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# Orthodox History

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History and Faith in  
Modern Mormonism

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## Defining Orthodox Doctrine

It is difficult, if not impossible to define orthodoxy within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in any systematic or consistent way. The very nature of Mormonism is opposed to creeds, or any type of rigid statements of faith. Indeed, Joseph Smith's First Vision was sought in reaction to the competing creeds and claims of "true" Christian orthodoxy active during his youth in upstate New York.<sup>1</sup> Smith reported that when God the Father, and Jesus Christ appeared to him in the spring of 1820, he asked "the Personages who stood above [him] in the light, which of all the sects was right ... and which [he] should join." He was told "that [he] must join none of them, for they were all wrong" and that "all their creeds were an abomination in [God's] site." Further, according to the personages, the professors of religion in Smith's time "[drew] near to [God] with their lips, but their hearts [were] far from [Him]" and thus, "[had] a form of godliness, but ... [denied] the power thereof."<sup>2</sup>

To Smith, rigid creeds denied God's dynamism and unnecessarily closed the book (pun intended) on additional scripture and revelation. Not surprisingly, over the course of his prophetic career, Smith produced three books of scripture in addition to the Bible which eventually became part of the LDS scriptural canon.<sup>3</sup> Somewhat paradoxically, Smith eventually produced what have come to be known as the *Articles of Faith* to outline LDS beliefs and distinguish them from the Protestantism of his time. As an indication that these *Articles of Faith* were not rigid and static however, the ninth of these thirteen articles states: "We believe all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal, and we believe that *He will yet reveal* many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God" (emphasis added). In

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<sup>1</sup> Accounts differ as to whether this was 1820 or 1824

<sup>2</sup> *Pearl of Great Price*, 1:18-19.

<sup>3</sup> These include the *Book of Mormon*, *Doctrine & Covenants* (first published as the *Book of Commandments*), and the *Pearl of Great Price*.

other words, the canonical books as it were, are always open in Mormonism as Latter-day Saints not only accept, but also anticipate further revelation and doctrinal understanding.

This is not to suggest that there is no doctrinal stability in Mormonism. There are many claims and positions fundamental to Mormonism and in fact, *define* Mormonism. Central of these is the claim that Joseph Smith was a prophet of God. Closely related is proposition is that the *Book of Mormon*, a record which Smith translated and published is both ancient and divine. In the modern LDS Church, the largest and most prominent of the Mormon sects that exist today, an additional strong doctrinal position is that Joseph Smith's prophetic authority was passed to Brigham Young, has been passed to each of Young's successors, and is held by the current President and Prophet of the LDS Church.<sup>4</sup> In strong relation to this last position is the concept of authority. In modern Mormonism, a very clear hierarchical ecclesiastical structure has been put in place which ensures ultimately that the Church's First Presidency, and to a lesser degree, the Quorum of Twelve Apostles, maintain absolute control over both doctrinal and administrative issues. The result then, is that orthodoxy, or what can be most closely identified as orthodoxy within the LDS Church, is more a question of acquiescence to the *authority* which defines doctrine, be it canon or hierarchal office, rather than to a set of doctrinal precedents. In modern Mormonism, a new revelation may significantly alter previous understanding and/or assumptions about theological questions.<sup>5</sup> When such revelations are received, the question is not whether the content of the new revelation aligns with previous revelations but rather, the question is if the revelation was received and accepted by the proper authority within the Church. At least theologically, modern Mormonism has been able to keep itself un-tethered from statements made, and dogmatic positions held by previous Church

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<sup>4</sup> Such authority actually resides within the LDS First Presidency— a quorum of men (usually 3) who constitute the ultimate presiding authority in the Church. The Church president sits at the head of this quorum but as will be discussed briefly below, the First Presidency has at times operated without a Church president, or when the president has been incapacitated.

<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the most recent example being the revelation in 1978 to Spencer W. Kimball, extending priesthood ordination to all men regardless of race. Previously, black men had been excluded due to a policy implemented in 1852 by Brigham Young.

leaders. The concept of continuing revelation allows Mormonism to remain agile in the face of continually changing circumstances and social realities. Centering its theological position on authority, rather than specific doctrinal propositions, the Church is able to navigate difficult situations by allowing itself to be open to new revelation and insight – even if that insight directly contradicts previous notions.<sup>6</sup>

This openness may be best illustrated by Bruce R. McConkie, a member of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles from 1972 until his death in 1985. Prior to 1978 while serving as both a Seventy and Apostle, Elder McConkie had been one of the Church's most outspoken leaders on the priesthood ban on blacks. In his first edition of *Mormon Doctrine*, he states:

“Those who were less valiant in [the] pre-existence and who thereby had certain spiritual restrictions imposed upon them during mortality are known to us as the *negroes*. Such spirits are sent to earth through the lineage of Cain, the mark put upon him for his rebellion against God and his murder of Abel being a black skin... Negroes in this life are denied the priesthood; under no circumstances can they hold this delegation of authority from the Almighty... The present status of the negro results purely and simply on the foundation of pre-existence. Along with all races and peoples he is receiving here what he merits as a result of the long pre-mortal probation in the presence of the Lord. The principle is the same as will apply when all men are judged according to their mortal works and are awarded varying statuses in the life hereafter.”<sup>7</sup>

In 1978, shortly after the announcement of the revelation reversing the priesthood ban, Elder McConkie made the following remarks repudiating not only his, but also every other previous Church leader's comments on the rationale for the previous policy:

“We have revelations that tell us that the gospel is to go to every nation, kindred, tongue, and people before the second coming of the Son of Man. And we have revelations which recite that when the Lord comes he will find those who speak every tongue and are members of every nation and kindred, who will be Kings and priests, who will live and reign on earth with him a thousand

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<sup>6</sup> The LDS Church's eventual abandonment of polygamy can be seen in these terms. The very existence of the Church itself was put in jeopardy by the various anti-polygamy laws passed by Congress. By being open to new revelation and inspiration, the Church was able to survive the federal government's efforts at disenfranchisement and since this tumultuous time, has forged positive and fruitful relationships with all levels of the U.S. government.

<sup>7</sup> Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1958), 457.

years. That means, as you know, that people from all nations will have the blessings of the house of the Lord before the Second Coming.

We have read these passages and their associated passages for many years. We have seen what the words say and have said to ourselves, 'Yes, it says that, but we must read out of it the taking of the gospel and the blessings of the temple to the Negro people, because they are denied certain things.' There are statements in our literature by the early brethren which we have interpreted to mean that the Negroes would not receive the priesthood in mortality. I have said the same things, and people write me letters and say, 'You said such and such, and how is it now that we do such and such?' And all I can say to that is that it is time disbelieving people repented and got in line and believed in a living, modern prophet. *Forget everything that I have said, or what President Brigham Young or President George Q. Cannon or whomsoever has said in days past that is contrary to the present revelation. We spoke with a limited understanding and without the light and knowledge that now has come into the world.*

We get our truth and our light line upon line and precept upon precept. We have now had added a new flood of intelligence and light on this particular subject, and *it erases all the darkness and all the views and all the thoughts of the past. They don't matter anymore.*

*It doesn't make a particle of difference what anybody ever said about the Negro matter before the first day of June of this year (1978). It is a new day and a new arrangement, and the Lord has now given the revelation that sheds light out into the world on this subject. As to any slivers of light or any particles of darkness of the past, we forget about them. We now do what meridian Israel did when the Lord said the gospel should go to the gentiles. We forget all the statements that limited the gospel to the house of Israel, and we start going to the gentiles."* (emphasis added)<sup>8</sup>

## ***Mauss' Doctrinal Construct***

Armand Mauss has designated four categories of Mormon doctrine as "an operational construct [and] not a theological one", which was "derived from empirical induction, rather than from anything formal."<sup>9</sup> Mauss' structure proves to be extremely useful in evaluating and judging the authenticity of Mormon doctrine and observing how these various doctrines find place within not just the Church's theological framework, but also the cultural underpinnings which are highly influenced by doctrinal notions. Mauss' categories include, *canon doctrine*, *official doctrine* (and policy), *authoritative doctrine*, and *popular doctrine*. These categories

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<sup>8</sup> ———, "All Are Alike Unto God," <http://www.zionsbest.com/alike.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Armand L. Mauss, "The Fading of the Pharaoh's Curse: The Decline and Fall of the Priesthood's Ban against Blacks," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 14, no. 3 (1981): 32.

represent a “scale of authenticity” and are helpful in assigning, or at least approximating the priority of LDS doctrinal conceptions.<sup>10</sup>

Mauss identifies canon doctrine as both “doctrines and policy statements which the prophets represent to the Church as having been received by direct revelation, and which are subsequently accepted as such by the sustaining vote of the membership.” The KJV Bible, Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price “obviously fall into this highest category of authenticity.”

Official doctrine is described as “nearly as important” as canon doctrine, and includes “statements from the president or from the First Presidency, whether to priesthood leaders or to the world as a whole...church lesson manuals, magazines, [and/or] other publications appearing under the explicit auspices of the First Presidency.”<sup>11</sup> Mauss is careful to explain that “General Conference addresses in their oral form should not routinely be included here, or if so, only tentatively, given the revisions that they have frequently undergone before being allowed to appear in print.”<sup>12</sup> Further, “there is no assumption of infallibility here, but only that the legitimate spokesmen for the Church are expressing its official position at a given point in time.” It should also be pointed out that there is a marked difference between statements by members of the First Presidency and statements made by the First Presidency as a whole. The latter seem to carry much more weight.

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<sup>10</sup> It is important to note that we are not discussing truth claims here, but rather LDS doctrine. It is true that many Latter-day Saints will view these as one and the same. However, as Mauss has illustrated here and elsewhere, and as mentioned above, LDS doctrine and policy can and does change depending on new and emerging circumstances.

<sup>11</sup> Mauss, "The Fading of the Pharaoh's Curse: The Decline and Fall of the Priesthood's Ban against Blacks," 32.

