

# Mormon Origins in New York: An Introductory Analysis

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In the fall of 1967 a small group of Mormon historians met in Salt Lake City to discuss the problems involved in writing the history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.<sup>1</sup> They were concerned with the history of the Church and its background in New York from 1820 to 1830, the decade which may be called the period of Mormon origins. Well aware that most books and articles on Mormonism say something about the period, they were also aware that no searching, in-depth analysis had yet been made of the entire decade. It was apparent that all periods of Mormon history were crying for more study and fresh historical analysis, but New York seemed the logical place to begin.

The five men formed themselves into an organization called "Mormon Origins in New York," with Truman G. Madsen, director of the Institute of Mormon Studies at Brigham Young University, as chairman or director. The purpose of the organization was to promote studies of all phases of Mormon history in New York. Mormon scholarship seemed to have reached a point that it should be concerned not only with "proving" the claims of Joseph Smith, but also with recognizing the human side of Church history. With respect to possible new evaluations of Joseph Smith, for example, Dr. Madsen later wrote, "Now that the anti-Mormon will to exaggerate, and the pro-Mormon will to gloss are antiquated, we

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<sup>1</sup>The group consisted of Truman G. Madsen, Leonard J. Arrington, T. Edgar Lyon, Richard L. Bushman, and James B. Allen.

can perhaps see Joseph Smith as he saw himself: both as a Prophet and as a growing, not infallible, human being."<sup>2</sup> The human failings of many early Mormons, leaders and followers alike, have frequently been irresponsibly exploited by anti-Mormon writers. Evidence of these failings needs to be more responsibly analyzed and clarified, as does evidence of their more commendable qualities, in an effort to achieve the proper historical balance of all aspects of Church history in this early period.

The "Steering Committee" began immediately to encourage research in the political and social setting of the Church in New York, the theological and organizational aspects of the New York period, and the background of individuals, both Mormons and non-Mormons, who were involved with the nascent Church. There were two aims: (1) to gather a body of primary material; and (2) to stimulate the publication of monographs based on these materials. Every effort would be made to avoid slanting the material; it should tell its own story.

Dr. Madsen arranged through the Institute of Mormon Studies to send several scholars to the eastern United States during the summer of 1968. Although the time was limited, these men scoured libraries, studied newspapers, and sought to find private individuals who might uncover hitherto unknown source materials. In this issue of *BYU Studies* two of these men, Milton Backman and Larry Porter, present some of their findings.

#### THE PROBLEM OF MORMON ORIGINS

The problem of Mormon origins may be approached in several different ways, although these approaches are not always mutually exclusive. One is what might be called the polemical approach, which emphasizes Joseph Smith and his spiritual experiences. This approach implicitly raises the ques-

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<sup>2</sup>Madsen to James B. Allen, November 25, 1968. The Prophet, indeed, often alluded to his own weaknesses, as he did on February 8, 1843: "This morning I read German and visited with a brother and sister from Michigan, who thought that 'a prophet is always a prophet,' but I told them that a prophet was a prophet only when acting as such." Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, edited by B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City, 1958), Vol. 5, p. 265. (Hereafter cited as DHC.) See also *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, p. 302; Vol. 6, p. 366.



tion, "Did these things actually happen?" Devout Latter-day Saint writers naturally assume that they did, and their publications are frequently devoted to marshaling the evidence to prove them or to detailing the experiences in such a way that spiritual understanding will be enhanced. This is called *apologia*—not in derision, but simply to classify it as the kind of writing that is intended primarily to defend and justify. This approach has value not only in promoting faith in the Restoration but also in expression, even for nonbelievers, of the essential spirit of the faith. Unless a historian has an appreciation of this spirit, he will find it difficult to understand the history of Mormonism, or, indeed, of any religious movement.

In a sense, the so-called "debunkers" might fit into this same category. Their emphasis, too, is on Joseph Smith and his spiritual experiences. Convinced that such experiences did not happen and that Joseph was a fraud, their basic intent has been to discredit him and disprove his claims. Many of these writers, particularly those who wrote in the nineteenth century, could see nothing good in the Church or in Joseph Smith.

A second way to approach the problem of Mormon origins is to study the political, economic, and social environment of the areas and time in which Joseph Smith lived. Here one is concerned, not with proving or disproving any spiritual claims, but with historical analysis designed to promote a better understanding of every aspect of Church history. Since this approach is analytical and the writer strives to avoid any effort to build or destroy faith, his work is usually naturalistic.

A third approach, which we might call pluralistic, is often taken by Mormon scholars who are also very much devoted to the faith. They accept the basic claims of Joseph Smith. At the same time, they see great value in looking also at the naturalistic aspects of his history. They demonstrate that Mormons are capable of looking at their history with both faith and "objectivity." While their writings are not necessarily or specifically pointed toward "proving" the faith, implicit in them is an acceptance of the faith and a belief that they can be of service to the Church through an attempt at balanced reporting. It is in this spirit that the following articles were written.

The deluge of literature which has been written on the origin of Mormonism is almost overwhelming but, like the literature of other historical events, most of it can be traced to a few basic sources or classified according to a few general traditions. The following list, although by no means complete, represents the better-known publications upon which current knowledge of the period of Mormon origins is based.

*The early claims of Restoration.* "Mormonism," or "the Restored Gospel of Jesus Christ," had its official beginning in the 1820's with the assertions of Joseph Smith, the teenage son of a Palmyra, New York, farmer of the same name, that he (the son) had received visions and communications from heavenly beings. Nothing in his own hand has survived from this period, but there are references to his claims in letters, diaries, and newspapers from the late 1820's and on.<sup>3</sup> In brief, these sources indicate that several in the family of Joseph Smith, Sr., influenced by revivals conducted by itinerant preachers, joined the Methodist and Presbyterian churches. Young Joseph was also "smitten with a sense of sin" as the revivalists would have said, but was perplexed as to which church he should join. After earnest prayer he came to understand that he would be the instrument through which the true Gospel of Christ would be restored. Heavenly beings directed him to a nearby hill where he found gold plates which he "translated . . . by the gift and power of God." The translation was published in Palmyra in 1830 as the Book of Mormon. Declared to be a record of the people of the Western Hemisphere, it contained both history and theology. Widely circulated and commented upon, the Book of Mormon was the first religious tract of the infant Church of Christ, founded in Fayette, Seneca County, New York, on April 6, 1830.

