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Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon

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Abstract: This article argues against statements that Joseph Smith produced the Book of Mormon by way of “visionary seizures.” The testimony of the Three Witnesses is reprinted, as is a description of David Whitmer’s testimony before he died.

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JOSEPH SMITH AND THE BOOK OF MORMON

DR. HERBERT Z. LUND

"MORMONISM" had its inception in a blaze of spiritual glory—visions, angelic visitations, golden bible, prophecy, and the holy gifts of the Spirit. To the first question usually put to a "Mormon": "Do you believe in these things?" I wish to answer: "I most assuredly do!"

Religion had its birth in these spiritual conceptions. To me it is the poetry, the beauty, the vitality of religion. The Jewish Record is one round of these divine expressions. If you wish to emasculate the Holy Bible, remove these things. What would it be without the men who spake as they were moved upon by the Holy Ghost, without the glory of Sinai, without Emmanuel born of the Virgin, or without the revelation of Deity Himself?

I believe in a personal Deity, one that can reveal Himself or make personal contact with His children. I am persuaded that humanity unconsciously clings to this conception. Certain of my friends say it isn't big enough, that it is unphilosophical. Disraeli asks: "Is it more unphilosophical to believe in a personal God omnipotent, omniscient, than in natural forces unconscious and irresistible. Is it unphilosophical to combine power with intelligence?" Is it more philosophical to believe in the monad of pure intelligence in the center of space (the thought of Goethe and Spinoza) than the truth first revealed to man that God created man in His own image?

There is no relation between the faculties of man and the scale of creation of the planet which he inhabits. The earth is a molehill by a mountain compared to the sun. The mind of man penetrates beyond the sun off into the depths a hundred and fifty million light years away. He analyzes the stars, has made serious efforts in weighing the universe. We meet in religious services to contemplate the things of God, past, present and future; and in such contemplation our souls may mount up to adoration, up to that majestic attitude of worship. This is the

supreme expression of vital activity! There is nothing outside so big, so subtle, so marvellous. So when I ascribe personality to Deity, I do not detract from His omnipotence, omniscience, or majesty. Such a God can and does reveal Himself.

I believe that if the Spirit of Truth or the Holy Ghost is enjoyed by any religious organization, prophecy, vision and miracle cannot be denied. Paul, in his description of the body of the Church, likens it unto the human body, and says:

But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal. For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom; to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit; to another faith by the same Spirit; To another the gifts of healing by the same Spirit; To another the working of miracles; To another prophecy; . . . For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body; so also is Christ. . . . And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee. . . . all are necessary. (1 Cor. 12: 7-22.)

The human body is the most perfect machine or construction known. Every part is essential—the comely and the uncomely. Every part has its function.

ALL ARE NECESSARY TO THE PERFECT WHOLE

Years ago the pituitary gland was thought to be a vestigial body, a remnant, a third eye. It was removed by a surgeon in a young ape, and it was found that this ape grew out of all proportion. He discovered that it regulated the growth of bones and had other wonderful influence on the metabolism of the body. Every portion and part is essential as Paul says, and the eye cannot say unto the hand, "I have no need of thee"; nor again, the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." Are all prophets, apostles, or workers of miracles? But all are essential to the perfect whole. The gifts of the Spirit are absolutely essential for the growth and well-being of the Body of Christ. Deny prophecy or vision and you put out the eyes. Who has a right to place inhibitions on the gifts of the Spirit of Truth? Some of our religious friends may suggest that they are in the more excellent way suggested by Paul, "For now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known." Who is so perfect that he does not look through a glass darkly? Or see only in part? If so, prophecy and the gifts of the Spirit of Truth are necessary, and come absolutely within the philosophy of St. Paul. Any other view does not. Moroni, one of the prophets, says, "And now I speak unto the ends of the earth that if the day cometh that the power and gifts of God shall be done away, it shall be because of unbelief."

No one has a right to say these gifts of the Spirit are vestigial!

But one may ask, "How can the Holy Ghost illumine the mind of man and bring forth that miracle of knowledge, 'prophecy'?" I do not know. How can the green colouring matter of the leaf transform the sunbeam into tissue? How is the energy of the clod transformed into the activity of subtle consciousness? I do not know. I do not know how the Holy Ghost operates on the minds of men, but it does. Instance: The prophecy of Isaiah against the mighty Babylon:

And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the beauty of the Chaldees' excellency, shall be as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah.