<sup>12</sup> It should be explained here that General Conference is a bi-annual meeting first instituted by Joseph Smith where the entire Church gathers to hear sermons and lectures from the Church's general authorities. Today, this is facilitated through the use of the Church's extensive satellite, radio, and television networks.

Authoritative doctrine includes “all of the other talks, teachings and publication of authorities on Mormon doctrines and scriptures, whether or not these are published by a church press like Deseret Book.” These teachings and publications are presumed authoritative due to the “speaker’s high ecclesiastical office”, “formal scholarly credentials” (and I would add quasi-Church endorsement as in the case of a well-respected BYU professor), or “from both”. Mauss offers Bruce R. McConkie, Hugh Nibley, and James Talmage as examples of these “authoritative” sources respectfully.

The least authentic form of Mormon doctrine is popular doctrine which Mauss identifies as “folklore.” This doctrine often includes “apocryphal prophecies that often circulate around the Church” and other common beliefs that have either “local or general circulation.” Mauss notes that “occasionally a popular doctrine will be considered subversive enough by the General Authorities to warrant official condemnation, but usually folklore flourishes unimpeded by official notice.”

Clearly, “a particular doctrine can be found in all four categories simultaneously” and “such would ideally be the case for canon doctrine.” Thus Mauss’ “‘authenticity scale’ may have a cumulative property in many cases” and in fact, “it is rare for a doctrine in a given category not to have some ‘following’ in the lower categories.” In evaluating authoritative LDS doctrine then, “it becomes crucial for us to determine... how *high* up the scale is the *primary source* of a given doctrine or policy.” In practice “this determination is rarely made, or even considered, by most Church members, who therefore remain very susceptible to folklore, as well as to doctrines that may be authoritative or even official, for a time, but later prove erroneous.”

Mauss’ doctrinal construct is extremely useful and allows us the attempt to categorize and prioritize the various and sometimes competing iterations of Mormon doctrine. However, this construct also has its limitations. For example, what Mauss considers canon doctrine is not always clearly understood and must be interpreted by the Church’s First Presidency in order to



be put into practice.<sup>13</sup> In these cases, it seems that official interpretation and policy perhaps do not take precedence over canon doctrine, but rather, are necessary corollaries used to interpret the meaning and intended purpose of the canon. Of course, this is not always the case and such official interpretations, as it were, are not appropriate (or necessary) when the canon appears to be very clear and definitive on a given subject. The canon indeed does have authority in itself which may trump official or authoritative interpretation.<sup>14</sup> Thus the dynamic between canon doctrine and authoritative doctrine is complex and it is often difficult to define when official doctrine should accompany canon doctrine, and when the canon is sufficiently clear.

No where are this doctrinal construct and role of “official” authority more apparent than in the recounting of the LDS Church’s official history. History and doctrine are indelibly linked in Mormonism and from the beginning; the Church has had a keen interest in managing and controlling the presentation of its own past. Just as any religious tradition, Mormonism’s past has its difficult moments and the Church – especially the modern Church, have made great efforts to minimize the exposure of these “embarrassing” historical episodes. Church history then, also fits into Mauss’ doctrinal construct. There exists the “canon” history as presented in both the Doctrine and Covenants and Pearl of Great Price, the “official” which is taught in Church manuals, the authoritative which is found in forums such as BYU studies, and the “folk” which often time reflects both canon and official history. Unlike doctrine, which is very

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<sup>13</sup> Consider for example Jesus’ prohibition on divorce. In the New Testament this prohibition is unequivocal while in the *Book of Mormon* it is disallowed “except for fornication.” In the modern Church, divorce is highly discouraged, but allowed. Even couples who have been married and “sealed” in the LDS Temple can obtain a “cancelation” of their sealing under certain circumstances with direct approval from the First Presidency. Clearly, this is a canon doctrine which requires specific interpretation from Church leadership in order to establish a policy.

<sup>14</sup> While discussing this point with Richard Bushman, this author attempted to argue that it is the authority and present interpretation of the First Presidency which takes precedence over everything doctrinal – including the canon. Bushman countered that Latter-day Saints would readily reject, for example, a statement by the First Presidency that discouraged or prohibited prayer (see 2 Nephi 32:8), or denied the divinity of Jesus Christ (see John 1). He pointed out that while the First Presidency does possess tremendous power in doctrinal definition and interpretation of the canon, this power is in fact limited in many important respects.

much a matter of belief, historical narratives can be verified and corroborated. Unfortunately, the official history of Mormonism does not always mesh with “real” history – at least it does not tell the whole story.

In the following section, I will discuss the difficulty this disconnect presents to many Latter-day Saints and offer possible solutions to the current dilemma.

## Authority and History

Jan Shipps, among others, has identified Mormonism not as an extension of appendage to Christianity, but rather, an entirely new religious movement. In many ways, as Christianity was to Judaism, Mormonism is to the Judeo-Christian tradition. As such, the story of Mormonism has been elevated to the level of *myth*. Of course, “the mythological does not refer to fairy tales, fables, and other forms of patent untruth.” Rather, “it refers to *story*, to accounts of beginnings (dramatizing how the world came to be) and endings (holding out possibilities both of devastation and renewal), of sin and redemption, of heroes, heroines, and lives lived out in the larger-than-life ‘olden-days’ when divinity is said to have dealt with humanity face to face, providing a foundation for culture.”<sup>15</sup> Unlike other traditions where stories of origin have had thousands of years to shape and develop, the story of Mormonism begins “in the late 1820’s and early 1830’s” and “it is not difficult to establish the extent of cultural confusion, occasioned by dislocation and change that infected the milieu into which it came.”<sup>16</sup> Unlike stories of the Exodus, or even the mostly-similar Gospel narratives, “conflicting data [is] a serious problem” as “there are several stories of Mormon beginnings from which to choose.”<sup>17</sup> A difficult question for Latter-day Saints becomes: which history do we choose?

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<sup>15</sup> Jan Shipps, *Mormonism, the Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 46.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 43-44.

History is an essential part of Latter-day Saint theology as well as culture. Often, it is the stories of the Restoration which give meaning and context to the doctrines received under specific historical contexts and circumstances. Church history is one of the driving forces behind Latter-day Saint culture as Mormons, both individually and as a Church, look to their forefathers as examples of virtue, fortitude, industry, and courage in an attempt to live up to the examples that came before. More importantly, many important church doctrines are rooted in historical events. For example, the First Vision, restoration of the Aaronic and Melchizedek priesthoods, bestowal of priesthood keys, and their accompanying doctrine, all fit within an overarching narrative of the history of the Restoration which today, have a tremendous impact not only on theological questions, but also on hierarchical structure and issues of authority.

For the better part of its existence, the LDS Church has maintained an “us versus them” attitude, and for good reason. From the beginning, critics and outsiders were suspicious of the prophetic and visionary claims of the young Church and this consternation only intensified as Latter-day Saints moved from New York, to Ohio, to Missouri, to Illinois, and eventually to Utah. Issues such as polygamy only served to further alienate the church from the outside world. Richard Bushman has pointed out that the Church “looked trivial in the eyes of the eastern observers and that [the Church’s] claim to possess the saving truth for the world seemed more than faintly ridiculous.”<sup>18</sup> In response, the Church produced history “offering portraits of a prophet and a people who were the polar opposites of the scoundrels and fanatics pictured in the colonizing literature.”<sup>19</sup> The result was a history focused on the miraculous and faith promoting: a history which presented the near-apotheosis of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young while showing Church enemies and dissenters to be vile apostates. For years, this dichotomy defined any consideration of Church history. However, as Mormonism moved from being

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<sup>18</sup> Richard L. Bushman, "The Liberation of Mormon Studies" (paper presented at the Faith and Knowledge, Latter-day Saints in Religious Studies, Yale Divinity School, New Haven CT, 2007), 6.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

vilified and held in contempt by the eastern establishment, “Mormon historians joined forces with their onetime enemies” to produce “a mediating new history that accepted the methods and many of the conclusions of secular eastern historians.”<sup>20</sup> According to Bushman, “the result was an extensive and powerful scholarship” but one that “[avoided] critical topics where [Mormonism’s] distinctive and fabulous beliefs were involved.”<sup>21</sup> These “new historians simply avoided the miraculous and the requisite apologetics.” This new approach to LDS history became known as the New Mormon History.<sup>22</sup>

### ***Elder Benson and Elder Packer Respond to the New Mormon History***

Not surprisingly, the Church has been skeptical of the New Mormon History and has been reluctant to “surrender a proprietary hold” on its past.<sup>23</sup> Of course, “when others were owners of the Mormon past in earlier generations, they tended to distort or at least misunderstand that past.” Thus, this reluctance is not only understandable but expected as “the Mormon Church [has kept] its guard up against the outsider.” However, this skepticism is not reserved for outsiders only as “the church [also] keeps its guard up against the insider too, against those who move beyond amateur history and amateur theology.” In particular, Jan Shipps identifies the publication of *The Story of the Latter-day Saints* in 1975 as the moment when those in “the church hierarchy ... started to pull back” and “distance itself from history which fails openly and deliberately to place God at the center of the action.”<sup>24</sup> This “pull-back” and

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>22</sup> Robert B. Flanders, “Some Reflections on the New Mormon History,” in *Faithful History*, ed. George D. Smith (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 35.

<sup>23</sup> Edwin S. Gaustad, “History and Theology: The Mormon Connection,” in *Faithful History, Essays on Writing Mormon History*, ed. George D. Smith (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 64.

