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The Balancing Act: A Mormon Historian Reflects on His Biography of Joseph Smith

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Ask the Author

Richard Lyman Bushman **The Balancing Act**

A Mormon historian reflects on his biography of Joseph Smith

Most reviews of my recent biography, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, mention that I am a practicing Mormon. The Sunday *New York Times* titled its review, "Latter-Day Saint: A practicing Mormon delivers a balanced biography of the church's founder, Joseph Smith." Perhaps a little oversensitive, I wondered why this was news. Was a Mormon telling the story of the church's founding prophet with a degree of objectivity something like man bites dog? Did the editor mean that a mind capable of embracing Mormonism would surely be incapable of a balanced portrayal? Or that Mormonism evokes loyalties so deep that a dispassionate approach to Joseph Smith would be impossible for a church member? One reviewer spoke of my walking a high wire between the demands of church conformity and the necessary openness of scholarly investigation. Another, surprised by the balance of the book but unwilling to trust me entirely, said it achieved a "veneer of credibility."



The nearly universal notice of my religion got me thinking about passion, commitment, and balance. What is the place of personal values and beliefs in scholarship? Our personal commitments are certain to bias our work, and yet is that necessarily bad? Historians write with passion about slavery, race, women, war and peace,

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Beyond question, their values shape the work. After the civil rights movement, we write differently about women and race than we did a half century ago. Are the biases that play about our scholarship prejudices to be purged, or are they powerful and useful motivations?

An impassioned graduate student once announced in a seminar that she could find traces of gender on a blank wall. Her commitment had sharpened her eye for evidence that less engaged researchers missed. I can remember the time when historians sighed that since so little evidence about slaves survived slavery, slave lives, regrettably, could never be recovered. Nowadays one would pause before saying that about any subject. As the Gospels say, those who search, find. Passion may introduce bias but it also produces persistence—and data.

Okay, that may be true, we say, for gender studies or investigations of race, but does it work for Joseph Smith with his angelic visitors, gold plates, and a Urim and Thummim? Isn't that a different kind of commitment that borders on the crazy? How can belief in such oddities be allowed any place in scholarship?

I would be the first to admit that my account of Joseph Smith shows greater tolerance for Smith's remarkable stories than most historians would allow. I write about the visits of angels as if they might have happened. I do not assume, a priori, that Joseph Smith's stories are fraudulent, any more than I would automatically write about Mohammad's visions or the biblical miracles as obvious deceptions. But I hope that my readers see that my writing as a believer is not just a personal indulgence. I would like them to understand the benefit for historical inquiry as a whole in writing out of my convictions. The bizarre nature of Joseph Smith's stories makes historical work by a believing historian all the more useful.

One reason is that skepticism about the gold plates and the visions can easily slip over into cynicism. The assumption that Smith concocted the stories of angels and plates casts a long shadow over his entire life. Everything he did is thrown into doubt. His exhortations to godly service, his self-sacrifice, his pious letters to his wife, his apparent love for his fellow workers all appear as manipulations to perpetuate a grand scheme. Cynicism has its advantages in smoking out hypocrisy, but it does not foster sympathetic understanding. Every act is prejudged from the beginning.



Joseph Smith. Frontispiece from *The Prophet of Palmyra: Mormonism Reviewed and Examined in the Life, Character, and Career of its Founder, from "Cumorah Hill" to Carthage Jail and the Desert*, by Thomas Gregg, 1890. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

My advantage as a practicing Mormon is that I believe enough to take Joseph Smith seriously. If a writer begins with the idea that Smith was a fraud who perpetrated a hoax upon the gullible public with his story of gold plates and ancient Israelites in America, nothing he did can be trusted. Every act and every thought is undercut by his presumed fraudulent beginnings. That overhanging doubt makes it difficult for a skeptical biographer to find much of interest in Smith's writings or to explain why thousands of people believed him. What of value is to be expected from the theological meanderings of a charlatan?

A few empathetic historians like Jan Shipps have written with great insight about early Mormonism, but more often than not, skeptical historians brush Joseph Smith's writings aside as banal or vapid. Fawn Brodie, author of a widely accepted biography of Smith, found his religion faintly ridiculous. Her *No Man Knows My History* summarized

his teachings only to dismiss them as derivative or strange. She could not explain why thousands of converts to Mormonism devoted their lives to building a Zion in the Great Basin, or what was so enthralling in Smith's vision of a God who was once a man. A more recent biography, Dan Vogel's skeptical *The Making of a Prophet*, intensely scrutinizes the Book of Mormon, but, not surprisingly, it finds nothing compelling or profound in it. On the whole, disbelief dampens this kind of inquiry and for good reason. People with little concern for the plight of slaves do not scour the sources for clues to slave lives; and skeptics about Mormonism do not work at penetrating the mind of a pretended prophet. It is less a question of intellectual perspicuity than of motivation.

Passion and belief are certainly not requirements for historical inquiry, but neither are they crippling handicaps. Once we relinquish, as we must, the "noble dream" of objective history, personal commitment becomes a valuable resource. We continually develop new readings of Reconstruction or Andrew Jackson because our personal viewpoints, based on our values, enable us to discover new perspectives. Contrary to the idea that belief closes the mind, our passions open our eyes and ears. Stifling my belief in Joseph Smith would extinguish one of my greatest assets.

Passion, of course, can blind as well as enliven us. There is a danger of descending into undisciplined subjectivity. My belief could yield a Joseph Smith that only the Mormons would recognize. Mormon writers have produced plenty of hagiographies. But there is a check on unbalanced writing—the audience. If I write for Mormons alone, I probably will create an idealized prophet worthy of founding a new religion, and many Mormon readers will raise no objections. By the same token, one who writes exclusively for a non-Mormon audience can turn Joseph Smith into a rogue without fear of contradiction. No one will say, "Not so fast." The reason Mormons disliked Fawn Brodie's biography of Joseph Smith was that she had no regard for Mormon readers. Mormons thought she caricatured Smith, minimizing his religious feelings and downplaying his theological ingenuity. But she did not care; she had written the book for another audience.

As I set out to write *Rough Stone Rolling*, I tried to keep all kinds of readers with me. I vowed not to make Brodie's mistake of writing solely for one part of the potential audience. She wrote for unbelievers; I did not want to err in the opposite direction. My historical instincts moved me to tell the whole story as truthfully as I could anyway, but I also knew that if I overly idealized Smith, I would lose credibility with non-Mormons. With a broad readership in mind, I could not conceal his flaws. Moreover, I tried to voice unbelieving readers' likely reactions when Smith married additional wives or taught doctrines foreign to modern sensibilities. When he went beyond the pale, I acknowledged readers' dismay.

Even though I wrote for a diverse audience, as the reviews came in I realized that I had not kept everyone with me. As probably was inevitable, readers who came to the book with their own strong notions of Smith found my account wanting. Those on the Mormon side thought I failed to describe his noble character and supernatural gifts; non-Mormons said I painted too rosy a picture and failed to acknowledge the obvious fraud. At both ends of the spectrum, I lost readers.

At times I thought there was no middle ground for my version of the Mormon Prophet. I came to envy historians who write about slavery or patriarchy; no one questions their basic beliefs. But on second thought, I realized that my book was better for being written for a divided audience. I cannot say that *Rough Stone Rolling* achieves a perfect balance, but it does offer an empathetic and, so I hope, a candid view of an extraordinary life.



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