*The Campbell-Hurlburt-Howe tradition.* Although contemporary newspapers contained much comment, the first serious attempt to explicate Mormon origins was made in a

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<sup>3</sup>A review of this literature is published and discussed in Francis W. Kirkham, *A New Witness For Christ in America: The Book of Mormon* (Independence, Mo., 1942; republished by Brigham Young University, 1960 *et seq.*); and a second volume published under the same title in Independence, Missouri, in 1951, and in Salt Lake City, Utah, in 1959. A letter to Lucius Fenn from Seneca County, N. Y., dated February 12, 1830, is published in William Mulder and A. Russell Mortensen, eds., *Among the Mormons: Historic Accounts by Contemporary Observers* (New York, 1958), pp. 26-29.



critical analysis of the Book of Mormon published by Alexander Campbell, founder of the Disciples of Christ, in the *Millennial Harbinger*, February 7, 1831, under the title "Delusions." Campbell sought to show that Joseph Smith was the real author of the Book of Mormon. Declaring the Prophet to be "as ignorant and impudent a knave as ever wrote a book," Campbell asserted that young Smith "betrays the cloven foot" in his many errors.

Campbell's case against Joseph Smith can be reduced to three basic arguments: (1) the Book of Mormon was inconsistent with the Old and New Testaments; (2) it reflected the religious cross-currents of western New York in the late 1820's;<sup>4</sup> (3) its writing style was that of an ignorant person.

#### BOOKS ATTACK JOSEPH SMITH'S CLAIMS

Campbell's blast at the Book of Mormon was the forerunner of a long series of publications designed to prove Joseph Smith an imposter. The first major book, *Mormonism Unveiled* [*sic.*], was published by E. D. Howe in Painesville, Ohio, in 1834. The publisher of the *Painesville Telegraph*, Howe had begun, as early as 1831, the printing of anti-Mormon letters and articles.<sup>5</sup> He had made the acquaintance of Philastus Hurlburt,<sup>6</sup> who was excommunicated from the Church on June 23, 1833, for immorality and who spent the last part of the year 1833 collecting affidavits about Joseph Smith and his family from people who had known them in New York and Pennsylvania. These affidavits, which denigrated the character of the Smith family, provided about half the bulk of *Mormonism Unveiled*. Although Howe took credit

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<sup>4</sup>"This prophet Smith, through his stone spectacles, wrote on the plates of Nephi, in his book of Mormon, every error and almost every truth discussed in New York for the last ten years. He decides all the great controversies;—infant baptism, ordination, the trinity, regeneration, repentance, justification, the fall of man, the atonement, transubstantiation, fasting, penance, church government, religious experience, the call to the ministry, the general resurrection, eternal punishment, who may baptize, and even the questions of free masonry [*sic.*], republican government, and the rights of man." Alexander Campbell, "Delusions," *Millennial Harbinger*, Vol. 2 (February 7, 1831), p. 93.

<sup>5</sup>See Kirkham, *A New Witness for Christ in America*, Vol. 2, Chaps. 7 and 8.

<sup>6</sup>Variously spelled—Hurlbut, Hulbert, Hulburt, etc.

for the book, Hurlburt seems to have been the principal compiler.<sup>7</sup>

*Mormonism Unveiled* began with a brief description of the Smith family: they were "lazy, indolent, ignorant, and superstitious." Then came a seventy-five page summary and analysis of the Book of Mormon. After discussion of the activities of the Mormons to 1834, the compilers presented letters and affidavits from various people who had lived in the Palmyra region and had knowledge of the Smiths. These included a series of nine letters written in 1831 by Ezra Booth, a Methodist minister who had joined the Mormon Church then apostatized after a disappointing journey with Joseph Smith to Missouri. His letters declared that he left the Church because he had seen Joseph Smith's prophecies fail.<sup>8</sup> The tone of the other statements collected by Hurlburt is illustrated by that of Peter Ingersoll, sworn before a Wayne County judge. Ingersoll claimed to have known Joseph Smith personally from 1822 to 1830, and stated that the family had been money diggers, even trying to get Ingersoll to join them, and that Joseph had pretended to locate the money through the use of a certain stone. Ingersoll also stated that Joseph had admitted to him that he never could actually see into the stone, and later that the finding of the "Golden Bible" was really a deception. Other letters told of Smith's money digging, clairvoyance, and generally deceptive qualities, while one statement signed by fifty-one people declared that the Smiths were "destitute of moral character" and addicted to vicious habits. The chief problem with all these affidavits, of course, is the fact that we know little or nothing about the people who wrote them (or even whether they wrote them), and the extent to which they were influenced by jealousy, envy, and

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<sup>7</sup>In 1878 Howe wrote: "In 1834 I wrote & compiled a book of 290 pages, which was entitled 'Mormonism Unveiled,' which contained a succinct & true history of the rise & progress of the sect up to that time, as I verily believed." Eber D. Howe, *Autobiography and Recollections of a Pioneer Printer . . .* (Painesville, Ohio, 1878), p. 45. All Mormon sources credit Hurlburt with collecting the affidavits and writing most of the manuscript, which was then sold to Howe for 500 copies of the book after printed. See *Chardon Spectator and Geauga Gazette* (Chardon, Ohio) April 12, 1834; sermon of George A. Smith on November 15, 1864, *Journal of Discourses* (26 vols., Liverpool), Vol. 11, pp. 8-9; *Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star* (Liverpool), Vol. 44 (October 23, 1882), pp. 334-5.

<sup>8</sup>See the discussion of Booth's letters in B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church: Century I* (6 vols., Salt Lake City, 1930), Vol. 1, pp. 265-267.



spite. Such statements were a dime a dozen in contemporary America, and most historians give them short shrift.<sup>9</sup> There was also a letter from Charles Anthon to whom Martin Harris had taken certain characters purported to have been copied from the gold plates. Anthon now expressed his feeling that Harris had been deluded and the whole Book of Mormon story was a hoax.

