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JOSEPH SMITH AND MONEY DIGGING

Richard Lyman Bushman

IN THE MID-1970s, AS I BEGAN WORK ON THE MANUSCRIPT THAT WAS TO become Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism, I anticipated that Joseph Smith's money digging would be the toughest issue to tackle. The stories of the Smith family performing magic rituals in the woods while hunting for buried gold or boxes of watches were the single element of the Prophet's history that most differentiated Mormon accounts of his early life from the accounts of non-Mormons. Fawn Brodie, whose No Man Knows My History was the standard scholarly biography at the time, devoted much of a chapter to the Smiths' nocturnal expeditions and their attempts to elude the guardian spirits who protected the treasure.¹ At a trial in 1826, a witness told of Joseph directing money diggers to pursue a trunk that kept sinking deeper into the earth whenever their spades struck it.² None of this appeared in Mormon accounts. Joseph admitted to employment by Josiah Stowell (also Stool) in 1825 to dig for Spanish coins, but he claimed he had little faith in the venture and eventually persuaded Stowell to give it up. Later he implied that the stories about his treasure seeking were unfounded exaggerations of this one incident.

The treasure-seeking stories of Joseph Smith's youth have done more than cast a shadow on his character. They supply a secular explanation for his extraordinary religious claims. As early as 1831, the Palmyra newspaper editor Abner Cole speculated that the guardian spirits of Joseph's treasure seeking had transmuted in his imagination into the angel Moroni and that the buried treasure was transformed into the gold plates.³ Joseph changed his treasure quest into a religious mission for a single purpose; both pursuits

were forms of his effort to gain financial security for his impoverished family. When treasure seeking failed him, he tried religion.⁴

JOSEPH'S TREASURE SEEKING

The response of Mormon historians in the 1970s was to deny almost everything. Beyond the Josiah Stowell incident, they argued, all the money-digging stories were fabrications of Joseph Smith's enemies. They claimed that the sources for the stories were corrupted and therefore not to be trusted. Most of the accounts came from a set of affidavits collected by Philastus Hurlbut, an embittered former Mormon who was hired by Smith's sectarian enemies in the Kirtland area to dig up dirt on the Smiths back in New York. Hurlbut set out in the summer of 1833 to see what he could find that might support a theory about the origins of the Book of Mormon, and while he was in Palmyra, he interviewed neighbors of the Smiths. They came up with one story after another of the family's low character and of their involvement in treasure seeking. Unwilling to work for a living, they said the Smiths went in for money digging.⁵

Church historians thought Hurlbut's motives were too suspect to trust his findings. What reason was there to believe him? He could easily have written the affidavits himself or distorted what people said to make the Smiths look bad. He found exactly what his employers wanted him to find. Could that be taken as sound historical evidence? Once the money-digging stories got into circulation through a book entitled *Mormonism Unveiled*, published in 1834, then similar stories proliferated—so argued the Church historians.

Another fabrication, in their view, involved a purported trial in 1826 in which Joseph Smith was accused of "glass looking"—looking into a peep stone to find lost objects and buried treasure. The details of this trial came to light in 1873 based on court minutes that were supposedly brought to Utah by a niece of the justice at the trial, later a missionary with Daniel S. Tuttle, the Episcopal bishop of Utah.⁶ All this seemed too contrived to be taken seriously, and Church historians dismissed it all as the work of overzealous critics who sought to discredit the Prophet.⁷ Mormon historians thus not only told a different story from secular historians, they also differed in their judgment of what constituted legitimate sources of the historical facts.

This was the state of affairs when I began work on Joseph Smith's early life in the mid-1970s. By that time I was a professor of early American history at Boston University and an active member of the historical guild, where I had many professional friends and colleagues. When I wrote, I had to answer to professional standards as well as satisfy Church members. What was I to do about money digging, with all of its implications for Joseph Smith's story? The first thing I decided was that I could not dismiss all of Hurlbut's affidavits with the wave of a hand. Academic historians had

taken them seriously, and so should I. The sources may indeed have been corrupted by Hurlbut's animosity against Joseph Smith, but many documents are written for contentious purposes and still figure into the reconstruction of events; every source is biased in one way or another. The art of the historian is to extract historical truth from the maze of human memories, however distorted. Hurlbut's affidavits had to be read and evaluated like any other source.

