book of Mormon manuscript in 1829 and actually published extracts from it in his newspaper until forced to desist by Joseph Smith.

Miffed at the discovery and forcible discontinuance of his secret enterprise, Cole sought to defame Joseph Smith and his work. He described the Prophet in degrading terms and explained the Book of Mormon as a deception growing out of the family's use of "peep stones" to dig for hidden treasure guarded by evil spirits. He claimed that Joseph concocted the idea of finding a book from the suggestion of a vagabond conjurer named Walters who had participated with the Smiths in their digging ventures.<sup>2</sup>

Cole laid the groundwork for the theme of deception, indolence, and irreligion that was to characterize descriptions of Joseph Smith in subsequent non-Mormon writings. But while early newspapers labeled Joseph Smith as an unprincipled character, it was Eber D. Howe's book, *Mormonism Unveiled* in 1834 that canonized that theme for future non-Mormon discussions. Howe's work was the culmination of efforts of a Kirtland, Ohio, anti-Mormon committee spearheaded by an embittered ex-Mormon, Philastus Hurlbut, cut off from the Church for immorality. Having been restrained by court injunction from committing personal violence upon Joseph Smith, Hurlbut undertook to vent his wrath by prospecting for information that would "divest Joseph Smith of all claims to the character of an honest man, and place him at an immeasurable distance from the high station which he pretends to occupy."<sup>3</sup> The result consisted of affidavits signed by eighty-two New York and Pennsylvania residents who claimed personal knowledge derogatory to the Smith character. The affidavits portrayed Joseph Smith as "lazy, intemperate," "entirely destitute of moral character and addicted to vicious habits," including the deceptive practice of digging for hidden treasure.<sup>4</sup> The legal framework of the documents gave them a strong flavor of credibility in an age uncritical of its information.

With the exception of I. Woodbridge Riley's work, *The Founder of Mormonism: A Psychological Study of Joseph Smith, Jr.*, (1902) in which the author sought to examine Joseph Smith's character from the standpoint of psychology, almost every significant non-Mormon study of Joseph Smith from 1834 to the present has used the Hurlbut framework. Besides Howe's book, these include William Harris, *Mormonism Portrayed* (1841); John A. Clark, *Gleanings by the Way* (1842); John C. Bennett, *The History of the Saints, or, An Expose of Joe Smith and Mormonism* (1842); Henry Caswall, *The Prophet of the Nineteenth Century* (1843); William S. Parrott, *The Veil Uplifted* (1865); Pomeroy Tucker, *Origin, Rise, and Progress of Mormonism*, (1867); J. H. Kennedy, *Early Days of Mormonism* (1888); Thomas Gregg, *The Prophet of Palmyra* (1890); Lu. B. Cake, *Peepstone Joe and the Peck Manuscript* (1899); Charles A. Shook, *The True Origin of Mormon Polygamy* (1914); William A. Linn, *The Story of the Mormons* (1923); Harry M. Beardsley, *Joseph Smith and His Mormon Empire* (1931); and Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith the Mormon Prophet* (1945).

For these writers, the Hurlbut thesis, to use Thomas Gregg's words, furnished "irresistible proof" that Joseph Smith's character "was such as would render it preposterous and impossible that he should have been selected through divine agency to carry a God-given revelation to mankind and lead in a great reformation."<sup>5</sup>

In contrast to the Cole-Hurlbut picture of Joseph Smith is the view set forth by people much better acquainted with him and less biased. Writing in personal diaries and letters, unmotivated by bitterness or the prospect of publication, close observers left detailed descriptions that give an understanding of the Prophet more consistent with his own religious pretensions and more factually accurate than the observations of his critics.

Parley P. Pratt saw Joseph Smith as “tall and well built, strong and active; of a light complexion, light hair, blue eyes [and] very little beard.”<sup>6</sup> Brigham Young’s observations of the Prophet were based upon an eleven-year association with him: “In 1833 I moved to Ohio where I became acquainted with Joseph Smith, Jr., and remained familiarly acquainted with him in private councils, and in his public walk and acts until the day of his death, and I can truly say, that I invariably found him to be all that any people could require a *true prophet* to be, and that a *better* man could not be, though he had his weaknesses; and what man has ever lived upon this earth who had none?”<sup>7</sup>

Repeatedly confronted with criticism of Joseph Smith, Brigham Young responded that those who made the charges “did not know him, as I did, and ... I knew him to be a good man; and ... when they spoke against him, they spoke against as good a man as ever lived.” Brigham knew no person who presented “a better character to the world when the facts are known than Joseph Smith.” (*Journal of Discourses*, 4:77, 14:203.)