<sup>24</sup> Shipps, *Mormonism, the Story of a New Religious Tradition*, 107.

suspicion of secular history is best encapsulated by Ezra Taft Benson, a member of the Quorum of Twelve apostles at the time of these remarks in 1976 observed:

“This humanistic emphasis on history is not confined only to secular history; there have been and continue to be attempts made to bring this philosophy into our own Church history. Again the emphasis is to underplay revelation and God’s intervention in significant events and to inordinately humanize the prophets of God so that their human frailties become more apparent than their spiritual qualities.”<sup>25</sup>

Benson maintains “too many of those who have been intellectually gifted become so imbued with criticism that they become disaffected spiritually.” To Benson, the New Mormon History = criticism = spiritual disaffection. Certainly, this is the case with authors and intellectuals such as Fawn McKay Brodie, a one-time believer who in *No Man Knows My History*, set out explicitly to undermine the prophetic claims of Joseph Smith.<sup>26</sup> According to Benson, “no writer can ever accurately portray a prophet of God if he or she does not believe in prophecy” and “they cannot succeed in writing what they do not have in personal faith.”<sup>27</sup> Of course, much of the New Mormon History was being written by professional Latter-day Saint historians – many of whom at one time or another, were employed by the Church’s historical department and professed belief in the prophetic claims of Joseph Smith.<sup>28</sup>

In 1981, Elder Boyd K. Packer, also a member of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles, gave a speech at Brigham Young University wherein he cautioned faculty that “there is no such thing as an accurate or objective history of the Church which ignores the spirit.”<sup>29</sup> Candidly, Elder Packer states: “Church history can be so interesting and inspiring as to be a very powerful tool

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<sup>25</sup> Ezra Taft Benson, "God's Hand in Our Nation's History" (Brigham Young University, 28 March 1976).

<sup>26</sup> Newell G. Bringhurst, "Fawn Mckay Brodie and Her Quest for Independence," in *Mormon Mavericks, Essays on Dissenters*, ed. John Sillito & Susan Staker (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 193.

<sup>27</sup> Benson, "God's Hand in Our Nation's History".

<sup>28</sup> Leanord Arrington, D. Michael Quinn, and Lavina Anderson, for example.

<sup>29</sup> Boyd K. Packer, "The Mantle Is Far, Far Greater Than the Intellect," *BYU Studies* (1981).

indeed for building faith; [however], if not properly written or properly taught, *it may be a faith destroyer*" (emphasis added). Further, "if we who research, write and teach the history of the Church ignore the spiritual on the pretext that the world may not understand it, our work will not be objective" and "we would end up with a history with the one most essential ingredients left out." Elder Packer also cautions against "the temptation for the writer or the teacher of Church history to want to tell everything, whether it is worthy or faith promoting or not." Again, very candidly: "*Some things that are true are not very useful*" (emphasis added). He observes:

"Some time ago a historian gave a lecture to an audience of college students on one of the past Presidents of the Church. It seemed to be his purpose to show that the President was a man subject to the foibles of men. He introduced many so-called facts that put the President in a very unfavorable light, particularly when they were taken out of the context of the historical period in which he lived.

Someone who has not theretofore acquainted with this historical figure (particularly someone not mature) must have come away very negatively affected. Those who were unsteady in their convictions surely must have had their faith weakened or destroyed."

Elder Packer continues: "Teaching some things that are true, prematurely or at the wrong time, can invite sorrow and heartbreak instead of the joy intended to accompany learning" and that "the scriptures teach emphatically that we must give milk before meat." Historians may not realize that while "they write and speak to a narrow audience ... many of the things they tell one another are not uplifting, go far beyond the audience they may have intended, and destroy faith." Regarding the historian referenced earlier:

"What that historian did with the reputation of the President of the Church was not worth doing. He seemed determined to convince everyone that the prophet was a man. We knew that already. All of the prophets and all of the Apostles have been men. It would have been much more worthwhile for him to have convinced us that the man was a prophet, a fact quite as true as the fact that he was a man.

He has taken something away from the memory of a prophet. He has destroyed faith... The sad thing is that he may have, in years past, taken great interest in those who led the Church and desired to draw close to them. But

instead of following that long, steep, discouraging, and occasionally dangerous path to spiritual achievement, instead of going up to where they were, he devised a way of collecting mistakes and weaknesses and limitations to compare with his own. In that sense he has attempted to bring a historical figure down to his level and in that way feel close to him and perhaps justify his own weaknesses.”

Elder Packer maintains that those “scholars who [delight] in pointing out the weaknesses and frailties of present or past leaders destroys faith” and “a destroyer of faith – particularly one within the Church... places himself in great spiritual jeopardy.” Such scholars may “not be among the faithful in the eternities.” In Elder Packer’s view:

“In the Church we are not neutral. We are one-sided. There is a war going on, and we are engaged in it. It is the war between good and evil, and we are belligerents defending the good. We are therefore obliged to give preference to and protect all that is represented in the gospel of Jesus Christ, and we have made covenants to do it.”

Elder Packer warns “that there is a limit to the patience of the Lord with respect to those who are under covenant to bless and protect His Church and kingdom upon the earth but do not do it” and that we are “in danger if we are out to make a name for ourselves.” Specifically warning Church employees and BYU faculty:

“Those of you who are employed by the Church have a special responsibility to build faith, not to destroy it. If you do not do that, but in fact accommodate the enemy, who is the destroyer of faith, you become in that sense a traitor to the cause you have made covenants to protect.

Those who have carefully purged their work of any religious faith in the name of academic freedom or so-called honesty ought not to be accommodated in their researches or to be paid by the Church to do it.”

Elder Packer also warns against reprinting or referencing material “so long as it is available from another source” and likens this practice to “[spreading] disease germs.” With this comment, Elder Packer may have had in mind the work of Jerald and Sandra Tanner, Mormon dissidents who in the 1960’s began reprinting LDS historical documents and books

and then highlighting certain points for their “shock value.”<sup>30</sup> Surprisingly, the largest consumers of these materials are not the so-called anti-Mormons, but rather “curious subscribers *within* the Mormon fold (or marginal to it), who simply want access to controversial documents and information that [Church] leaders ... try to keep out of circulation.”<sup>31</sup> Elder Benson had made similar remarks in 1976, giving more explicit reference to the Tanner’s work.<sup>32</sup>

Near the conclusion of his address, Elder Packer offers “qualifications in the form of questions” that each person must be able to answer in the affirmative in order to “properly teach the history of the Church.”<sup>33</sup>

- Do you believe that God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ personally appeared to the boy prophet, Joseph Smith Jr., in the year 1820?
- Do you have a personal witness that the Father and the Son appeared in all their glory and stood above that young man and instructed him according to the testimony that he gave to the world in his published history?
- Do you know that the Prophet Joseph Smith’s testimony is true because you have received a spiritual witness of its truth?
- Do you believe that the church that was restored through him is, in the Lord’s words, “the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth, with which I, the Lord am well pleased” (D&C 1:30)?
- Do you know by the Holy Ghost that this is the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints restored by heavenly messengers in this modern era; that the Church constitutes the kingdom of God on earth, not just an institution fabricated by human agency?
- Do you believe that the successors to the Prophet Joseph Smith were and are prophets, seers and revelators; that revelation from heaven directs the decisions, policies, and pronouncements that come from the headquarters of the Church? Have you come to the settled conviction, by the Spirit, that these prophets truly represent the Lord?

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<sup>30</sup> Jerald Tanner and Sandra Tanner, *Mormonism, Shadow or Reality*, 5th ed. (Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 1987).

<sup>31</sup> Armand L. Mauss, “Apostasy and the Management of Spoiled Identity,” in *The Politics of Religious Apostasy*, ed. David G. Bromley (Westport, London: Praeger, 1998), 63.

<sup>32</sup> Ezra Taft Benson, “The Gospel Teacher and His Message” (paper presented at the Church Educational System, Salt Lake City, 17 September 1976).

<sup>33</sup> Packer, “The Mantle Is Far, Far Greater Than the Intellect.”



It should be noted that both Elder Packer and Elder Benson, along with Mark E. Peterson, should be considered some of the more conservative members of the Quorum of the Twelve and that their views may not have represented the views of the entire Quorum. However, in recent decades, harmony within the Quorum has been a key element in the way it conducts its business. Therefore, even if there had been some disagreement, it is not surprising that Elder Benson's and Elder Packer's positions were given full, even if tacit, support. It is also important to note in the case of Elder Packer that while his words, when delivered in speeches and in print may come across as harsh and rigid, he is in fact very well-read in Mormon history and incredibly sympathetic to the cause of academics and intellectuals. He does, however take his responsibility as a "watchman on the tower" very seriously and consistently has placed the best-interest of the Church as his first priority.<sup>34</sup>

#### ***D. Michael Quinn's Response to Elder Benson and Elder Packer***

Not surprisingly, some LDS historians took issue with Elder Benson and Elder Packer's criticism of the New Mormon History. Most notably, was D. Michael Quinn, professor of history at Brigham Young University at the time these talks were given. Shortly after Elder Packer's talk in 1981, Quinn gave a detailed response to Elder Benson and Elder Packer in a presentation to Phi Alpha Theta, BYU's organization for excelling history students.<sup>35</sup> This presentation began Quinn's rather tumultuous relationship with both BYU and the LDS Church which eventually resulted in Quinn's excommunication in 1993.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> This perspective was provided to me by a source who has worked closely with Elder Packer in the past. Unfortunately, Elder Packer is often singled out by Church critics who point to his published works as proof of his ultra-conservatism. These critics should be aware that Elder Packer's position is likely much more sophisticated and nuanced than his printed words convey.

<sup>35</sup> Lavina Fielding Anderson, "DNA Mormon: D. Michael Quinn," in *Mormon Mavericks, Essays on Dissenters*, ed. John Sillito and Susan Staker (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 338+.