Developments in scholarship about this time had a deep effect on my work. A zealous evangelical scholar named Wesley P. Walters produced an article that changed the minds of many Mormon historians about Smith's 1826 glass-looking trial. Digging through courthouse documents one summer, Walters found a receipt demonstrating that the 1826 trial had actually been held. The receipt did not verify every detail of the hearings, but it did associate the recovered minutes with the 1826 sources from the archives, tying it pretty securely to that time and place.⁸ The other piece of scholarship to impact my analysis was Keith Thomas's massive *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, published in 1971.⁹ Thomas collected a huge amount of material to demonstrate the pervasive influence of magic at virtually all levels of society in the seventeenth century. This influence is also sometimes referred to as folk magic or popular religion. Members of Parliament and village seers alike used peep stones to discover objects and see visions. The miracles of magic intermingled with the miracles of Christianity in a single system of belief. Some clergy condemned and ridiculed these practices as false and potentially evil supernatural power, but others absorbed magical elements into their religious beliefs. A highly orthodox Puritan was known to press a pin into his doorjamb to ward off evil spirits. This fascination with magic began to fade among the educated classes in the late seventeenth century, but it did not disappear among ordinary people. According to Yale historian Jon Butler, folk magic was prevalent among Yankees well into the nineteenth century.¹⁰

This research enabled me to see the magic in Joseph Smith's life in a new light. As I read the Hurlbut affidavits, I picked up clues that not only the Smiths but also many of their neighbors were looking for treasure in Palmyra in the 1820s.¹¹ They were ashamed enough to try to cover it up, and the enlightened elements in the village scoffed at these folk traditions, but there was substantial evidence that in the farmhouses people were wondering how to invoke magical forces to lead them to treasure. The Smiths may have been subscribing to folk religion, but in this they were part of a culture found virtually everywhere among Yankees of their generation.¹² It may not have been the most uplifting activity, and some scoffed, but it was something like reading astrological charts today—a little goofy but harmless.

The only harm came when someone tried to deceive others to get gain. That was why Joseph Smith was put on trial. Was he trying to hoodwink

the Stowells? When Josiah Stowell said he believed in Joseph, the sting was removed.¹³ Scholars still argue whether Joseph Smith was convicted of glass looking in 1826, but the point is moot.¹⁴ Church scholars now acknowledge that he had a seer stone and did look for lost objects as a young man. The difference is that since Thomas and Butler published their research, folk magic is no longer toxic. It was too commonplace to be scandalous. Magic and Christianity did not seem at odds with one another. The combination was altogether too common in the nineteenth century for it to invalidate Joseph Smith's more conventional religious claims. In Mormonism and for many Christians, folk traditions and religion blend. To call the two incongruous seems more like a matter of religious taste than a necessary conclusion.

At present, a question remains about how involved Joseph Smith was in folk magic. Was he enthusiastically pursuing treasure seeking as a business in the 1820s, or was he a somewhat reluctant participant, egged on by his father?¹⁵ Was his worldview fundamentally shaped by folk traditions? I think there is substantial evidence of his reluctance, and, in my opinion, the evidence for extensive involvement is tenuous. But this is a matter of degree. No one denies that magic was there, especially in the mid-1820s. Smith never repudiated folk traditions; he continued to use the seer stone until late in life and used it in the translation process.¹⁶ It certainly had an influence on his outlook, but it was peripheral—not central. Biblical Christianity was the overwhelming influence in the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants. Folk magic was in the mix but was not the basic ingredient.¹⁷

I occasionally hear of people who are still offended by a prophet who dealt in treasure seeking, but very few. The most important issue when I began to write in the 1970s has faded in importance. Even highly orthodox Latter-day Saints are not offended by treasure seeking and seer stones, and to my knowledge, the seasoned critics rarely foreground the question. I wonder if this is not the fate of many charges against Joseph Smith. Will they lose their virulence as the years go by?

We need to keep in mind that the wheels of history grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly fine. What seems central at one moment in time will lose force as the years go by. Magic moved to the sidelines over the years; will other issues be next? We should be careful about putting too much weight on the criticisms of the moment when it is uncertain how enduring they will be.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard Lyman Bushman is an early American historian who has taught at Brigham Young University, Boston University, and Columbia University, where he was Gouverneur Morris Professor of History. Among his books are *From Puritan to Yankee: Character and the Social Order in Connecticut, 1690–1765*, which received the Bancroft Prize for 1967, and *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities*. He is best known to Latter-day Saints

for *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*. In *Believing History: Latter-day Saint Essays*, Dr. Bushman shares reflections on his faith and his own struggle to find a basis for belief in a skeptical world. He has served in the Church as bishop, stake president, and patriarch. He and his wife, Claudia, are the parents of six children and have twenty grandchildren.

NOTES

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3. Dan Vogel, ed., *Early Mormon Documents*, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996–2003), 2:243–45. For Cole, see Andrew H. Hedges, “The Refractory Abner Cole,” in *Reason, Revelation, and Faith: Essays in Honor of Truman G. Madsen* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002).
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