After nearly a decade’s experience with Mormonism, Wilford Woodruff wrote: “My soul has been much edified ... in hearing Joseph the Seer. ... Truly God is with him and is making him mighty in wisdom and knowledge and I am convinced for myself that none of the prophets, seers or revelators of the earth have ever accomplished a greater work than will be accomplished in the last days through the mercy of God by Joseph the Seer.”<sup>8</sup>

People who met the Prophet were often surprised at the contrast between the Joseph of the slanderous stories they had so often heard and read, and the Joseph that stood before them, as evidenced by this excerpt from William Appleby’s diary: “Where is the ‘Old Joe Smith, the imposter,’ the ‘fanatic,’ with almost every other name, or epithet, that could be thought of, applied to him, as I have heard him represented time and again? Ans[wer]: Nowhere. ... His age is about 35 years, ... his deportment is calm and dignified, his manners are condescending, gentle, humane, affable and free. He converses with the meekness of a Christian, and breathes the spirit of a pious man, ... no ostentation, no affectation of address, or manners, but candour, veracity, [and] humility.”<sup>9</sup>

After living in Joseph’s home for many months, Orson Pratt saw him in various settings—as public teacher, private citizen, husband, and father. “I witnessed his earnest and humble devotions both morning and evening in his family. I heard the words of eternal life flowing from his mouth, nourishing, soothing, and comforting his family, neighbours, and friends.” And although Orson attributed his conviction of the Prophet’s divine mission to a higher source, he “could form some kind of an opinion about Joseph Smith as a natural man, without receiving any communication or revelation for myself. I could believe him to be a man of God from his conversation, from his acts, from his dealings.” (*Journal of Discourses*, 7:176–77.)

John Bernhisel, another who contemplated Joseph’s character and conduct from the vantage point of a boarder in his home, observed that he was “kind and obliging, generous and

benevolent, sociable and cheerful ... possessed of a mind of contemplative and reflective character; he is honest, frank, fearless, and independent, and as free from dissimulation as any man to be found.” Bernhisel added, however, that it was in “the gentle charities of domestic life, as the tender and affectionate husband and parent, the warm and sympathising friend, that the prominent traits of his character are revealed, and his heart is felt to be keenly alive to the kindest and softest emotions of which human nature is susceptible.”<sup>10</sup>

Lewis Bidamon, the non-Mormon who married Emma Smith after the Prophet’s death, recalled that Joseph Smith’s “manners, movements and whole deportment made a deep and lasting impression upon me, and convinced me that he was not the imposter and wicked man he had been represented by his enemies to be; to me he appeared to be a good, honest and noble-hearted man, and from all I have ever learned about him since, I have not had occasion to change my opinion about him.”<sup>11</sup>

A convert from Vermont wrote, “My love for the Prophet Joseph was truly stronger than death; it was greater than for any man that ever lived.”<sup>12</sup> And a woman, seventeen when Joseph visited her parents’ home in Philadelphia in 1840, could never forget the impression he made upon her: “So animated with loving kindness, so mild and gentle, yet big and powerful and majestic was the Prophet, that to me he seemed more than a man; I thought that he was an Angel.”<sup>13</sup>

One of the Prophet’s plural wives, having lived three years in his home, reflected late in her life, “I have known of his outgoings, and his incomings, his sorrows and joys, his troubles and afflictions in public and in private. He was one of the noblest of men and those who knew him best, loved him most.”<sup>14</sup>

In the tradition of those who personally knew Joseph Smith and accepted his mission and religious claims, numerous sympathetic treatments of his life have been published. These include the Prophet’s own “History” which appeared serially beginning in 1842 and was later published as a six-volume work; Edward Tullidge, *Life of Joseph Smith the Prophet* (1878); George Q. Cannon, *The Life of Joseph Smith the Prophet* (1888); John Henry Evans, *Joseph Smith An American Prophet* (1933); Preston Nibley, *Joseph Smith the Prophet* (1944); John A. Widtsoe, *Joseph Smith, Seeker After Truth, Prophet of God* (1951); Francis M. Gibbons, *Joseph Smith: Martyr, Prophet of God* (1977); and Donna Hill, *Joseph Smith, The First Mormon* (1977).