The final chapter of *Mormonism Unveiled* advanced the Spaulding-Rigdon theory of the origin of the Book of Mormon. Sidney Rigdon, said the compilers, was the real author of the Mormon "conspiracy"; Joseph Smith was too illiterate to have written the book by himself. It was said that Rigdon had come into possession of the manuscript of an imaginative romance concerning early America, written about 1812 by the Reverend Solomon Spaulding, who had deposited the manuscript with Patterson and Lambdin, printers in Pittsburgh, where Rigdon obtained it while he lived there in 1823 or 1824. Hearing of Joseph Smith and his money-digging, Rigdon concocted a scheme whereby Joseph would claim to have dug up and translated the gold plates. Rigdon, according to this theory, had taken Spaulding's manuscript and modified it to suit his purposes. Evidence for the theory was seen in (1) the testimony of several people who claimed to have seen the Spaulding manuscript or heard parts of it read and who noted many exact parallels with the Book of Mormon, including proper names and specific events; (2) the ready acceptance by Sidney Rigdon of Mormonism in December, 1830, and the rapid move of Joseph Smith to Ohio in January, 1831, after the first public meeting of the two schemers.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Non-Mormon historian Whitney Cross, for example, comments on the Hurlburt documents as follows: "Every circumstance seems to invalidate the obviously prejudiced testimonials of unsympathetic neighbors (collected by one hostile individual whose style of composition stereotypes the language of numerous witnesses) that the Smiths were either squatters or shiftless 'frontier drifters.' Many an honest and industrious farmer followed their identical experience, pursued by bad luck or poor judgment, and sought a new fling at fortune farther west. No doubt the Smiths, like many of their fellows, wasted valuable time hunting gold at the proper turn of the moon. One of the potent sources of Joseph's local ill repute may well have been the jealousy of other persons who failed to discover golden plates in the glacial sands of the drumlins." Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-Over District*, (Ithaca, 1950), pp. 141-142.

<sup>10</sup>The Spaulding theory has long since been discredited. For one recent analysis see Marvin S. Hill, "The Role of Christian Primitivism in the Origin and Development of the Mormon Kingdom, 1830-1844" (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Dept. of History, University of Chicago, 1968), pp. 92-97.

The Hurlburt-Howe collaboration provided basic materials upon which nearly all subsequent anti-Mormon writings were based. Even "friendly" historians often drew information about Mormon origins from works which relied heavily on *Mormonism Unveiled*.<sup>11</sup> Along with Campbell's "Delusions," *Mormonism Unveiled* marked the beginning of a traditional approach to Mormon origins, focussing on Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon and attempting to demonstrate that the Mormon prophet was a crude but deliberate fraud. Campbell felt that Joseph Smith had composed the book himself, while Hurlburt and Howe involved Sidney Rigdon in a conspiracy with Joseph. Later writers frequently criticized the Book of Mormon in the Campbell tradition (Hurlburt and Howe made light of the book in somewhat the same fashion), but explained the origin of Mormonism in a manner suggested by the Hurlburt documents.

The year 1842 was significant in Mormon historiography. Not only did Joseph Smith then begin serial publication of his own important history, but four important anti-Mormon works also appeared: Rev. John A. Clark's *Gleanings by the Way*, Jonathan B. Turner's *Mormonism in All Ages*, Daniel P. Kidder's *Mormonism and the Mormons*, and Henry Caswall's *The City of the Mormons*. Clark, an Episcopal pastor in Palmyra, recalled his impressions of Joseph Smith, beginning in 1827. He knew of Smith's money digging and his claim concerning the discovery of gold plates, but considered it all a hoax and Joseph himself as dull and "utterly destitute of genius." Drawing heavily from *Mormonism Unveiled*, he told almost the same story of the origin of Mormonism. His only new contribution was another letter by Professor Anthon, written in 1840 and originally published in the Episcopal *Church Record*.<sup>12</sup>

Jonathan Turner, often regarded as the founder of the land-grant system of colleges, also drew heavily from Hurl-

<sup>11</sup>G. B. Arbaugh, *Revelation in Mormonism* (Chicago, 1932), accepts and argues for the Spaulding theory. Alice Felt Tyler, *Freedom's Ferment* (Minneapolis, 1944) presents an interpretation of Mormonism that is based primarily on the kind of "information" found in *Mormonism Unveiled*. Fawn Brodie in *No Man Knows My History* (New York, 1945) accepts many statements in the affidavits but refutes the Spaulding theory. The authors of several general histories of America, in turn, frequently follow Mrs. Brodie's interpretation of Joseph Smith.

<sup>12</sup>Both of Anthon's letters are republished, with appropriate criticism, in Roberts, *Comprehensive History of the Church*, Vol. 1, pp. 102-109.



burt's affidavits, presenting the then standard image of young Joseph as a clairvoyant charlatan. Recognizing that the evidence linking Rigdon, Smith, and the Spaulding manuscript was inconclusive, he decided that Joseph Smith alone was the author. However, he presumed that Joseph had access to the Spaulding manuscript through some source other than Sidney Rigdon. Rigdon, according to Turner, became the chief power in the Church after he persuaded Joseph Smith to move to Ohio, and it was Rigdon who formulated the doctrine of the restoration, gathering, and other traditional Mormon concepts. Kidder, whose work appeared later in the year, gently chided Turner for this modification of the Spaulding theory.

#### BOOK OF MORMON WRITER BRILLIANT OR IGNORANT

In these writings one can see the development of an interesting inconsistency. Some writers held that the Book of Mormon had to be the production of Joseph Smith, for only an ignorant person could have produced such a work. Others, arguing that it was the kind of work which only a brilliant, imaginative person could have produced, assigned it to Sidney Rigdon. Still others said that Joseph Smith was clever enough to have produced the book by himself.

Also published in 1842 was *The City of the Mormons* by Henry Caswall, one of the earliest works about the Mormons printed in Europe. A professor of divinity at Kemper College (Episcopal) in Missouri, Caswall showed familiarity with those writings of Joseph Smith which had recently been published in the Church-owned *Times and Seasons*, but drew most of his information from Clark and Turner. Caswall accepted the Spaulding-Rigdon theory of the origin of the Book of Mormon, but, reflecting his reading of Turner, pointed out that some people felt Rigdon was too intelligent to write such a work. In his work published in 1843, *The Prophet of the Nineteenth Century*, Caswall anticipated, as Turner had done, the social analysis of Mormon origins adopted by many modern scholars. Wrote the snobbish Caswall:

Mormonism is a system which could not have been easily produced or readily developed in England. The mature religious institutions of the mother country would have appeared a bulwark against its progress as a fanaticism; . . . Had it been preached in the first place in Britain, it would

probably have crept in the dust like other reptile forms of delusion. . . . But in the Western Hemisphere its antecedent probability of success was incalculably greater. . . . The fuel was already collected, the pile was duly prepared, and an accidental spark alone was wanting to kindle a blaze of fanaticism, which no existing means would avail to extinguish (pp. 1-2).