<sup>36</sup> It is important to note that Quinn did not intend these remarks to be available for wide distribution. Unfortunately, the Tanners obtained a copy of the presentation and printed it in as part of their anti-Mormon efforts. Subsequently, Quinn did allow these remarks to be published and an edited and revised

In his presentation, Quinn labeled the remarks of both Elder Benson and Elder Packer as “jaundiced” and set out to “explore... the motivations, rationale, intentions, and conduct of Latter-day Saints who profess to write ‘fair and objective’ Mormon history.”<sup>37</sup> After briefly recounting his own personal story of how he became interested in LDS history and then decided to pursue it as a career, Quinn addresses the issue brought up by Elder Packer of not “[publishing] or [referring] to sensitive or controversial items merely because they have already been published before.” Quinn states:

“Some church leaders in recent years have criticized Mormon historians for republishing in part of whole out-of-print church publications such as the 1830 Book of Mormon, the *Journal of Discourses* (edited and published for thirty-two years under the auspices of the First Presidency), and statements from former church magazines published for children, youth, and the general membership. It is an odd situation when historians are criticized for reprinting what previous general authorities regarded not only as faith-promoting but as appropriate for Mormon youth and new converts.”<sup>38</sup>

To Quinn, willfully ignoring available sources “raises questions of personal honesty and professional integrity.” Further, he states that “if I were to write about any subject unrelated to religion, and I purposely failed to make reference to pertinent information of which I had knowledge, I would be justifiably criticized for dishonesty.” Quinn maintains: “It does disservice to the church for LDS historians to render themselves subject to the criticism that they have ignored readily available and previously published materials” and “it is careless, if not dishonest, to write as if such evidence did not exist.” Quinn also defends presenting religious history, and specifically LDS history, in context: “Any historian writing about a non-religious subject would be considered inept at best and dishonest at worst if he or she described someone’s innovation or contribution without discussing the significance of previously existing,

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version has been included here: D. Michael Quinn, “On Being a Mormon Historian (and Its Aftermath),” in *Faithful History*, ed. George D. Smith (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 71-72.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 75-76.

similar contributions and ideas.”<sup>39</sup> This remark specifically refers to Elder Benson’s criticism of the Word of Wisdom being discussed in terms of similar abstinence movements of the 1830’s.

Quinn continues:

“It is obvious that Elder Benson opposed the idea that Joseph Smith invented something he called revelation that was a product of his own mind and of his culture and environment. As both a believing Latter-day Saint *and* historian, I also oppose such conclusions. One can acknowledge the influence of environment and contemporary circumstance and still affirm the actuality of divine revelation. In Mormon doctrine, revelation comes because of specific questions that individuals or prophets ask God, and those questions usually arise in the minds of prophets because of conditions they observe or experience.

Without environment influence or surrounding significant circumstances, there would be no revelations from God to the prophets. And the changing circumstances and environment of the world are the very reasons Latter-day Saints affirm that there must be living prophets to respond with the word of the Lord to the new circumstances. If we write Mormon history as though its developments occurred without reference to surrounding circumstances, we undermine the claims for the restoration of living prophets. This is one of many areas in Mormon history where an alleged defense is actually a disservice to the Saints.”

Quinn believes that “in reference to LDS historians, Elder Packer has created an enemy that does not exist” because “it is impossible for even an atheist to write about Joseph Smith or any of his successors without acknowledging that they claim to be prophets of God, that they make pronouncements in the name of God, and that they proclaim specific documents to be divine instructions given by revelation.” Quinn does acknowledge “a writer can express a tone of ridicule or affirmation, hostility or sympathy, detachment or advocacy when writing about such prophetic claims, but no reputable historian (least of all a believing Latter-day Saint) excludes consideration of the spiritual dimension in writing about people like Joseph Smith.”<sup>40</sup>

In speaking of the “scholarly detachment” which often accompanies writing LDS history, Quinn states: “It is inconceivable to me that any Latter-day Saint with a personal

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 78.

testimony would begin to lose that faith simply because he or she read a publication by a Mormon historian who reported the revelations of Joseph Smith without including the historian's personal testimony of the truth of those revelations."<sup>41</sup> For Quinn, the role of professional historian and missionary or pastor, are separate vocations. Quinn believes that Mormon historians are being accused of "writing to accommodate non-Mormon assumptions" but explains that this is not the case. Quinn believes that critics are asking Mormon historians:

"...change the monistic category of Joseph Smith as fraud, or religious genius, or personality disorder, for the equally monistic interpretation that Joseph Smith was a divine prophet. If asked to give a categorical definition of Joseph Smith, I (and most other LDS historians) would say that he was a divinely called prophet of God. However, in all honesty, we must also acknowledge the existence of other reasonable, honest and conscientious interpretations."<sup>42</sup>

Quinn believes asking historians to "demonstrate and affirm that 'the hand of the Lord [has been] in every hour and every moment of the Church' ... requires a single monistic explanation for every event in the Mormon past, but there are compelling reasons why Mormons should consider alternative explanations of the past." By interpreting Mormon history only in terms of the "hand of the Lord" Quinn fears "that official acts and pronouncements of the prophets are always the express will of God" and that "this is the Mormon equivalent of the Roman Catholic doctrine of papal infallibility." In order "to adopt a similar position of prophetic infallibility... the Mormon church would have to dispense with some of its fundamental theology."<sup>43</sup> Quinn claims:

"Mormon historians would be false to their understating of LDS doctrine, the sacred history of the scriptures, the realities of human conduct, and the documentary evidence of Mormonism if they sought to defend the proposition that LDS prophets are infallible in their decisions and statements. Moreover, it would be hardly less false to allow readers of Mormon history to draw the implicit conclusion that LDS prophets were infallible, because Mormon

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 79-80.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 81.

historians presented church history as though every decision and statement came as the result of direct revelation.

Mormon historians have both a religious and professional obligation not to conceal the ambivalence, debate, give-and-take, uncertainty, and simple pragmatism that often attend decisions of the prophet and First Presidency. In like manner, Mormon historians would be equally false if they failed to report the inspiration, visions, revelations, and solemn testimonies that have also attended prophetic decisions and statements throughout Mormon history. ... Elder Packer rightly observes that omitting the spiritual revelatory dimensions from the life of a church leader is a virtual denial of the existence of the spiritual and revelatory. However, it is equally true that omitting reference to human weaknesses, faults and limitations from the life of a prophet is also a virtual denial of the existence of human weaknesses and fallibility. Both approaches are distortions. <sup>44</sup>

Quinn then gives several examples in the sacred history (Bible, Book of Mormon, D&C) where prophets come under severe condemnation and show incredible human weakness. In reference to Elder Packer's statement that the human frailties of the prophets should not be discussed, Quinn argues that "the scriptures do exactly what Elder Packer condemns" and that "sacred history presents God's leaders as understandable human beings with whom the reader can identify because of their weakness at the same time the reader reveres the prophetic mantle."<sup>45</sup> Quinn argues, painting only a portrait of "benignly angelic church leaders... would border on idolatry."

Of course, Quinn is not unaware "of the need to reassure church members by cushioning evidence that is controversial" but maintains that "Elder Packer is not advocating Paul's dictum of milk before meat, but he demands that Mormon historians provide only a church history diet of milk to Latter-day Saints of whatever experience." Quinn maintains that "a diet of milk alone will stunt the growth of, if not kill, any child."

In total, Quinn argues that "the well-established and generally respected LDS church today [does not] need a protective, paranoid approach to its history" and that such an approach

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 84.

is “accommodation history for the weakest of the Latter-day Saints, for the vilest of the vile anti-Mormons, and for the most impressionable of the world’s sycophants.” This type of history has forced LDS institute and seminary teachers to offer up “a mixture of platitudes, half-truths, omissions and plausible denials” rather than frank and honest answers. In what is the central point and key of the presentation, Quinn argues this “so-called ‘faith-promoting’ church history which conceals controversies and difficulties of the Mormon past may actually undermine the faith of Latter-day Saints who eventually learn about the problems from other sources.”<sup>46</sup> To conclude, Quinn offers:

“Historians did not create the problem areas of the Mormon past, but most of us cannot agree to conceal them, either. We are trying to respond to those problem areas of Mormon experience. Attacking the messenger does not alter the reality of the message.”<sup>47</sup>

### *Quinn’s Subsequent Career*

Looking back, it is difficult to imagine why Michael Quinn decided to take on Elder Benson and Elder Packer, so directly and so boldly. The culture of Mormonism, certainly more so today than in 1981 but still very strong at this time, highly discourages “speaking evil of the Lord’s anointed.” Quinn’s direct criticism of Elder Benson and Elder Packer was perceived as “evil speaking” and was, according to Quinn and others, the root of Quinn’s subsequent conflict with the Church. At the time, Quinn was a loyal, active, and dedicated Latter-day Saint. This talk, as well as his subsequent publications, brought Quinn into direct conflict with members of the second-most influential Quorum in the LDS hierarchy who believed that Quinn was intentionally writing history to embarrass and undermine the Church.<sup>48</sup> This conflict eventually

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 86-87.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>48</sup> The story of this conflict is a study in and of itself and has been well documented elsewhere. See Anderson, “DNA Mormon: D. Michael Quinn.” And the latter-half of Quinn, “On Being a Mormon Historian (and Its Aftermath).”

resulted in Quinn's decision to leave BYU, and his excommunication from the LDS Church in 1993. Ultimately, this difficulty came to a head as a result of Quinn's publication of an extensive essay on post-Manifesto polygamy – which polygamy was seemingly endorsed by the First Presidency – and Quinn's propensity to discuss the Church's tumultuous relationship with its scholars, with the media.<sup>49</sup> A careful reading of Quinn's body of work reveals that prior to his excommunication, his history was very much apologetic in nature; certainly not the level of some other apologetic efforts elsewhere in the Church (FARMS, BYU) but nonetheless, friendly and favorable. Even his 1985 post-Manifesto plural marriage article showed Wilford Woodruff in a very favorable light considering the absolutely impossible situation the federal government had placed the Church in. After reading Quinn's early work, a reader may come away very sympathetic to the Church's leadership and thinking 'If I were in that situation, I would have done *exactly* the same thing.' I do believe that Michael Quinn wrote honest history and did not intend to embarrass the Church or its past leadership. However, his work was perceived by some in the Church hierarchy as an effort to undermine the Church. It should also be noted that Quinn was never *explicitly* asked to not publish this post-Manifesto article. On the one occasion where Quinn was asked by the Church hierarchy to not publish material relating to the business activities and interests of members of the Quorum of the Twelve, he honored that request. Even Quinn's post-excommunication work, which (not surprisingly) deals directly with issues of authority and Church hierarchy, is not unfriendly to the Church institution of its core beliefs. Granted, Quinn puts forth much effort to show the human fallibility of both current and past LDS leaders, but this is presented in the context of a larger historical narrative which in general, supports Mormonism's foundational claims.<sup>50</sup> Sadly, this conflict still haunts

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<sup>49</sup> See D. Michael Quinn, "Lds Church Authority and New Plural Marriages, 1890-1904," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 18, no. 1 (1985), Bryan Watermann and Brian Kagel, *The Lord's University, Freedom and Authority at Byu* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998), 265-80.