It shall never be inhabited, neither shall it be dwelt in from generation to generation; neither shall the Arabian pitch tent there; neither shall the shepherds make their fold there.

But wild beasts of the desert shall lie there; and their houses shall be full of doleful creatures; and owls shall dwell there, and satyrs shall dance there.

Just as remarkable a prophecy was made against Tyre and Sidon, and the mighty mistress of the sea has dwindled practically to nothing. Joseph Smith predicted that the saints would suffer hardships; and many, death; and would finally be driven to the Rocky Mountains and there become a great and mighty people, all of which has been veritably fulfilled. Our friends say, "Of course, theologically you are on secure ground, but scientifically what about it"? I am sorry science has no conclusions on the subject. Let us hope that some day the handmaid of truth will remove her sandals and tread this holy ground.

THE APPEAL OF THE PROPHET'S CLAIMS

Joseph Smith claims that an angel fresh from the bosom of God came and delivered to him a sacred record of generations of men who lived on the American continent, and that by the power of God he was enabled to translate it. To many this seems unthinkable, an absurdity of the first magnitude. To him who has flippantly read a chapter here and there and stumbled over "And it came to pass," it seems a jumble.

And as one said, "By the time he came to the Book of Ether, he was anaesthetized." Yes, we have all heard these "wise-cracks." But to the thoughtful reader the authorship of the Book of Mormon has always been a puzzle. The thoughtful investigator without exception has invariably come to the conclusion that Joseph Smith could not have written it, and he has set out diligently to find the author, but he has never been found. He was not Sidney Rigdon, he was not Parley Pratt, nor Solomon Spalding. No one man could write the Book of Mormon. No one man can write a Bible. That is a product of nations and peoples—taking the Holy Bible as a standard.

This "Mormon" prophet, with his visions, angel visitations, prophecy, has been variously explained on psychological (the science of the nature of the human soul and mind) and pathological (the science of disease) grounds. Some have striven hard to put him under certain types of psychosis or mental derangement. Dr. Riley says:

There is no call for so harsh a judgment; the visionary seizures were not consequent on dementia nor were they feigned. There is a truer and at the same time a more charitable explanation. It is, in a word, that Joseph Smith, Jr., was an epileptic. Steeped in ignorance and superstition, it was not to be expected that the parents could diagnose the case. Such seizures could be so slight that even bystanders do not notice them.

In this case I am sure of it. And I may add that some would-be bright psychiatrist has not been able to see them either.

In the matter of heredity, he points to nervous antecedents. What family hasn't them? He says there was a case of trau-

matic or violent epilepsy. It is very doubtful if this type can be transmitted. At no one seizure do all the classical symptoms of Grand Mal appear. At one time a dislocated thumb, at another a bruised side, at another exhaustion in the field, at another a loss of speech, because he did not answer his mother immediately, etc., and after amassing all these symptoms he attaches them on the most indefinite form of this dreadful disease, the transitional epilepsy.

“Transitory conditions of depression, excitement, confusion, delirium, and stupor may develop; and, quite characteristically, a condition of ecstasy with hallucinations. The patient sees the gates of heaven open, and as the heavenly hosts appear he hears himself addressed by the voice of God.” After such psychic experience the patient is hazy or a blank as to what happened. The delusions are not systematized. Reason, purposeful concentration and consciousness, have for the time being toppled. What can come out of that? Upon the arch spanning from Petit Mal to Grand Mal, or from slight psychic disturbance to a terrible convulsive seizure may be written faints, absences, blank, amnesia, in a word, vacuity. What can come of so sterile a field? Surely not a fruitful vision nor a Golden Bible!

SYMPTOMS THAT WERE NOT PRESENT

With a seizure comes a mental splash and forgetfulness, memory is abolished, for the time being the patient does not recall what happened. Yet here is Joseph Smith relating how an angel of light came to him and quoted the third chapter of Malachi, the eleventh chapter of Isaiah, the third chapter of Acts, explains the second chapter of Joel from the twenty-eighth verse on, and many more passages of scripture. Can you explain that in technical terms of ophthalmic migraine, hallucinatory progression, dementia or Grand Mal?