By the 1850's non-Mormons had added little to the general theme begun by Campbell and Hurlburt-Howe. By this time they were using some of the material published by the Mormons themselves, but they always returned to the tradition of *Mormonism Unveiled* to prove the "true" character of Joseph Smith and the "true" origin of the Book of Mormon. Robert Chambers' *History of the Mormons*, published in 1853, is a good example.

One of the most influential anti-Mormon works of the later nineteenth century was Pomeroy Tucker's *Origin, Rise, and Progress of Mormonism* (1867). Tucker had lived in Palmyra since 1823, was employed in the printing shop that published the first edition of the Book of Mormon, and was personally acquainted with Joseph Smith and his associates. Drawing heavily from *Mormonism Unveiled* as well as his own recollections, Tucker's conclusions were essentially those of Hurlburt-Howe, although he did modify a few important details. He did not remember, for example, the youthful Joseph as ignorant or unschooled:

Joseph, moreover, as he grew in years, had learned to read comprehensively, in which qualification he was far in advance of his elder brother, and even of his father; and this talent was assiduously devoted, as he quitted or modified his idle habits, to the perusal of works of fiction and records of criminality, such for instance as would be classified with the "dime novels" of the present day. The stories of Stephen Burroughs and Captain Kidd, and the like, presented the highest charms for his expanding mental perceptions. As he further advanced in reading and knowledge, he assumed a spiritual or religious turn of mind, and frequently perused the Bible, becoming quite familiar with portions thereof, both of the Old and New Testaments; selected texts from which he quoted and discussed with great assurance when in the presence of his superstitious acquaintances (p. 17).

This approach anticipated a more recent line of scholarship which accepts Hurlburt's claims about Joseph Smith's money-



digging, clairvoyance, and dishonesty, but postulates that he was sufficiently well-read and clever to have written the Book of Mormon.

In 1885 Ellen E. Dickinson, a relative of Solomon Spaulding, published *New Light on Mormonism* (New York). Advertised as "a brief and succinct history of this Stupendous Delusion," Dickinson's work was largely a story of the Spaulding romance. It also gave much background, some of it contradictory, on *Mormonism Unveiled*, but was marred throughout by the author's complete acceptance of the Spaulding theory. One of her contributions was an 1882 interview with Philastus Hurlburt. Though Hurlburt would not admit it, she claimed that he had stolen the original manuscript from the Spaulding family in 1834 and turned it over to the Mormons, who destroyed it.

In *The Prophet of Palmyra* (New York, 1890), Thomas Gregg went back to the original "unlettered" theory by stating categorically that when Joseph Smith began his career "his untutored and feeble intellect had not yet grasped at anything beyond toying with mysterious things." After he obtained the Spaulding manuscript, according to Gregg, he got the idea of a new sect and was aided by confederates as bad as himself. Gregg ridiculed Joseph Smith's account of the origin of the Church. He published an interview with David Whitmer, for example, in which this Book of Mormon witness declared that, in translating, Joseph did not even use the gold plates but, rather, placed two chocolate-covered stones to his eyes, covered his face with a hat and saw the words appear (Chap. III).<sup>13</sup>

Gregg added two interesting items to this traditional approach to Mormon origins. One was a letter from Stephen S. Harding, who had been governor of Utah in 1862-1863. The letter, written in 1882, told of Harding's return to his boyhood home of Palmyra in 1829, just in time to be present when the first pages of the Book of Mormon came from the press. He told of the credulity of Joseph Smith's associates, of his own successful efforts to hoodwink them into believing that he, too,

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<sup>13</sup>The two best historiographical discussions of Joseph Smith's method of "translating" the Gold Plates are: B. H. Roberts, "Translation of the Book of Mormon," *Improvement Era*, Vol. 9 (April, May, July, 1906); and James E. Lancaster, "'By the Gift and Power of God': The Method of Translation of the Book of Mormon," *The Saints' Herald*, November 15, 1962, pp. 14-18, 22, 33.

had been chosen to assist in the work, and of his belief that the book originated with the Spaulding manuscript. Harding also claimed to have seen a newspaper notice in the Brookville *Enquirer*, as early as the fall of 1827, which mentioned Joseph Smith and the finding of a "Golden Bible." Mormon writers have sometimes used this as evidence that Joseph was telling the story that early, although the newspaper account itself has yet to be brought to light.

A second addition introduced by Gregg dealt with the appearance of a certain "mysterious stranger" whom earlier writers claimed visited Joseph Smith prior to the publication of the Book of Mormon. A gentleman of "undoubted character for veracity," said Gregg, stated that Sidney Rigdon was in Palmyra three different times, twice in 1827 and once in 1828. The same source also declared that Oliver Cowdery had arrived in Palmyra from Kirtland, Ohio, in 1826, then returned the following year to take up his well-known association with Joseph Smith. This, of course, linked Smith, Cowdery, and Rigdon all in the conspiracy. Although Gregg failed to divulge his source and no corroborating evidence has ever been discovered, the conspiracy theory first advanced by Hurlburt-Howe was receiving plenty of literary amplification.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the most widely quoted book on Mormonism was probably William Alexander Linn's *The Story of the Mormons* (New York, 1902). Linn devoted more space than any previous writer to the period of Mormon origins, and his book appeared impressive by its documentation. He used the Mormon writings of Joseph Smith, Lucy Smith, Orson Pratt, and Parley P. Pratt. Nevertheless, his primary source material was the Berrian Collection of Mormon materials (mostly anti-Mormon) in the New York Public Library. He relied heavily on John A. Clark, Pomeroy Tucker, a few magazine articles, and inevitably, Hurlburt-Howe. He devoted more space to the Smith family background than most earlier writers and added his own exegesis to the general story of Mormon origins. The original idea of golden plates, he suggested, was based on a thirteenth-century story of an "Everlasting Gospel" written on plates which was intended to supplant the New Testament. Because of his theological background, said Linn, Rigdon would have known the story (Chap. IX).