Quinn today as it has been extremely difficult for Quinn, an extremely well-qualified Yale Ph.D, to find a job.<sup>51</sup>

Interestingly, at the time of his conflict with the Church, Quinn could easily answer all of Elder Packer's "qualification" questions in the affirmative. Despite this however, Quinn's persistence in writing history put him in direct conflict with Elder Packer.<sup>52</sup>

Of course, it is essential to note that it is a long-standing policy of the Church not to publicly discuss disciplinary actions involving Church members. Therefore, we are left with only Quinn's side of the story. If given additional information, our perspective on these events may change dramatically. It is impossible to judge.

Despite Quinn's personal conflict with the LDS Church or perhaps *because* of it, Quinn has produced extensive studies of key elements of the Mormon past. In the following section, Quinn's work will be consulted to extensively examine the *official* account of Church history and explore the dynamic this history introduces to Mormon culture at large.

### ***Official Church History***

LDS Church history as it is taught at BYU, LDS Institutes of religion, and Sunday school classes worldwide, fits well into the Benson/Packer model of recounting history. Difficult issues or questions may be mentioned and briefly dealt with, but by and large, the official narrative is linear, faith-promoting, and clean.

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<sup>50</sup> Quinn explained to me that when he was still a member of the LDS Church, his editors often forced him to "tone things down" in an effort to safeguard him from LDS Church reprisal. After his excommunication, his editors no longer had this concern and change in editorial approach explains the different tones of Quinn's pre and post excommunication work.

<sup>51</sup> Daniel Golden, "Higher Learning: In Religion Studies, Universities Bend to Views of Faithful," *Wall Street Journal*, 6 April 2006.

<sup>52</sup> Substantial Evidence indicates that Elder Packer was directly involved in Quinn's excommunication. This fact has even been indirectly confirmed by Elder Dallin H. Oaks.



The LDS Church considers itself a “restoration” of Christ’s original church and as such, believes its history is important not only for the believing Mormon, but also for *all humanity*: past, present and future. In fact, this “latter-day restoration is the last act in God’s divine drama for his children before the Millenium” and is the “‘dispensation of the fullness of times’ in which the ‘restitution of all things’ would take place as the Lord promised through ‘all his holy prophets since the world began.’”<sup>53</sup> According to LDS theology, “each time the Lord’s people fell into apostasy, there came a need for a restoration of the gospel” and “the Restoration discussed in the [Church History in the Fulness of Times student manual] is simply the last in the series of restorations that have occurred through the ages.”<sup>54</sup> Mormonism is the latter-day form of “the Lord’s organization... established at times to gather the chosen and obedient children of God into a covenant society and to train them to fight evil.” In other words, the LDS Church, is not simply *another* church, but rather, plays a significant role in a cosmic drama between “the kingdom of God and Satan.”<sup>55</sup>

Significant historical developments are described in terms of this latter-day restoration. Significantly “the work of [the Protestant Reformers] was in preparation for the restoration of the gospel.”<sup>56</sup> The discovery and colonization of America, along with the subsequent development of religious freedom had to occur “before there could be a restoration of Christ’s church.”<sup>57</sup> Similarly, the founding of the United States, the writing of the Constitution, and the Second Great Awakening, all served to prepare the world for the calling of Joseph Smith as “the Lord’s hand was evident in directing that Restoration take place exactly when it did.” Indeed,

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<sup>53</sup> *Church History in the Fulness of Times*, (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2000), 1.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

“the restoration of the gospel and the Lord’s true Church could not have taken place amidst the religious intolerance in Europe and early America” and “was only possible in the setting of religious liberty, reevaluation of Christian thinking, and spiritual awakening that had developed in early nineteenth-century America.”<sup>58</sup> Certainly:

“God knows the end from the beginning and is the author of the grand design of human history. He directed the affairs of history so that America was appropriately fertile soil for the seed of the restored gospel to be planted and tended by his chosen seer, Joseph Smith.”

### *Joseph Smith’s Early Prophetic Career*

The story of Joseph Smith is essential to Mormonism and indeed, the person of Joseph Smith cannot be separated from the movement he founded. Recently Gordon B. Hinckley, president of the LDS Church, described Joseph Smith’s prophetic career either as “a fraud” or “the most important and wonderful work under the heavens.”<sup>59</sup> Official Church history paints a picture of Joseph in these same terms. Thus, just as Elder Benson and Elder Packer instructed, Joseph Smith’s official history is told mostly with the goal to reinforce a notion of the divine in his life and work.

The difficulty here is that notions of divine tend to shift and alter over time and often reflect our own cultural understanding and social norms. To retell the story of Joseph Smith in terms of our own cultural notions of divinity is to rob the Prophet of his own time, culture, and social circumstance. Unwittingly, by fitting the Prophet’s story into our own divine notion, we take away much of what made Joseph Smith charismatic, engaging, and unquestionably unique. We must also recognize that Joseph Smith’s own circumstances influenced the recounting of his own history. We can see this in the various accounts of the First Vision and

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>59</sup> Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Marvelous Foundation of Our Faith,” in *General Conference* (Salt Lake City: 2002).

more specifically, in the 1838 history which is now part of the LDS scriptural canon. We cannot assume that if Joseph Smith included or excluded specific bits of historical data in his various accounts that he was somehow trying to “hide” or conceal his own past. Rather, we must evaluate the history of Joseph Smith in its own context and time. If one looks hard enough, one can find mischief or conspiracy anywhere or everywhere.

## **Folk Magic and Money-Digging**

Take for example, the influence of folk magic and treasure-lore in the early life of Joseph Smith. The official history attempts a near-apology for this early influence and ignores the overwhelming first-hand evidence that such folk practices played an important, if not vital role in the prophetic development of Joseph Smith and in the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. In reference to an effort to discover and dig for a silver mine on the property of Josiah Stowell, the official history explains:

“... detractors have used what they call [Joseph Smith’s] ‘money-digging’ to attack his character, to question his motives, and to cast doubt upon the validity of the church he organized. The circumstances are best understood in the context of their time and place. In New England and western New York, such activities were not frowned upon the way they came to be later. Years later, Joseph candidly acknowledge his participation in the venture but pointed out that it was insignificant.”<sup>60</sup>

Further, it is explained that “the Prophet was reluctant [to participate in this venture], but Stowell persisted, and since Joseph’s family was in need, he and his father together with other neighbors agreed to [participate].”<sup>61</sup> This endeavor is explained as a singular, uncommon, and uncharacteristic outing for Joseph Smith and his family.

In fact, Joseph Smith, and his entire family had been deeply involved with money-digging and other types of folk-magic for years. This type of activity was very much part of the

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<sup>60</sup> *Church History in the Fulness of Times*, 43.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 42. This reference to Joseph Smith downplaying his involvement is not primary and comes nearly 50+ year after the event. I am skeptical of its reliability.

folk-religious traditions prevalent in New England during this time.<sup>62</sup> Given the Smith family's economic conditions, geographic location, and social status, it would have been surprising *had they not* participated in money-digging and folk-magic. In 1834, E.D. Howe released what can be considered the first anti-Mormon book: *Mormonism Unveiled*; wherein he compiled various affidavits from Palmyra residents familiar with Joseph Smith in an effort to provide a "faithful account of that singular imposition and delusion": Mormonism.<sup>63</sup> Howe made much of Joseph's use of a "peep stone" and divining rod during his youth in Palmyra and used resident's testimony to make his point. It is not surprising then, that (at least partially) as a result of *Mormonism Unveiled*, later histories of Joseph Smith significantly downplay the influence and importance of the magic world view in the Smith household. Eventually, Latter-day Saints came to believe that any such references to money-digging and magic were simply dishonest attempts to discredit the prophet's reputation. Eventually, court documents from 1826 were recovered which showed that Joseph Smith was put on trial for "disorderly conduct" as a result of his money-digging activities on Josiah Stowell's property. Interestingly, Stowell himself testified on behalf on Smith and expressed full confidence in his abilities to find treasure using the stone. It is unclear why Joseph Smith was brought to trial or who first filed the complaint against him. All of the primary sources for this event show that he was clearly welcome on the Stowell property and was explicitly invited to participate as a result of his reputation as one skilled in the use of divining rods and peep-stones. What is beyond question, is that this event happened during the time which Joseph Smith reported to have been visited by the angel Moroni and was in the process of trying to obtain the plates which Moroni had instructed him to uncover. However, it must be noted that Moroni did warn Joseph of

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<sup>62</sup> D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View, Revised and Enlarged* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998), 30-31. and Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Chicago and Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 70-71.

<sup>63</sup> Eber Dudley Howe, "Mormonism Unveiled," Telegraph Press, <http://solomonspalding.com/docs/1834howb.htm#cont>.

continuing his work with the money-diggers and by 1826; Joseph was well on his way out of the money-digging business.

The official Church recounting of these events is not necessarily untrue, but it is certainly misleading to present Joseph Smith as a reluctant money-digger. Folk-magic and being a treasure-seer played a central role in Joseph's life for many years.

