



Type: Magazine Article

Joseph the Prophet

Author(s): Charles H. Hart

Source: *Improvement Era*, Vol. 23, No. 6 (April 1920), pp. 491–495

Published by: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Joseph the Prophet

By Judge Charles H. Hart, of the First Council of Seventy

One hundred years have passed since the boy Joseph Smith declared he had been visited by two heavenly beings. The first vision was followed by many other spiritual manifestations reported by him, all of which have resulted in the birth and growth of a young, virile, vigorous Church of world-wide influence and aspirations. The Church thus launched has had a unique and striking history and has become "a marvelous work and a wonder."

After a century's test and scrutiny by a critical world, is the Church thus established still required to bear the burden of proof that Joseph Smith was a prophet, or may not unbelief be called upon to give some plausible explanation of the Prophet and his work? How is Joseph and the work inaugurated by him to be explained with inspiration or divine guidance left out of the account? Did he fabricate the religious experiences and visions reported by him? Was he a designing impostor? Was he sincere but misled by delusions or hallucinations? Or was he divinely inspired, a Prophet? Let each word and act of his come under the search light of truth and be put to the acid test. The entire record bears no evidence of insincerity. While, to begin with, many have sought to dispose of him and the work for which he stood by considering him as a wilful impostor, thoughtful and well informed people concede his sincerity but seek to account for him and what he did by supposing him innocently misled.

Josiah Quincy, in his noted book, *Figures of the Past*, published in 1882, said of him:

"The man who established a religion in this age of free debate, who was and is today accepted by hundreds of thousands as a direct emissary from the Most High,—such a rare individual is not to be disposed of by pelting his memory with unsavory epithets. Fanatics and impostors are living and dying every day and their memory is buried with them, but the wonderful influence which this founder of a religion exerted and still exerts throws him into relief before us, not as a rogue to be criminated but as a phenomenon to be explained. The most vital question Americans are asking each other today have to do with this man and what he has left us."

After describing Joseph as a fine-looking man, a remarkable individual, giving the impression of capacity and resource,

and endowed with the kingly faculty to direct others, he comments on Joseph's statesmanship in anticipating by eleven years the wisdom of Emerson in advocating the settlement of the slave question by the purchase of the slaves by sale of public lands. In conclusion Mr. Quincy writes: "I have endeavored to give the details of my visit to the Mormon Prophet with absolute accuracy. If the reader does not know just what to make of Joseph Smith, I can not help him out of the difficulty. I myself stand helpless before the puzzle."

The theory of Dr. Woodbridge Riley in his book, *The Founder of Mormonism*, so far as he has any persisting theory, is that Joseph was sincerely misled. George Trumbull Ladd, of Yale University, in an introductory preface to Mr. Riley's book, says:

"The rise and growth of 'Mormonism' is one of the most remarkable phenomena of the 19th century. It is deserving of thorough investigation, conducted from the point of view of the sociologist, the psychologist, or the student of politics or religion."

George Lansing Raymond, in his book, *The Psychology of Inspiration*, treats Joseph not only as sincere but as a true "psychic" to be classed with Joan of Arc, Jesus Christ, and others of accepted sincerity.

It is not to be wondered at that the best modern thought should concede Joseph's honesty. His words and acts attest fidelity. How is it that a court, or jury, is impressed with the truthfulness of the testimony of the witness and may believe him against the statement of many others? The very manner of telling the story and demeanor of the witness carry conviction. So with Joseph's story of his visions. What unprejudiced person can read his simple, candid narrative without believing him honest? It has all the evidence of an actual experience. If an invention, how did it happen that a fourteen-year old boy chose substantially the form of introduction which the Father has always used, according to the Hebrew scriptures, in introducing the Son? (*History of the Church*, Vol. 1, Chap. I and II.)

It should be noted that the answer Joseph got was not the answer he was looking for. He asked which of all religions was right. He assumed that some one or other must be. No preconceived whim or desire on his part could account for the answer he received. If an impostor, desirous of establishing a new church, he would not have antagonized all other churches by declaiming them all wrong. The very reply received by him indicates that it was not of human origin. It has required the passing of a century for man to more fully realize and learn how true the answer was. Such modern writers as Rev. Elvet

Lewis, in the *Atlantic Monthly*, Dr. Edwin Davies Schoonmaker, in *Century Magazine*, for 1915, and Horace J. Bridges, in his book of 1916, entitled, *The Religion of Experience*, indicate how true the answer to Joseph was. Mr. Bridges uses much the same language when he says: "The church to be sure is corrupt, there is no single branch of it, from the Roman to the Quaker, which is not obnoxious to this censure. But to say this is only to say that the church is a human institution."

If the boy had not seen the vision and heard voices, why would he say to his mother, who was a Presbyterian, "I have learned for myself that Presbyterianism is not true"? Why would he lay the axe at the root of religious error unless he had been instructed as he claimed? In the same narrative he frankly confessed having fallen into errors, "and displayed the weakness of youth and the foibles of human nature." Had he been a pretender, would he have confessed having been led into temptation? Would he not have sought prestige by assuming or pretending a perfection he had not attained?