In 1931, Harry M. Beardsley published *Joseph Smith and his Mormon Empire*. Presenting again the theme that Joseph Smith was an "impoverished, illiterate, disreputable youth, the most notorious of a shiftless family" (p. 6), and that the Book of Mormon and the new religion were produced in collusion with Sidney Rigdon, Beardsley's superficial biography was a classic example of the old Campbell-Hurlburt-Howe tradition. A more scholarly work, published by George B. Arbaugh in 1932, was *Revelation in Mormonism: Its Character and Changing Forms*. Although staunchly in the Hurlburt-Howe tradition, Arbaugh was much more analytical than most of his predecessors, and was more successful in relating the origin of Mormonism to its social environment.

In brief, a full century after the original pattern was set, *Mormonism Unveiled*, with its emphasis on Joseph Smith's personality and his presumed collusion with Sidney Rigdon, still provided the pattern for explaining Mormon origins.<sup>14</sup>

#### CHURCH CLERKS APPOINTED

*The Smith-Pratt tradition.* During its early years the Church made little progress toward publishing a detailed, sympathetic account of its own origin. Oliver Cowdery and Joseph Smith apparently kept early notes and records, but on March 8, 1831, John Whitmer was appointed to "keep the church record and history continuously." Whitmer, however, did not deal with the period of Mormon origins. When he was released from his position in 1838, he refused to surrender his records and history; not until 1893 did his history become the property of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. John Corrill and Elias Higbee were appointed church historians in 1838, but Higbee did not write anything, and Corrill left the Church the same year. His history, published in 1839, contained nothing on the New York period.<sup>15</sup>

The first substantial Mormon effort to publish a history of the rise of the Church came with the printing of a series of

<sup>14</sup>Other significant non-Mormon writers of this period drew heavily from the same tradition, but their writings also took on some new dimensions which will be discussed below.

<sup>15</sup>Roberts, *Comprehensive History*, Vol. 1, p. 429; *John Whitmer's History* (Salt Lake City, 1966?); John Corrill, *A Brief History of the Church of Christ of Latter-day Saints . . .* (St. Louis, 1839).

letters by Oliver Cowdery in the Church paper, the *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* (Kirtland, Ohio), beginning in October, 1834,<sup>16</sup> the same year that Hurlburt and Howe published their influential exposé. Cowdery received the assistance of Joseph Smith in the preparation of these letters, and the Mormon leader helped introduce the series by publishing a statement admitting that, in common with "most or all youths," he "fell into many vices and follies." "I have not [he said] been guilty of wronging or injuring any man or society of men"; but he admitted having such imperfections as "a light and too often, vain mind, exhibiting a foolish and trifling conversation."<sup>17</sup> This statement was apparently intended as a reply to some of the affidavits being collected and published by Hurlburt, for he wrote:

Having learned from the first No. of the Messenger and Advocate, that you were, not only about to "give a history of the rise and progress of the church of the Latter Day Saints; but, that said "history would necessarily embrace my life and character," I have been induced to give you the time and place of my birth; as I have learned that many of the opposers of those principles which I have held forth to the world, profess a personal acquaintance with me, though when [not] in my presence, represent me to be another person in age, education, and stature, from what I am.<sup>18</sup>

Cowdery's first letters contained lucid descriptions, often quoted by later Mormon writers, of his feelings as he met Joseph Smith, assisted in the translation of the Book of Mormon, and witnessed the angel (John the Baptist) who bestowed upon them the priesthood.

Cowdery's third and fourth letters were the first published works to associate the Methodist minister Rev. George Lane with Joseph Smith's religious experiences. In so doing Cowdery initiated a chronological confusion (discussed below) which has plagued Mormon historians ever since. Cowdery's letters told, in grandiose style, of the religious excitement which had aroused the Palmyra vicinity in 1823 (he does not say 1820), and which led to Joseph Smith's prayer and the appearance

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<sup>16</sup>Actually, a brief "Rise and Progress of the Church of Christ" by W. W. Phelps was published as early as April, 1833 in *The Evening and the Morning Star* (Zion [Independence, Mo.]).

<sup>17</sup>*Messenger and Advocate*, Vol. 1 (December 1834), p. 40.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*



of an angel who told him of the plates from which the Book of Mormon was eventually translated.

Cowdery's letters began a Mormon approach to the origin of the Church which, like the Hurlburt-Howe tradition, centered on Joseph Smith's background, personality, and spiritual experiences. Mormon writers in this tradition were inclined to leave out "strictly human" activities in an effort to counteract the debunkers who had gone to the opposite extreme.<sup>19</sup> Emphasizing the positive, these Mormon writers concentrated on the visions and revelations which led to the publication of the Book of Mormon and the founding of the Church. It was unfortunate that *Mormonism Unveiled* and other anti-Mormon commentaries had appeared earlier, for this tended to make Mormon histories defensive.

#### HISTORY OF JOSEPH SMITH PUBLISHED

In 1838, Joseph Smith began to prepare his own history for publication. This history ran serially in the *Times and Seasons* in 1842-1846, and later in the *Millennial Star* and the *Deseret News*. It was in this history that Joseph Smith first prepared for publication the story of his First Vision, stating that it occurred in the year 1820.<sup>20</sup> The "History of Joseph Smith" elaborated on the young Prophet's activities during the years after 1820, and more particularly after 1827. The "History" contains a transcription of each revelation received during the period. As later published by B. H. Roberts, the section covering the period of Mormon origins occupies some 130 pages, and is an indispensable source for both Mormon and non-Mormon historians.

Prior to the original publication of the "History of Joseph Smith," however, two other Mormon sources recounted some of Joseph Smith's early experiences. One was a missionary tract written by Orson Pratt and printed in England in 1840 under the title, *An Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions, and of the Late Discovery of Ancient American Rec-*

<sup>19</sup>See *Messenger and Advocate*, Vol. 1 (December, 1834), p. 42; "History of Joseph Smith," *Times and Seasons* (Nauvoo, Ill.), Vol. 3 (March 15, 1842), pp. 726-727.

<sup>20</sup>A discussion of the knowledge of the First Vision as it appeared in early Mormon and non-Mormon literature is given in James B. Allen, "The Significance of Joseph Smith's 'First Vision' in Mormon Thought," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, Vol. 1 (Autumn, 1966), pp. 29-45.

ords. Pratt had apparently been authorized by Joseph Smith to publish this work, but he embellished the account of the First Vision in such a way that it took on a much more dramatic air than any story ever recorded by Joseph himself. His account has become the basis for some of the expanded versions of later Mormon writers.<sup>21</sup> In 1842 Orson Hyde printed a missionary tract in Germany entitled *A Cry from the Wilderness: A Voice from the Dust of the Earth*, which contained a greatly elaborated account of the vision. The same year Joseph Smith published in the *Times and Seasons* the "Wentworth Letter," which contained an abbreviated account of the vision.<sup>22</sup> His more detailed history began to appear in print shortly thereafter. The early experiences of Joseph Smith as told by himself in his "History" took on the aura of scripture when they appeared in the first edition of the *Pearl of Great Price*, published by Franklin D. Richards in England in 1851 and accepted by the Church in 1880 as one of its "standard works."