## **Folk Magic and The Book of Mormon**

Given Joseph Smith's deep involvement in folk-magic and money-digging, it is not surprising that the coming forth of the Book of Mormon was heavily influenced by Smith's magic world view. According to the official history, Joseph required "four years of tutoring" from the angel Moroni wherein "he met annually with Moroni at the Hill Cumorah to receive instructions in preparation for receiving the plates."<sup>64</sup> While in many respects this account is accurate, it is also misleading in giving the impression that the four years of preparation were part of an overarching and linear plan. Joseph Smith fully expected and intended to receive the plates on his first visit to the Hill Cumorah but was denied because he had thoughts of using the plates for monetary gain and also, because he placed the plates on the ground – letting them out of his reach – in blatant violation of Moroni's instructions. The second year, Joseph had been instructed to bring his older brother Alvin with him to retrieve the plates. Unfortunately, Alvin passed away before the following September when Joseph was to return to the hill. Interestingly, Palmyra's residents were very much aware of Moroni's requirement that Joseph bring Alvin to the hill and began circulating a rumor that Joseph Smith was planning on exhuming Alvin's body to take with him on his next visit to the Hill Cumorah. The rumor became so persistent, that Joseph Smith Sr. published a rebuttal for several days in the local paper. Information on the third-year visit is sketchy but circumstantial evidence indicates that

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<sup>64</sup> *Church History in the Fulness of Times*, 41.

Joseph was told by Moroni that he could obtain the plates if he brought the “right person.”<sup>65</sup> Apparently, Joseph chose Samuel Lawrence, a fellow treasure-seer, to accompany him on his third visit to the hill. There are no mentions of the appearance of an angel on this visit, perhaps because Lawrence was not the “right person” to bring. Eventually, Joseph was told by Moroni that he would have one last opportunity to obtain the plates if he would “Do right according to the will of God.”<sup>66</sup> Smith “learned from his seer stone what the requirement was” for the following year: he must bring Emma Hale, a girl he had met while engaged in treasure-seeking with Josiah Stowell.<sup>67</sup> Joseph also learned that the requirement was not simply that he must bring Emma Hale, but also that he be married to her by this time. Thus, “Smith’s visit to the hill in September 1826 was the reason the twenty-year-old Smith was determined to set aside his family’s tradition of delayed marriage.”<sup>68</sup> Smith eventually eloped with Emma Hale and did in fact take her with him to retrieve the plates in 1827.

Michael Quinn does an excellent job of showing the many parallels between Smith’s encounters with Moroni and specific folk magic traditions regarding treasure-hunting and digging. They are far too numerous to mention here.<sup>69</sup> Some scholars have criticized Quinn’s methods for being too generous in drawing parallels.<sup>70</sup> However, I find Quinn to be quite modest in illustrating parallels without claiming causation or direct influence. In any case, these critics mostly find fault with Quinn’s foundational chapters rather than with the substance of his Moroni narrative.

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<sup>65</sup> Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View, Revised and Enlarged*, 161-62.

<sup>66</sup> Joseph Knight as quoted in *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>69</sup> See *Ibid.*, 136-74.

<sup>70</sup> John Gee, “An Obstacle to Deeper Understanding,” *FARMS Review of Books* 12, no. 2 (2000). For some reason FARMS has seen fit to write several reviews of Quinn’s book. Unfortunately, they are often quite polemical and fail to deal with substantive issues.

In regard to the translation process itself, the official Church history is very clear that not much is known about how the Book of Mormon was translated. Scholars such as Quinn and Richard Bushman have illustrated that Joseph Smith did not use the plates in the translation process. Rather, he placed his seer stone in his hat, looked inside, and dictated the narrative to his scribe. There are conflicting accounts of what Smith actually saw in the seer stone, but regardless, this was the method employed to translate the Book of Mormon.

Unfortunately, Church publications often include illustrations and artwork of the translation process which may give readers a false impression.



This image clearly shows Joseph Smith using the plates and translating in the “traditional” way. However, as has been mentioned, Joseph Smith did not use the term “translate” as it is generally understood and in many ways, we should consider Joseph Smith’s translations *revelations* of one form or another.

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<sup>71</sup> Artwork found in *Church History in the Fulness of Times*, 53.

## Priesthood Restoration and Retroactive Editing

The concept of Priesthood restoration is also central to the official Church history narrative. While the dating of the restoration of the Aaronic Priesthood by John the Baptist is well-established by the historical record, the date of the Melchizedek priesthood restoration is less clear. According to current church interpretation and understanding of priesthood authority, it is assumed that the Melchizedek priesthood was a necessary prerequisite “to act as legal agents for the Lord in building the kingdom of God upon the earth.”<sup>72</sup> Therefore, the official history places the Melchizedek priesthood restoration “near the end of May 1829” – before the official organization of the Church in April 1830. However, this is very-likely a misdating. It is almost certain (based on the departure date of Joseph from Colesville) that the Melchizedek priesthood was restored through the visitation of Peter, James, and John in June 1830 – several months *after* the official organization of the Church. Certainly this is not a major point, but illustrates that the Restoration was not necessarily as linear and ordered as the official history may present.

A greater difficulty with the Priesthood restoration is related to the issue of the retroactive editing of both revelations and history by Joseph Smith himself. David Whitmer, one of the three witnesses to the Book of Mormon, claimed that the entire notion of Priesthood restoration was invented by Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery sometime in 1834 or 1835 in order to legitimize hierarchical structures they were implementing in the Church.<sup>73</sup> Quinn illustrates that Joseph did in fact go back and edit previous revelations and confirms that the stories of angelic visitations to confer and restore priesthood did not appear until 1835. However, according to Richard Bushman, “[Joseph] wanted the door left ajar for truth from every source” as he “often revised his own revelations, adding new material and splicing one to

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>73</sup> David Whitmer, “An Address to All Believers in Christ” as quoted in “New Mormon Studies Cd-Rom, a Comprehensive Resource Library.” (Place Published: Smith Research Associates, 1998.



another, altering the wording as he saw fit.”<sup>74</sup> Therefore, Joseph’s retroactive editing of revelations relating to the Priesthood restoration, as well as his elaboration on the restoration process itself (especially its angelic components), fits well into Joseph’s overall revelatory and history-telling pattern and may not be as nefarious as David Whitmer supposes. Even Quinn, who has done some of the most extensive work on Joseph Smith’s retroactive editing, to this day “[believes] in gold plates, angels, and priesthood restoration.”<sup>75</sup>

## **Difficulties in Kirtland**

The Church’s official history often fails to place blame on Joseph Smith for unfortunate outcomes or possible moral failings, even when such blame may be warranted. For example, under Joseph Smith’s leadership the Church established a bank in Kirtland Ohio to help mitigate the economic hardship imposed by the continual influx of poor Mormon immigrants to the city. The Church did so believing it was fully within its legal rights. As it turned out, the establishment of such a bank was in violation of Ohio’s banking law. The bank printed its own currency and Joseph Smith, at times using his prophetic authority, explicitly encouraged Church members to invest in and back the bank. Unfortunately, within just over a month, the bank failed and many Church members lost significant amounts of money. Joseph Smith, who had invested the most, consequently lost the most. The official Church history explains that “anti-Mormon newspapers branded the [bank’s] currency as worthless” and that “Enemies of the Church obtained enough notes to initiate a run on the bank.”<sup>76</sup> In fact, the bank’s currency really was worthless, not due to being labeled such by anti-Mormons, but because the structure and backing of the bank could not support the currency being printed. Additionally, while

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<sup>74</sup> Richard L. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling, a Cultural Biography of Joseph Smith* (New York: Alfred Knopf Press, 2005), 285.

<sup>75</sup> Interview with D. Michael Quinn, 12 April 2007

<sup>76</sup> *Church History in the Fulness of Times*, 172.

enemies of the Church may have obtained some currency, the real demand came from Church members who feared the instability of the bank itself. Simply put: Joseph Smith and his advisors were awful bankers. Their Kirtland banking experiment failed, not because of an anti-Mormon conspiracy, but rather because the bank itself was a poor idea, poorly implemented. The immediate result of the bank failure was widespread apostasy. Many Church members declared Smith a false prophet and left the Church. Most notably of these is David Whitmer.

## **The Nature of God and the Trinity**

One of the most distinctive and yet widely misunderstood doctrines of Mormonism relates to both the nature of God and the potential of humankind. Early in his prophetic career (pre-1833), Smith seemed to maintain a modalistic view of God the Father and the Son. Some have contended that the earliest Mormon views were orthodox trinitarian, however, the work of Dan Vogel has shown that even these early views were quite different from the “traditional” sects in Smith’s day.<sup>77</sup> What is beyond dispute, is that in the mid-1830’s Joseph Smith’s conception of the nature of God, or at least the rhetoric he used to describe God, began to change. Critics often use Smith’s differing accounts of the First Vision to illustrate an evolutionary conception of God, and not a revealed notion.<sup>78</sup> However, this position ignores several important contemporary sources as well as several key passages in the Book of Mormon.<sup>79</sup> In his 1832 account of the First Vision, Joseph recounts that “in the 16<sup>th</sup> year of my age a pillar of light above the brightness of the sun at noon day come down from above and rested upon me [and] I was filled with the spirit of God and the Lord opened the heavens upon

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<sup>77</sup> Dan Vogel, "The Earliest Mormon Concept of God," in *Line Upon Line, Essays on Mormon Doctrine*, ed. Gary James Bergera (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 24-27.

<sup>78</sup> Tanner and Tanner, *Mormonism, Shadow or Reality*, 143-57.