Although historical studies of Joseph Smith present two highly contradictory pictures of him, the answer to the question “What was the Mormon prophet really like?” is not simply a matter of choosing between what may seem to be equally valid viewpoints. In an age indifferent to facts and research, when tests of reliability were not a part of scholarly decorum and historical tastes were not so discriminating, the Hurlbut affidavits found easy acceptance. However, as more scientific historical procedures developed, and writings of the past were reevaluated, once acceptable themes lost their credibility. In a study that analyzed the entire spectrum of anti-Mormon literature pertaining to Joseph Smith, Hugh Nibley illustrated the contradictory nature of these sources:

“Joseph did not talk much in society, his talk was not very fluent” (Maria Ward). Joseph was “very voluble in speech, having great self-confidence” (W. Lang).

“Young Joe was hard to approach. He was very taciturn, and sat most of the time silent as the Sphinx.” (Thomas Gregg.) Joseph was “rather fascinating and winning, of a mild and sober

deportment, though at times inclined to jest and be exceedingly merry” (E. D. Howe).

Joseph “was never known to laugh” (Pomeroy Tucker). “Joe had a jovial, easy, don’t care way about him. ... He used to laugh from the crown of his head to the soles of his feet, it shook every bit of flesh in him” (W. Wyl).

Joseph was “tall and slender—thin favored” (Obadiah Dogberry). Joseph was “a stout, round, smooth-faced young man” (Thurlow Weed).

Joseph’s “gait ... was heavy and slouching, his hands were large and thick, his eyes grey and unsteady in their gaze” (*Edinburgh Review*). Joseph was “a tall, elegant-looking man, with dark piercing eyes, and features, which if not handsome, were imposing” (*Female Life Among the Mormons*).

Joseph’s “hands are large and fat” (Henry Caswall.) Joseph had remarkably small hands (John Q. Adams).

Joseph “was one of those indolent and illiterate young men” (Thomas Gregg). Joseph was “an omnivorous reader” (Benj. G. Ferris).

“Jo from a boy appeared dull and utterly destitute of genius” (John A. Clark). Joseph “had a fertile and highly imaginative brain” (*American Whig Review*).<sup>15</sup>

Concentrating more specifically on the Hurlbut affidavits, Richard L. Anderson, in another important study, showed from their similar word usage and organization how the mind of the crusading Hurlbut was superimposed over all that had been written. He also demonstrated that the charges of laziness and occupational money-digging were contradicted by the labors and activities of the family. After separating vague generalities from firsthand experience and analyzing the latter, he pointed out that Hurlbut not only had a hand in writing the affidavits, but very possibly fabricated some of the information.<sup>16</sup>

Although, as Hugh Nibley has concluded with respect to the Huffbut affidavits, “the passing of time has invested with an aura of antiquity and hence of authenticity documents which have no other merit than their age,”<sup>17</sup> their influence has continued to persist. One reason for this has been that critical publications have had wider circulation than sympathetic studies of the Prophet. One still finds Gregg, Bennett, and Tucker on many bookshelves that Cannon, Widtsoe, and Preston Nibley never reached. Furthermore, the most widespread biography of Joseph Smith produced nationally during the last twenty-five years has been Fawn Brodie’s *No Man Knows My History*, a work that has seen nine printings and two editions.

Mrs. Brodie saw Joseph Smith as a deceiver, whose role as Prophet evolved from the “spurious world of money-digging” to “the hallowed world of religion,” and proclaimed that Joseph Smith, in writing his history, distorted his past to promote his public image. To support this theme she relied, among other sources, upon Hurlbut’s affidavits and a misreading of the Prophet’s published history. Failing to consider the original sources upon which the history was based, she saw the changing personality that moved across its pages as evidence of her evolutionary thesis, concluding that “there are few men ... who have written so much and told so little about themselves. To search in his [Joseph’s] six-volume autobiography for the inner springs of his character is to come away baffled.”<sup>18</sup> A study of these sources would have revealed Joseph

Smith's dependence upon others to assist with his writing and the nineteenth century editorial usages in vogue at the time that tend to obscure the Prophet's personality in his published history.

Since everything a biographer writes is conditioned by the information he gathers and his interpretation of it, the use of original sources is essential. The holograph writings of Joseph Smith provide valuable insight for defining the Prophet's personality and character and measuring other views of him from a historical standpoint:

"My soul delighteth in the law of the Lord, for he forgiveth my sins."<sup>19</sup>

"Held a meeting at Freeman Nickerson[s]. Had a large congregation. Brother Sidney preached and I [bore] record to the people. The Lord gave his spirit in marvelous manner for which I am thankful to the God of Abraham. Lord bless my family and preserve them."<sup>20</sup>

"This night at Brother Jenkins Salisbury. ... Oh Lord keep us and my family safe untill I can return to them again. Oh my God have mercy on my Brethren in Zion for Christ[']s sake, Amen."<sup>21</sup>