Shortly after the death of Joseph Smith, his mother, Lucy Mack Smith, began a biography of her son. She was assisted by Mrs. Martha Jane Knowlton Coray, a devout member of the Church and a competent writer. In 1853, this history was published in England by Orson Pratt, under the title *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet, and His Progenitors for Many Generations*. When copies of the book arrived in Utah, however, *Biographical Sketches* was criticized by Brigham Young and Utah historians as containing many inaccuracies, and it was recalled and suppressed. The book was republished in 1880 by the Reorganized Church. Still later, in 1902, the *Improvement Era* published a revised edition under the title, *History of the Prophet Joseph, by his Mother*. There have been various revised editions since that time.<sup>23</sup>

Lucy Smith's history has become a basic source for most writers who deal in any detail with the Mormon Prophet's family background. The first nine chapters deal with Lucy's

<sup>21</sup>See, for example, Ivan J. Barrett, *Joseph Smith and the Restoration* (Provo, Utah, 1967), p. 31.

<sup>22</sup>"Church History," *Times and Seasons*, Vol. 3 (March 1, 1842), pp. 706-707.

<sup>23</sup>The original edition may be compared with the most recent edition in Jerald & Sandra Tanner, *Changes in Joseph Smith's History* (Salt Lake City, 1966?). See also Roberts, *Comprehensive History*, Vol. 1, p. 14n. There is some evidence to suggest that Lucy Smith was compiling her history prior to the death of Joseph.



immediate family, the Macks, and give life sketches of her father, brothers, and sisters, as well as the story of her own courtship and marriage. The Macks were presented as an honorable, industrious family, in obvious contrast to the rather critical image that had been presented by non-Mormon writers. Mrs. Smith also provided a seven-generation genealogy of the Smith family and a four-generation Mack family line. Other chapters give many details not found elsewhere concerning the Smith family experiences after Lucy's marriage to Joseph Smith, Sr. She emphasizes the spiritual nature of the family by relating seven visions experienced by her husband prior to those of their son. Later chapters quote extensively from her son's own history, which had already been published, although a few of her own observations and memories are included.

The writings of Oliver Cowdery, Joseph Smith, Lucy Smith, and Orson Pratt provided the basic Mormon sources for the period of Mormon origins. Centering on Joseph Smith's background, personality, and spiritual experiences, they tended to be defensive and were designed primarily to build faith in Joseph Smith as a prophet and religious leader. They established the pattern followed by most Mormon histories down to the present.

Illustrative of this approach is *Life of Joseph Smith, the Prophet*, published by George Q. Cannon in 1888. Writing primarily for young believers, Cannon (who was assisted by his son, Frank J. Cannon) followed the general outlines of the Joseph Smith and Lucy Mack Smith histories, embellishing the narrative with his own interpretations and dramatic style but adding no new information. After describing Joseph as a hard-working young man, for example, he comments:

The sweat of his face, therefore, was at once a necessity and a salutation: a requisite for the family welfare and comfort; a protection from enervating dreams. No husbandman of all that neighborhood was more industrious than he; and, except for the hatred bred against him by false teachers and their followers, no one would have a better reputation (p. 46).

In 1902 Joseph and Heman C. Smith, historians for the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, published their four-volume *History of the Church of Jesus Christ*

of *Latter Day Saints* (Lamoni, Iowa). Their basic source for the New York period was the "History of Joseph Smith," which they repeated in almost exact detail. In 1922 Joseph Fielding Smith, Mormon apostle and Church historian, published the first edition of his *Essentials in Church History*. It has been frequently updated and republished, but Elder Smith's treatment of the New York period was essentially that of his father's uncle, Joseph Smith.

The most important Mormon history to come from the press since Joseph Smith's "History of the Church" was B. H. Roberts' six-volume *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: Century I*, published in 1930. Most of this work had been published serially from 1909 to 1915 in the historical journal *Americana*, under the title "History of the Mormon Church." (Some of it had been published even before in some "period histories.") Roberts made every effort to base his work on all available evidence, both Mormon and non-Mormon, and to correlate seemingly conflicting testimonies in such a way as to present an accurate narrative. He was acquainted with the works of all the important anti-Mormon writers, and frequently used them when he thought them reliable. He also went beyond Joseph and Lucy Smith in presenting background material on the paternal ancestry of the prophet. Roberts readily admitted that there were discrepancies in some of the accounts of Joseph's early activities. A note at the end of Chapter VIII, for example, comments on variations in the accounts of bringing home the gold plates, suggesting that these variations are not serious and should actually be expected. Roberts also went into detail in his explanations of the translation of the Book of Mormon, the organization of the Church, and the background of a few of the people who became associated with Joseph Smith during the New York period.

Roberts' history, nevertheless, fits into the tradition being discussed. Although he drew much from the writings of some non-Mormons, from letters and other documents in the Church Historian's Office, and from an address by David Whitmer, his major sources of information were the writings of Joseph and Lucy Smith, and he accepted the writings of Joseph as unquestionably accurate. Moreover, the work was apologetic: many of Roberts' interpretations were specifically designed to



answer charges by the non-Mormon writers described above. More than five pages were devoted to a rebuttal of the charges that Joseph Smith's ancestors were restless, illiterate, and credulous.<sup>24</sup>

The first Mormon biography of Joseph Smith to be circulated widely outside the Church was John Henry Evans' *Joseph Smith An American Prophet*, published in 1933. Evans wrote in his introduction: "I have tried to give a scientific treatment of Joseph Smith, the Mormon prophet—that is, to present the available facts, without smothering these facts in opinion. This, I believe has never been done before" (p. vii). This attempt at scientific detachment was not completely successful: the reader will note several places in which Evans added his personal interpretation of Mormonism, fitting Joseph Smith's history into the pattern. His style is also disappointing to scholars, for the writing was popularized and lacked bibliographical footnotes and references. Evans showed a lack of sophistication in his historianship. For example, he told of the organization of the Church on April 6, 1830, then explained in some detail the importance and religious significance of the Church's name, especially of the word "saint." But he failed to recognize that the name of the Church in 1830 was simply "The Church of Christ"; its present name was not adopted until 1838. Evans' general analysis of church history follows the traditional pattern, his basic reliance was on the traditional sources, and his book fits the basic pattern of Mormon defensive writing.