He claims further that the spontaneous cure came at the age of twenty-one. Yet, after this we find him and Oliver Cowdery on the banks of the Susquehanna river, and to them appeared John the Baptist and delivered the Aaronic Priesthood. This interpreted into the pathology of Dr. Riley would mean that the two men had a simultaneous seizure. Very cozy pathology indeed!

He further adds: “To one who has waded through this sea of swash (the Book of Mormon) there will occur the words of Dr. Johnson concerning young Chatterton: ‘This is the most extraordinary young man that has encountered my knowledge. It is wonderful how the whelp has written such things.’ Yes, and when one, understanding the scientific grounds upon which Riley bases his conclusion, has waded through his book of swash, he is reminded of how the mountain has laboured and brought forth a mouse.” The whole argument is academic rather than applicable. What constructive thing can come out of a seizure or vanity, or semi-worshipful attitude these patients assume at times? Nothing! Joseph Smith never was so afflicted.

He has been explained on the grounds of paranoia, or mental derangement. No term in psychiatry has undergone wider variations of meaning. It used to mean just craziness, but now it means one afflicted with systematized delusions. One so afflicted is in a constant morbid introspection about things he desires to

understand. He finds people leagued against him, and therefore concludes he is a personage of some importance.

He has auditory hallucinations—hears things—and is afflicted with delusions of persecution. The delusional system may become extremely complex in all directions, involving all kinds of occurrences and experiences. The Prophet Joseph is explained by this type of psychosis, and “Mormonism” as just a fabric of systematized delusions of this pathological mind.

When we were studying this subject in our medical school, I went into the great library at Washington to read what literature I could on this mental disease. I picked up Dr. Dana's work on nervous diseases and there to my surprise I found a discussion (a favourable one) on the Prophet Joseph Smith. Incidentally it brought forcibly to my mind the prophetic statement that his name should be had for good or for evil the world over. Dr. Dana said :

A mind of this type is a sick mind. He may attract weak minds and even discerning minds about him. He may hold them for some time, but sooner or later some one will detect the delusional structure and destroy it. Joseph Smith, the “Mormon” Prophet, cannot be explained on this type of psychosis. He attracted strong minds, built a commonwealth, established a church that has devotees by the hundreds of thousands.

THE PROPHET ATTRACTED THE STRONGEST MINDS

No, those who must explain the “Mormon” Prophet must do it on some other grounds. Joseph Smith did attract some of the strongest minds of his time. There were the Pratts, H. C. Kimball, John Taylor, the Snows, Orson Hyde, Wilford Woodruff, the Smiths, Daniel H. Wells, and this type of excellent manhood might be indefinitely extended. Brigham Young, as an executive, a leader, and an empire builder can be compared to the great of all time. The organization of the “Mormon” Church has been compared to the best organizations extant.

His philosophy of life is the best I know. We lived before Jehovah planted the heavens or laid the foundation of the earth. Through the redemption we live after death. A fullness of joy is obtained by the inseparable union of spirit and element. Through the great principle of eternal progression we go on and on to perfection. A volume of scripture has been added to the world's sacred literature. Is all this a product of a diseased mind? With the great doctor, you will have to find a better basis for explaining the “Mormon” Prophet.

When I think of Missouri, I almost wish his persecutions had been delusional! He had no hallucinations, no delusions. To me he will ever be one hundred per cent. prophet.

The witnesses of the Book of Mormon have been variously explained. One of the Prophets of the Book of Mormon said, “Wherefore by the words of three God hath said, ‘I will establish my word. Nevertheless God sendeth more witnesses and he provest all his words.’” Witnesses not only establish a fact, but form the surest protection against collusion and fraud. It has been explained that Joseph Smith was a very strong character, a man of great personal magnetism. He took these witnesses into the woods and so dominated them with his suggestions and views that they were able to see through his eyes.

They were forced to cast their subjective activity on the external screen and there watch the panorama unfold. They claim that these witnesses were drilled in the vision-expectancy and therefore good subjects. A certain plausibility might attach to this argument. We have all seen the hypnotist double the personality of his patient, cause him to sleep, or drive him into absurd antics ; but he always avoids in his operations the refractory or stubborn subject.

It is hard for me to imagine three subjects more difficult to deceive than Martin Harris, David Whitmer and Oliver Cowdery. Martin Harris was a plain, sober business man and farmer. His perversity and ineredulity are instanced in the losing of the 116 pages of manuscript. David Whitmer was a strong, determined, self-willed man ; had a fine intellect ; a man who was not bobbed about by every wave of doctrine. Nothing of the neurotic about him ! He was a man not to be dominated by anyone. Oliver Cowdery was possibly more impressionable than the other two witnesses.