<sup>79</sup> Perhaps most important is the passage in 1 Nephi 11:11 where Nephi describes the Spirit as an anthropomorphic being. If nothing else, this clearly shows that Joseph Smith’s early conceptions of the Godhead were quite radical for the time and at least foreshadowed the more complete and complex doctrines he taught in 1843-44.

me and I saw the Lord.”<sup>80</sup> In this early account, Joseph mentions only “the Lord”, and not both the Father and the Son, as he would later describe. In 1835, Joseph again described the appearance of a pillar and then “a personage appeared in the midst of this pillar of flame which was spread all around, and yet nothing consumed, another personage soon appeared like unto the first, he said unto me thy sins are forgiven thee, he testified unto me that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.”<sup>81</sup> Here, Joseph tells of two personages without identifying either. The 1838 account is the version currently in the LDS Canon and clearly identifies the appearance of both the Father and the Son, as two separate and distinct beings.<sup>82</sup> Rather than viewing these various accounts as an evolution, Richard Bushman describes them in terms of an increase in both Smith’s understanding and confidence. Bushman tells of Smith’s hesitance to share sacred experience early on in his ministry and interprets these various accounts as a reflection of growth, rather than redaction.<sup>83</sup> Today, Latter-day Saints and the official Church history rely heavily on the 1838 account to substantiate the doctrine that the Father, Son and Holy Ghost are three separate and distinct beings.<sup>84</sup> However, the official history, as it is presented today, is silent on the fact that it may have taken several years before this doctrine became completely clear to Joseph Smith. By 1843, Joseph Smith had solidified the question of the trinity and defined God as an anthropomorphic being: “The Father has a body of flesh and bones as

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<sup>80</sup> 1832 account written by Frederick G. Williams and Joseph Smith – LDS Church Historical Archives as quoted in *The Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith, an American Prophet’s Record*, ed. Scott H. Faulring (Salt Lake City: Signature Books and Smith Research Associates, 1989), 5.

<sup>81</sup> Joseph Smith Recital to Robert Matthews, 9 November 1835 as quoted in *Early Mormon Documents*, ed. Dan Vogel, 5 vols., vol. 1 (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996), 44.

<sup>82</sup> *Pearl of Great Price*. JSH 1:17

<sup>83</sup> Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling, a Cultural Biography of Joseph Smith*, 39-41.

<sup>84</sup> It does not appear as if the early Latter-day Saints relied on the First Vision account to explain this doctrine and it appears that doing so became prevalent well after 1850.

tangible as man's; the Son also; but the Holy Ghost has not a body of flesh and bones, but is a personage of Spirit."<sup>85</sup>

## Eternal and Plural Marriage

Mormonism is likely best known for its one-time practice of plural marriage, or polygamy. As early as 1835, Joseph Smith began practicing plural marriage. His first plural wife was Fanny Alger, a young woman who had been working in the Smith home.<sup>86</sup> Even though the revelation explicating the purpose of plural marriage was not written down until 1843, there is evidence that portions of the text were received as early as 1831.<sup>87</sup> In 1832, Smith told Levi Hancock "plural marriage had the millennial purpose of fashioning a righteous generation on the eve of the Second Coming."<sup>88</sup> The text of the revelation, now Section 132 of the Doctrine and Covenants, focuses less on establishing a righteous generation than on outlining the eternal purposes of the "new and everlasting covenant" of which plural marriage was a part.

More important than plural marriage in Section 132 is the idea of *eternal* marriage. In this revelation, the Lord explains: "all covenants, contracts, bonds, obligations, oaths, vows, performances, connections, associations, or expectations, that are not made and entered into and sealed by the Holy Spirit of promise ... are of no efficacy, virtue or force in and after the resurrection from the dead; for all contracts that are not made unto this end have an end when men are dead."<sup>89</sup> Further, "if a man marry him a wife in the world, and he marry her not by me nor by my word, and he covenant with her so long as he is in the world and she with him, their

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<sup>85</sup> *Doctrine and Covenants*, 130:22.

<sup>86</sup> Todd Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness, the Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997), NEED PAGE!!

<sup>87</sup> Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling, a Cultural Biography of Joseph Smith*, 326.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> *Doctrine and Covenants*, 132:7.

covenant and marriage are not of force when they are dead, and when they are out of the world; therefore, they are not bound by any law when they are out of the world. “ Thus, “when they are out of the world they neither marry nor are given in marriage.” In other words, those who marry outside of the new and everlasting covenant “are appointed angels in heaven... [but] cannot be enlarged, but remain separately and singly.”<sup>90</sup> In contrast:

“If a man marry a wife by my word ... and by the new and everlasting covenant, and it is sealed unto them by the Holy Spirit of promise...it shall be said unto them – Ye shall come forth in the first resurrection; and if it be after the first resurrection, in the next resurrection; and shall inherit thrones, kingdoms, principalities and powers, dominions, all heights and depths ... and they shall pass by the angels, and the gods, which are set there, to their exaltation and glory in all things, as hath been sealed upon their heads which glory shall be a fullness and a continuation of the seeds forever and ever. Then shall they be gods, because they have no end; therefore shall they be from everlasting to everlasting, because they continue; then shall they be above all, because all things are subject unto them. Then shall they be gods, because they have all power and the angels are subject unto them.”<sup>91</sup>

The revelation goes on to address the specific issue of plural wives by referencing the marriages of David, Solomon, and even Abraham.<sup>92</sup> The remainder of the revelation is intended to encourage Emma Smith to accept the doctrine of plural marriage because up to this point, she had serious reservations about its divinity.

It is unclear what portions of this revelation were received in 1831, and which portions were received later at Nauvoo (1841-2) in response to Emma Smith’s concerns. What is clear however, is that Joseph Smith had married many other women without Emma’s knowledge, made many attempts to conceal said marriages, and even engaged in a ruse by marrying one woman twice: once for the marriage itself, and then a second time with Emma’s “consent.” Emma Smith was unaware of the first marriage.

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 132:15-16.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 132:19-20.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 132 34-44.

Joseph Smith was also dishonest with the public and the Church at large about his plural marriages. Rumors began circulating of plural marriage as early as 1838-39 and by 1843-44, it became nearly impossible to control the spread of this information. All this time, Joseph Smith and others who were engaged in the practice, explicitly denied their involvement both in speeches and in print.<sup>93</sup>

No one who has made a serious study of Joseph Smith's plural marriages can doubt his religious sincerity in the practice. It is beyond question that Joseph Smith *believed* in the practice of plural marriage as a divine and revealed principle. It is true that Joseph Smith had sexual relations with many of his plural wives, but there are many he did not have relations with. Critics, who suggest that Smith was simply a philanderer or a sexual deviant, grossly ignore key primary evidence and ignore aspects of the practice itself. However, there are reports, especially from Nauvoo, which indicate that Smith may have, over time, become more comfortable with the practice and more aggressive in the pursuit of plural wives.<sup>94</sup> As Todd Compton has observed, sexual attraction and intimacy were at least a part of the marriages Smith pursued.<sup>95</sup> Some of the more salacious accounts of Smith's exploits come from sources extremely unfriendly to Joseph Smith and thus we should be skeptical of their reliability. However, it would be equally unwise to discount them altogether.

Todd Compton has noted that eight months prior to his death, Joseph Smith abruptly stopped marrying plural wives. During the time, Smith was under tremendous external pressure from enemies of the Church and the rumors of polygamy were compounding these problems. Compton is very candid in stating that the reasons for Smith's abrupt stop cannot be

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<sup>93</sup> Richard S. Van Wagoner and Marcy C Van Wagoner, "Sarah M. Pratt: The Shaping of an Apostate," in *Mormon Mavericks, Essays on Dissenters*, ed. Susan Staker and John Sillito (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 43-50.

<sup>94</sup>Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness, the Plural Wives of Joseph Smith*, 11.

known for certain, but there is some evidence that Joseph Smith began to have second thoughts about the practice of plural marriage. Most notably, William Marks recalls:

“When the doctrine of polygamy was introduced into the church as a principle of exaltation, I took a decided stand against it; which stand rendered me quite unpopular with many of the leading ones of the church ... Joseph, however, became convinced before his death that he had done wrong; for about three weeks before his death, I met him one morning in the street, and he said to me, ‘Brother Marks ... We are a ruined people.’ I asked how so? He said: ‘This doctrine of polygamy, or Spiritual-wife system, that has been taught and practiced among us, will prove our destruction and overthrow. I have been deceived,’ said he, ‘in reference to its practice; it is wrong; it is a curse to mankind, and we shall have to leave the United States soon, unless it can be put down and its practice stopped in the church.’”<sup>96</sup>

Compton casts doubt on Mark’s testimony because “Marks was not in the inner polygamy circle in Nauvoo... however, the eight month cessation of plural marriages before Joseph’s death might support Mark’s story.” Even Brigham Young stated the Joseph Smith’s renunciation of polygamy was possible, although he made it clear that he himself had not heard this from the Prophet’s mouth.<sup>97</sup>

Additionally, it is known that either Joseph or Emma willfully burned and destroyed the revelation on plural and eternal marriage. Whether this was as a result of the continuing conflict between Joseph and Emma on this subject or the result of Joseph’s own doubts of the doctrine’s divinity is unknown.

What is beyond question is that Joseph Smith began to give serious thought to ending or curtailing the practice of polygamy near the end of his life – whether for practical reasons of survival, or as William Marks suggests, because he was “deceived” may be never known. In any case, polygamy became one of the principle catalysts for the Prophet’s death and eventual expulsion of Mormons from Illinois.

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<sup>96</sup> William Marks journal 1845, as quoted in *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>97</sup> D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy Origins of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books and Smith Research Associates, 1994), 147.

What I have recounted above is virtually absent from the official Church history. Joseph Smith's polygamy, and its secret nature is mentioned, but the details of the difficulties plural marriage posed to the Prophet are completely absent. Also absent are any references to the Prophet's efforts to curtail or renounce plural marriage near the end of his life. Again, this portion of the official history is presented as a very clean and linear story – one in which the virtue of the Prophet is highlighted, and his humanity suppressed.