Three years after the appearance of Evans' biography, there appeared the first edition of a book which was to have a greater impact on the youth of the Church than any other history: William E. Berrett's *The Restored Church*. Originally written at the request of the Church's Department of Education, it has been revised frequently and has been used as the basic Church history text in the seminary program for more than thirty years. Written in a warm and appealing style, and based primarily on Smith and Roberts, it is not as argumentative or defensive as Roberts. Berrett also tried to place the Church in its broader historical setting with a discussion of frontier America and the role of religion on the frontier.

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<sup>24</sup>Roberts, *Comprehensive History*, Vol. 1, pp. 23-28.

Additional books which treat the New York period from this defensive point of view include Willard Bean, *ABC History of Palmyra* (Palmyra, 1938); Preston Nibley, *Joseph Smith, the Prophet* (Salt Lake City, 1946); Pearson Corbett, *Hyrum Smith, Patriarch* (Salt Lake City, 1963); and Ivan J. Barrett, *Joseph Smith and the Restoration* (Provo, Utah, 1967). In each of these works, the material on Mormon origins may be traced to the same sources and their purposes are basically the same.<sup>25</sup>

*The "Socio-Psychological" approach.* Another school of historians tries to analyze the sociological patterns which affected the Mormon Prophet and, in some case, the psychological forces which may have accounted for his actions. While they usually conclude, along with the followers of Hurlburt-Howe, that Mormonism was founded on a deception, their individual paths to that conclusion are more original. Taken together, they form a body of literature on Mormon origins that stands apart from the older traditions.

Perhaps the earliest of these writers was I. Woodbridge Riley, who published *The Founder of Mormonism* in 1902. A strictly psychological approach to Joseph Smith, Riley's *Founder of Mormonism* boldly began with the thesis that the "state of his body goes far to explain the state of his mind, and his ancestry [explains] both. Like the distorted views of his grandfather, 'Crook-necked Smith,' Joseph's mental abnormalities are to be connected with physical ills" (pp. 3-4). Riley then proceeded to psychoanalyze not only the Prophet, but his progenitors as well! Reading between the lines of Lucy Smith's work, and of her father's narrative history, Riley concluded that Joseph's whole family were natural heirs to the traits of illiteracy, restlessness, and credulity (p. 12). In the visions of Joseph Smith's father Riley saw the basis for what he considered some of the hallucinations of Joseph Smith as well as the source for certain episodes in the Book of Mormon. He did not consider Joseph an intentional imposter. Rather, he explained Joseph Smith's visions in terms of abnormal psy-

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<sup>25</sup>It should perhaps be noted that Corbett's biography of Hyrum Smith contains unsupported interpolations which seek to reconstruct obscure and sometimes unimportant events. His intimate description of the family scene as Joseph Smith told them the story of the Angel Moroni is not really supported in detail by the documents (pp. 28-31).



chology. From his mother Joseph inherited a "liability to neural instability." The Prophet was described as addicted to drunkenness, one of the causes of his frequent "seizures." More specifically, Riley saw Joseph as an epileptic, and he read into the history of Joseph and his ancestors all the symptoms of epilepsy. He explained the Book of Mormon in terms of Joseph's religious environment, family background, and personal experiences. In support of this interpretation, Riley accurately demonstrated that contemporaries often attributed a Hebraic origin to the American Indian. According to Riley, the Book of Mormon was a clue to the Prophet's mentality. Its four chief marks were "a redundant style, fragmentary information, a fanciful archaeology, and an unsystematic theology" (p. 168)—all evidences of the fancifulness and restlessness of Joseph.<sup>26</sup>

#### MORE RECENT STUDIES OF JOSEPH SMITH

In 1912 Eduard Meyer, an eminent German scholar who had visited Utah, published *Ursprung und Geschichte der Mormonen*.<sup>27</sup> Meyer had access to most of the standard Mormon and non-Mormon sources, but was particularly impressed with Riley's psychological explanation. Like Riley, he rejected the Spaulding theory. He was generous to the "three witnesses," who, he explained, actually saw the gold plates, even though they did not really exist, because desire and promises led to a common vision "conjured up to them by the anticipation of the long preparation, the pregnant atmosphere of miracles through which they lived, their prayer together, and the Prophet's power of suggestion" (p. 9). He was also some-

<sup>26</sup>Latter-day Saint historians might learn much from the insights of their psychologist brethren. A psychoanalytical biography of Joseph Smith of the stature and depth of *Young Man Luther* by Erik Erikson would help to illuminate the process by which Joseph's teenage religious conflicts ultimately led to a spiritual solution of major consequence. Just as Erikson depicts the identity struggle of a young great man who ultimately established a new branch of Christendom, so the use of psychoanalysis as a historical tool might demonstrate how young Joseph faced the problems of human existence in the most forward terms of his era. Young Joseph was not pathological as Riley supposed, but the historian must still consider the possibility that Joseph's search for truth was meaningfully related to his psychological conflicts. See Erik H. Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York, 1962).

<sup>27</sup>This is now available in English: Eduard Meyer, *The Origin and History of the Mormons, With Reflections on the Beginnings of Islam and Christianity*, translated by Heinz F. Rahde and Eugene Seach (Salt Lake City, 1961).

what generous to Joseph Smith, whose religious environment with its emphasis on the Old Testament and upon visions explains how a young man could really believe that God had called him to be a prophet.

Fawn M. Brodie's *No Man Knows My History* (New York, 1945) was an Alfred A. Knopf prize-winning biography of Joseph Smith. Mrs. Brodie relied on the traditional Mormon and non-Mormon sources. For the New York period, she provided little new evidence except for a controversial transcript of an alleged trial in 1826 in which Joseph Smith was found guilty of disturbing the peace. Seeking to paint a preconceived portrait of Joseph Smith, Mrs. Brodie ignored important conflicting sources. Her views are brilliantly presented, however, and give the appearance of being well researched and documented. For want of a better scholarly biography, *No Man Knows My History* continues to serve as a standard reference for professional textbook writers who include a section or chapter on early Mormon history.