OLIVER COWDERY'S POWERS OF REASON

He had splendid powers of reasoning, and reason is the sieve which stops unhealthy suggestions and allows only those to pass which lead in normal ways. None of these was a neurasthenic or neurotic. They were not ineredibly eredulous. They were refractory subjects. This is their testimony :

Be it known unto all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people, unto whom this work shall come : That we, through the grace of God the Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, have seen the plates which contain this record, which is the record of the people of Nephi, and also of the Lamanites, their brethren, and also of the people of Jared, who came from the tower of which hath been spoken. And we also know that they have been translated by the gift and power of God, for his voice hath declared it unto us ; wherefore we know of a surety that the work is true. And we also testify that we have seen the engravings which are upon the plates ; and they have been shown unto us by the power of God, and not of man. And we declare with words of soberness, that an angel of God came down from heaven, and he brought and laid before our eyes, that we beheld and saw the plates, and the engravings thereon ; and we know that it is by the grace of God the Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, that we beheld and bear record that these things are true. And it is marvelous in our eyes. Nevertheless, the voice of the Lord commanded us that we should bear record of it ; wherefore, to be obedient unto the commandments of God, we bear testimony of these things. And we know that if we are faithful in Christ, we shall rid our garments of the blood of all men, and be found spotless before the judgment-seat of Christ, and shall dwell with him eternally in the heavens. And the honour be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost, which is one God. Amen.

OLIVER COWDERY
DAVID WHITMER
MARTIN HARRIS

That is the testimony of these witnesses. They all departed into the fog of apostasy ; all three of them became personally estranged from the Prophet. Oliver Cowdery, who had shared in these magnificent visions of the Prophet, never did deny his testimony ; and in after years he came back to the Church when it was in distress, asking not for position or place, but just to be

a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He made the significant statement that he wrote nearly every word of the Book of Mormon as it fell from the lips of the Prophet Joseph, and that neither Solomon Spalding nor Sidney Rigdon, nor any other man, wrote that book. He was true to his testimony. He had a chance to get away from this hypnotic rub of the Prophet when he was in Michigan practising law.

Martin Harris also left the Church, but never did deny his testimony that he had seen these plates and the angel, and had heard that wonderful divine testimony. He came back and he died with the saints, and he was never happier than when testifying of this grand vision and of the truthfulness of the record.

DAVID WHITMER'S DYING TESTIMONY

David Whitmer, after years and years, gave the same wonderful testimony. This strong-minded man, this determined man, never did return to the fold, but declared all the time that the Nephite record was true. He had plenty of time to have gotten away from that personal touch of the Prophet, or to have departed from that psychic pathology. The last testimony he gave was in his own name. He called the doctor, I think, a relative, and asked him if he, Whitmer, was in his sane mind. The doctor said, "You are."

"The Nephite record is true."

No pathology about that testimony! It cannot be explained by hypnotism nor by the various psychic explanations that we have had. These men claimed that they saw an angel, heard the testimony from out the deep that these things were true. They stuck to that testimony throughout their lives! That testimony stands unimpeached and unimpeachable! No man can say they lied. No man can say they did not see what they said they saw, and hear what they said they heard. God has established His word by witnesses.

The Book of Mormon has come forth as a sacred volume of scripture. It is a wonderful book. It was predicted that it would come forth in the latter days, and it has gone to nearly every nation, kindred, tongue and people. It has been translated into all the major languages of the earth. If you go to South Africa or to the sod hnts of Lapland you will find the Book of Mormon. The Elders have always said that if they could sell a Book of Mormon they would win a convert.

It is a volume of prophecy, a volume of sacred literature, a volume of clarity, one that delves into the depths of religious doctrine. I have never studied a volume of scripture that has appealed to me so forcibly. I recommend it to you all. Read it, and the more you read it, the more you will love it, and the more you will see in it. It is a marvellous work and a wonder. It is a volume that has "sprung out of the ground, and has whispered low out of the dust." It is deserving of our most careful attention.

May God bless you and help you to see and to know the truth, I ask, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.—(Address delivered in the Tabernacle at Salt Lake City, Utah, September 24th, 1933.)