Those who assume that Joseph, although honest, was himself deluded, necessarily imply or assert that his visions were "subjective" and not "objective;" that is, that, while some vision may have passed before his mental gaze, and although he may have thought he heard voices, there was no reality to the sights or sounds, but they were only the products of a disordered mind. Such is the hypothesis of Dr. Riley above referred to. The weakness and error of such a theory is that there is overwhelming evidence that the manifestations were objective. If Joseph spoke of a first vision, he was to receive further directions. Such further directions came through a heavenly messenger. If such messenger, the angel Moroni, spake of a hidden record, as proof that the vision was not merely a phantasma of the mind, there was in the Hill Cumorah the stone cist in which the sacred relics were found, including the Urim and Thummim, the breastplate, and the golden plates. It is folly to suggest that the visions were imaginary or subjective, when these material things are in evidence. That he had plates of the appearance of gold upon which were what appeared to be ancient characters, is supported by the unimpeached and unimpeachable testimony of eleven witnesses besides himself and his mother. If Joseph did not obtain the golden plates in the manner stated, how did he come by them? A boy so circumstanced could not come by them in a worldly way without the fact being known. The late Elbert Hubbard wrote:

"But why and how people who believe that Moses found the tablets of stone carved by Jehovah, yet cavil and sneer at the metal tablets discovered by Joseph Smith, I cannot understand. It is just a matter of time

and distance, but time cannot make the false true. That which once happened can happen again. If God were God in the time of Moses, he is yet."

Again, these plates purport to contain a sacred history of prehistoric races on the American continent and of God's dealings with them; in other words, a volume of scripture. As an evidence that the vision and the plates and translation of the record by the gift and power of God are not subjective, or merely the emanation of diseased fancy, behold, here is a volume of ancient American scripture as the objective or tangible token. The vision, the plates seen and examined by many persons, are all the forerunners of, and closely connected with, the sacred record, the Book of Mormon. If Joseph the Prophet did not get this book in the manner represented, how did he get it, and where did it come from? Will anyone acquainted with the history of crime believe that an unlettered country youth could successfully forge a whole volume of scripture? If bright and skilful men find it very difficult and often impossible to forge a single word or even a syllable without detection, how could Joseph successfully fabricate the elaborate history and scriptural teachings contained in the Book of Mormon? Could he falsely pretend to be translating for a period of years without being detected? The attempt to connect Solomon Spaulding and Sidney Rigdon with the authorship of the Book of Mormon has failed. Who can plausibly account for the book other than upon the statement given by Joseph? If the visions or revelations were simply the result of a diseased or disordered mind, as Dr. Riley supposes, how comes it there is such unity running through Joseph's entire work? The instruction of the Angel Moroni, for instance, foreshadow the temple work which was not developed for many years after, and near the close of Joseph's ministry. The First Vision is a fitting prelude to the entire drama of the unfolding of so-called "Mormonism." It is the key to the arch of the restored Church.

It requires less credulity to believe that Joseph was inspired than to think that a boy of his age and experience could forge, so to speak, the whole stupendous structure and teachings of "Mormonism." To accept the Book of Mormon as fiction and not sacred history makes it necessary to explain how the author could know the many facts of ethnology and archaeology involved in the writing of that book, truths not known to science until later years. For instance, Joseph Smith describes the stone box or cist in which the records were found. At that time it was not generally known, if known at all, that the Aborigines of America were accustomed to use such cists in the burial of valuables. Such a stone box was discovered in the fall of

1906 on the farm of T. M. Edmondson, near Streetsville, in Peel county, about 22 miles west of Toronto, Ontario, Canada, as announced in *Records of Past Ages*, for March and April, 1909, pp. 75, 76. It is there stated that such cists had been found in Tennessee, Illinois, and at points on the Delaware river, and also in northern New Mexico.

After the skeptic has attempted to explain satisfactorily all the problems connected with the Book of Mormon there is another volume of scripture for him to account for, the *Doctrine and Covenants*. Let him explain how Joseph by worldly wisdom could produce, for instance, sections 1, 20, 29, 45, 59, 76, 84, 88, 89, 93, 101, 107, 132, and many others, perhaps equally wonderful.

As a result of the visions and revelations to Joseph Smith, the Church was organized. Such men as Professor Ely, of the Wisconsin University, and Vice-President Marshall, and others, pronounce the Church one of the most perfect and complete organizations.

If one considers the research required by man's learning to produce the three volumes of scripture which came through Joseph, he will realize that no boy, with Joseph's limited opportunities, could possibly have done the work without divine assistance. There are some matters that are not susceptible of successful fabrication. One is a volume of scripture. More difficult still, and less likely of attempt, would be the offer of a wilful deceiver to have his work of deception affirmatively attested by the Holy Trinity in the manner requested by the Book of Mormon, to "ask God, the eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost; and by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things."