"[I] was at home writing blessings for my most beloved Brethren. I have been hindered by a multitude of visitors, but the Lord has blessed our souls this day. May God grant to continue his mercies unto my house this night, for Christ's sake. This day my soul has desired the salvation of Brother Ezra Thayer. Also Brother Noah Packard came to my house and let the Chapel committee have one thousand dollars by loan for the building the house of the Lord. Oh! may God bless him with an hundred fold, even of the things of [the] earth, for this righteous act. My heart is full of desire today, to be blessed of the God of Abraham with prosperity, until I will be able to pay all my debts, for it is the delight of my soul to be honest. Oh Lord, that thou knowest right well. Help me, and I will give to the poor."<sup>22</sup>

The distance between the Joseph Smith portrayed in his holograph writings and the Joseph of the Hurlbut affidavits is the point of responsible history. The availability and use of the vast archival collections pertaining to Mormon history has done much to place studies of the Prophet on a less emotional plane. And a vigorous interest in Mormon history in recent years has provided significant headway in presenting a more accurate view of him. Numerous articles in professional history journals and the U.S. publication of at least two important volumes on a national level indicate this trend. Donna Hill's *Joseph Smith, the First Mormon* (Doubleday, 1977) and *The Mormon Experience* by Leonard Arrington and Davis Bitton (Knopf, 1979) reveal Joseph Smith in a much more substantial light than the writings of the past have heretofore portrayed him. And one can anticipate that with continued interest in Mormon history, much will yet be written to counter the distorted image of the Prophet that has rested so heavily upon the bookshelves of the world.

#### Notes

1. *History of the Church* 1:6–7. William Smith, the Prophet's brother, later recalled, "We never knew we were bad folks until Joseph told his vision. We were considered respectable till then, but at once people began to circulate falsehoods and stories in a wonderful way." (*Deseret Evening News*, 20 Jan. 1894, p. 11.)

2. *Reflector* (Palmyra, New York), 30 June 1830, 1 Feb. 1831, and 28 Feb. 1831. See also Russell R. Rich, “The Dogberry Papers and the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies* 10 (Spring 1970), pp. 315–20.
3. *Painesville Telegraph* (Painesville, Ohio), 31 Jan. 1834.
4. E. D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled* (Painesville, Ohio, 1834), pp. 231–69.
5. Thomas Gregg, *The Prophet of Palmyra* (New York, 1890), p. 10.
6. Parley P. Pratt, *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1961), p. 45.
7. Brigham Young letter to David P. Smith, 1 June 1853, Brigham Young Papers, Church Historical Dept. Archives.
8. Wilford Woodruff Diary, 19 Feb. 1842, Church Hist. Dept. Archives. (In diary sources, punctuation and spelling have been corrected by the author.)
9. William Appleby, Diary and Reminiscence, 30 Apr. 1841, Church Hist. Dept. Archives.
10. John M. Bernhisel letter to Thomas Ford, 14 June 1844, Bernhisel collection, Church Hist. Dept. Archives.
11. Andrew Jenson and Edward Stevenson, *Infancy of the Church* (Salt Lake City, 1889), p. 51.
12. Joseph L. Robinson, Reminiscences and Diary, 1841, Church Hist. Dept. Archives, p. 22.
13. “Margaret Pierce Whitesides Young Excerpts Taken From Her Journal,” typescript, Church Hist. Dept. Archives, p. 2.
14. Emily Dow Partridge Young, Diary, typescript, 27 June 1898, Church Hist. Dept. Archives.
15. Hugh Nibley, *The Myth Makers*, (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1961), pp. 75–87.
16. Richard L. Anderson, “Joseph Smith’s New York Reputation Reappraised,” *BYU Studies* 10 (Spring 1970), pp. 283–314. See also his “The Reliability of the Early History of Lucy and Joseph Smith,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 4 (Summer 1969), pp. 13–28.
17. Nibley, *The Myth Makers*, Foreword.
18. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith the Mormon Prophet* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), vii, viii, 25, 405, 416. Two recent reviews of this work are by Marvin Hill: “Brodie Revisited: A Reappraisal,” *Dialogue* 7 (Winter 1972), pp. 72–85; and “Secular or Sectarian History? A Critique of No Man Knows My History,” *Church History* 43 (Mar. 1974), pp. 78–96.
19. Joseph Smith Diary, 1 Apr. 1834, Church Hist. Dept. Archives.

20. Ibid., 13 Oct. 1833.

21. Ibid., 16 Jan. 1834.

22. Ibid., 23 Sept. 1835.

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