Today, the issue of plural marriage presents a difficulty for many Latter-day Saints who do not understand its origins and purpose and may even question its divinity. By ignoring Joseph Smith's own struggle with polygamy, the official history may inadvertently imply that acceptance of this particular practice is requisite in accepting Joseph Smith's prophetic calling. However, as the above narrative has shown, Joseph Smith himself may have had serious doubts about the practice of plural marriage. Therefore, I believe that faithful Latter-day Saints may benefit from a more full exposition of this subject as it may allow those who question this practice to discard notions of its divinity and still be in good company with the Prophet.

### *Taking Ownership of the Past*

A careful study of Mormon history, through the difficult times in Utah and even up to the present day, will reveal patterns of both human frailty and divine intervention. Mormon history, just as the history of any religious tradition, is full of missteps and mistakes; but it is also full of faith, stories of the miraculous, and accounts of people and events which inspire and illuminate the presence of God in the world. Unfortunately, there is a disconnect between what I would consider an accurate history, and the story which is presented to Latter-day Saints throughout the worldwide Church institution.

In my anecdotal study and preliminary research of those who have left Mormonism in recent years, I have found a consistent theme: disillusionment and the loss of faith as a result of an encounter with Mormon history. What I have found tends to prove and validate Elder



Packer's concern that Church history can be a "faith destroyer." Indeed, it seems to be one of, if not *the* most effective destroyer of faith in the LDS Church. The Church relies so heavily on its history to validate and substantiate theology and doctrine; it is no surprise that a challenge to historical conceptions often leads to the loss of faith in both the doctrines and authority of the Church. Unfortunately, a surprising number of those who leave Mormonism, often become agnostic or atheist – rather than join or participate in other Christian traditions.<sup>98</sup> Of the books most often cited as being influential in their decision to leave Mormonism, many include sources dealing directly with questions of history.<sup>99</sup>

Again, it is very clear that Elder Packer is correct to be concerned about Church history challenging faith. May I suggest however, that it is not the encounter with Church history which challenges faith, but rather the sanitized and near-mythological presentation of the Mormon past perpetuated by the Church institution, which causes a crisis in world-view when the inevitable encounter with history arrives. In past generations, it was much easier for the Church to control access to troubling areas of Mormon history. The first real challenge to this controlled-access were the publications of Jerald and Sandra Tanner in the 1960's. Interestingly, their work serves as the foundation for all, and I want to stress -- literally \*all\*, of the major anti-Mormon books of the last forty years. Today, the advent of the Internet, as well as the increased wide-spread interest in Mormonism, makes it virtually impossible to conceal "problem areas" of the past. The cat is out of the bag, as it were.

In all fairness, it must be noted that documents and publications have been available for years dealing with difficulties in Mormon history. However, these publications have generally not been intended for Church-wide consumption, as they have been authoritative (BYU

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<sup>98</sup> This statement is completely anecdotal and based on the extended observation of Ex-Mormon mailing lists on the internet, Ex-Mormon conference proceedings, and private interviews conducted with those who identify themselves as Ex-Mormon. I have no hard statistical data to substantiate this claim.

<sup>99</sup> Based on preliminary survey of 20 Ex-Mormons from both Europe and the United States. The Question was posed: Please list the books you read or other sources you consulted (such as websites, pamphlets etc...), while still a believing Latter-day Saint, which influenced your decision to leave Mormonism.

published etc...) and not official, and appealed mostly to LDS scholars or those with a keen interest in specific areas of LDS history. The historical conceptions of the vast majority of Latter-day Saints come from what they are taught in Sunday school, seminary, Church Institutes, and in official Church books. It is for these Latter-day Saints, who have constructed a world-view based largely on a sanitized and mythological past, which the encounter with the New Mormon History can be most difficult. Of course, many Latter-day Saints are fully aware of these historical "difficulties" and are able to make adjustments to their understanding and remain faithful and believing Latter-day Saints.<sup>100</sup> I have found however, that many are unable to reconcile the encounter of the New Mormon History with their existing faith and eventually leave Mormonism. I suspect, although I have no data to support this assertion, that these types of difficult historical encounters may be a large contributor to the Church's effective growth rate of just 1.3% in the U.S. - despite the popular Mormon folk-myth that the Church is the fastest growing religion in the world.<sup>101</sup>

I believe these faith-destroying encounters with the Mormon past are avoidable and unnecessary. These crises of faith are the result of placing unrealistic moral and divine expectations on the Mormon prophets. No man, save the perfect Jesus, can possibly live up to the expectations the Latter-day Saints have of their divinely called leaders, both past and present. It is true that we, as Latter-day Saints say the prophet is fallible – but to speak something without ever engaging its reality and its actual consequences – leaves the statement meaningless and flat. In fact, this refusal to engage prophetic fallibility openly, honestly, and explicitly may be doing more damage than good.<sup>102</sup> Rather than avoid aspects of the past, we

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<sup>100</sup> Of course, many wonder what it means to be a "believing" Latter-day Saint. Richard Bushman often described Mormon faith as a buffet – meaning that Latter-day Saints tend to focus on certain appealing doctrines and either ignore or set aside those doctrines they find difficult.

<sup>101</sup> Peggy Fletcher Stack, "Keeping Members a Challenge for Lds Church," *Salt Lake Tribune*, 06/22 2006.

<sup>102</sup> An example of this may be the Church's position on its previous policy regarding blacks and the Priesthood. Armand Mauss has shown that because the church has failed to renounce and repudiate its former doctrine, missionary work has suffered, and will continue to suffer, amongst those of African

should seek to understand the past. The question should not be ‘Was Joseph Smith dishonest about polygamy?’ or ‘Did Joseph Smith dig for buried treasure?’, but rather: ‘Why did Joseph Smith feel compelled to be dishonest with the Saints and his wife about plural marriage?’ and ‘What cultural circumstances led to Joseph Smith being regarded as a treasure seer in his youth?’. The answers to these latter questions are much more meaningful and may in fact be more faith promoting than the simplistic hero-worship currently promulgated throughout the Church today.

By asking *why*, rather than *what*, we take ownership of the past and make it our own. For too long, Latter-day Saints have allowed their critics tell the story of “difficult” historical problems. Thus, these difficulties have been framed in such a way as to cast doubt on the divine within Mormonism. I am advocating that Latter-day Saints should snatch these “difficulties” from the critics and turn them into faith-promoting positives which illustrate the divine at work within the humanity of the Mormon prophets and people. I am not advocating an effort in apologetics or polemics. Both are about as useful as they are ugly. Latter-day Saints have functioned as apologists for far too long.<sup>103</sup> Let us build faith through an honest and full assessment of our past and our people. Skeptics may wonder if this is even possible. How can seemingly “ugly” events be made into faithful narratives? It must be remembered that the purpose of these narratives is not to validate the character of the Latter-day Saint leaders or people, but rather to understand them. We need to look no further than the Old and New Testaments for how this type of narrative can be composed.

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descent. This is a perfect example of how refusing to acknowledge the fallibility of a former policy hinders, rather than helps the modern Church.

<sup>103</sup> Carl Cranney, "Don't We Have Anything Else to Talk About?" (paper presented at the Faith and Knowledge, Latter-day Saints in Religious Studies, Yale Divinity School, New Haven CT, 2007).

## ***“Rough Stone Rolling” as a Model for Mormon History***

Richard Bushman’s *Rough Stone Rolling* is giant step toward this goal. Its publication in 2005 signaled a paradigm shift in the telling of Mormon history. Bushman fully presented Joseph Smith on Joseph’s own terms. He allowed Joseph Smith to speak for himself while at the same time presenting his humanity “warts and all.”<sup>104</sup> According to Mike Quinn, Bushman has produced “the best biography on Joseph Smith ever written.”<sup>105</sup> Bushman frankly deals with Joseph’s gregarious prophecies and propensity for overzealousness. He discusses Oliver Cowdery’s concern that Joseph was adulterous in the practice of plural marriage and discusses the Prophet’s willful deceit of his wife and others. But along with the Prophet’s warts, Bushman also illustrates the Prophet’s sincere love of God and his love for the Mormon people. By allowing Joseph to have his own voice, rather than superimposing a set of motives (Brodie) or unattainable piety (official Church history), Bushman presents a Joseph Smith that one can have faith in and learn from. A reader may not always agree with the choices or character of Bushman’s Joseph. A reader may not even *like* Joseph Smith in certain parts of the narrative. But the beauty of Bushman’s work is that it does not force the reader to make a choice between Joseph Smith’s very human flaws and his prophetic claims. The reader may simply take Joseph as he was. *Rough Stone Rolling* is faithful history, but more importantly it is a full history.<sup>106</sup>

## **Concluding Thoughts**

My hope is that Latter-day Saints, both lay members and the institution of the Church, will continue to be more open to full and honest history. The theological strengths of Joseph

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<sup>104</sup> Interview with Richard L. Bushman, March 26, 2007.

<sup>105</sup> Interview with D. Michael Quinn, 11 April 2007

<sup>106</sup>Of course, *Rough Stone Rolling* is not a perfect book. Bushman does choose to spend more time on certain subjects than on others and intentionally avoids issues which would mire the overall flow and purpose of the biography. For this, some critics have called Bushman an apologist. I find this to be an unfair assertion.

Smith far outweigh any questions of history. Frankly, I find a somewhat mysterious God working through an even more mysterious Joseph Smith, more spiritually inspiring and fulfilling than a neatly packaged and linear narrative. I asked Mike Quinn how he, as the author of historical works that have caused so much consternation and crises of faith for some Latter-day Saints, is able to maintain his own faith in the prophetic calling of Joseph Smith. He responded that “faith is not rational” and that it is essential to remember that “stories and history are separate from questions of faith.” I was impressed that Quinn did not attempt to offer a reconstruction or some sort of new model for how fact A could be reconciled with fact B. Such facts simply *were*. Quinn simply believes in “gold plates, angels and priesthood.” He *simply believes*.

Quinn’s simple faith should be the envy of every Latter-day Saint.

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