Mrs. Brodie began her work with the standard Hurlburt-Howe image of the Smith family, then proceeded to dramatize the intense religious spirit which pervaded western New York in Joseph Smith's time. She rejected completely the Spaulding manuscript as the source of the Book of Mormon, attributing the latter wholly to Joseph. In the tradition of Arbaugh and Riley, but with more depth and clarity, she analyzed the social and religious environment of Joseph Smith as it related to the Book of Mormon. Even though she considered young Joseph a likeable ne'er-do-well, she did not consider him ignorant or unimaginative at the time the Book of Mormon was written. She demonstrated that he had every opportunity to encounter the idea that American Indians were of Jewish origin. Ethan Smith's *View of the Hebrews* may have been the original source for Joseph's ideas, she speculated, but it was only a basic source and he built upon it. Other contemporary ideas and problems provided the source for other parts of the book. His father's dreams were the source of the Lehi vision; anti-Catholic feelings the source of the idea that much had been lost from the Bible; and anti-masonry the source of warnings against secret societies. The Book of Mormon was, for her, a product of its times. She expressed surprise that American literary historians had ignored it, for it was "one



of the earliest examples of frontier fiction, the first long Yankee narrative that owes nothing to English literary fashions" (p. 67). She viewed Joseph Smith's role of Prophet as something he slipped into quite accidentally as he advanced from one deception to another.<sup>28</sup>

Sooner or later, a non-Mormon student of Frederick Jackson Turner was certain to try his hand at Mormon history. It was Turner who had developed the famous thesis that certain basic American institutions and characteristics were the result of the frontier experience. Dean D. McBrien, who in 1924 had followed Turner all the way to Logan, Utah, to take his course in the history of the frontier at Utah State University, later completed a dissertation for George Washington University on "The Influence of the Frontier on Joseph Smith." More than eighty pages of this little-used dissertation are concerned with the New York phase of Mormonism. McBrien, in a typically Turnerian interpretation, stresses the role of the physical, social, and cultural environment of the New York frontier in the origins of Mormonism:

Joseph Smith was an American, an American Westerner. As such it is not to be wondered that there should be found blended within him a mixture of the ideas, principles, emotions, and crude conceptions of American frontier life of a hundred years ago (pp. ii-iii).

Many Mormon writers, too, have, in a somewhat Turnerian fashion, related the history of the Church to the history of the American frontier. William E. Berrett made such an attempt in 1936, but perhaps the clearest Mormon statement of the "frontier theory" of Mormon origins comes from Milton R. Hunter's *The Mormons and the American Frontier* (Salt Lake City, 1940). Hunter accepted the Turner thesis and saw the

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<sup>28</sup>After the appearance of *No Man Knows My History*, Hugh Nibley published the pamphlet, *No Ma'am, That's Not History* (Salt Lake City, 1946). Although a hurried reply to Fawn Brodie, this booklet contained an incisive and often humorous commentary on Mrs. Brodie's reasoning, and was applauded in many quarters. In "Censoring Joseph Smith's Story," a 1961 series of articles in *The Improvement Era*, Nibley wrote a more careful step-by-step refutation of several anti-Mormon writers. In the same tradition was a 1967 booklet, *Exploding the Myth about Joseph Smith, The Mormon Prophet*, published privately in New York City by F. L. Stewart. Miss Stewart refutes Mrs. Brodie not only with logic but also by showing weaknesses in documentation and providing further historical material. Although some reviewers have asserted that Miss Stewart made a few historical blunders of her own, the work has value in helping to achieve a balanced view.

Mormon experience as definitely a frontier (and therefore praiseworthy) experience.

In the early 1950's the view that Mormonism was a frontier religion was challenged by two important studies. Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-Over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850* (Ithaca, 1950), argued that the Palmyra area was not a frontier by the time the Smiths arrived. It was "less isolated and provincial, more vigorous and cosmopolitan, than Vermont. It was reaching economic stability" (p. 40). Nor was Mormonism a frontier religion; its early converts were not frontiersmen. Mormonism did not originate in the pioneering section of western New York, and its early recruits came from the longest-settled neighborhoods of the region (p. 146). Similar conclusions were reached independently by S. George Ellsworth, whose Ph.D. dissertation, "A History of Mormon Missions in the United States and Canada, 1830-1860," was completed at Berkeley in 1951.<sup>29</sup>

*Other approaches.* A somewhat different view of Mormon origins may be seen through the experiences of someone other than Joseph Smith. Unfortunately, biographies and autobiographies of those who joined the Church during this period are sadly lacking. A few useful details, however, may be gained by reading such works as Parley P. Pratt's *Autobiography* (Salt Lake City, 1874); Stanley Gunn's *Oliver Cowdery* (Salt Lake City, 1962); and F. Mark McKiernan, "The Voice of One Crying in the Wilderness: Sidney Rigdon, Religious Reformer, 1793-1876" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Kansas, 1968).

Additional information about the period may be found in various collections of readings published during the past few years. In 1953 William E. Berrett and Alma P. Burton published the first of their three-volume *Readings In L.D.S. Church History* (Salt Lake City), which contained excerpts from the standard pro-Mormon sources already mentioned.

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<sup>29</sup>A recent essay has challenged these conclusions. In "The Social Sources of Mormonism," *Church History*, March 1968, pp. 50-79, Mario De Pillis criticized both Cross and Ellsworth for relying on a too-narrow definition of the frontier, and for not interpreting accurately the attributes of the early converts to Mormonism. According to De Pillis, western New York was still a social frontier at the time Mormonism originated, and early Mormons were still facing frontier-type problems in spite of the maturing economy outlined by Cross and Ellsworth.



*Among the Mormons*, edited by William Mulder and A. Russell Mortensen (New York, 1958), contains a number of valuable documents from sources less readily available to the general reader. A more extensive collection of sources relating to the Book of Mormon is found in Francis W. Kirkham's two-volume work *A New Witness for Christ in America* (Independence, Mo., 1941 and Salt Lake City, 1952). Kirkham made an exhaustive effort to collect every available early newspaper account or other reference to the Book of Mormon, as well as later narratives, both pro- and anti-Mormon, which might throw light upon its origin. His basic purpose was to prove the authenticity of the Book of Mormon by showing the inconsistency of the anti-Mormon documents. His documents are all valuable, but they would be more useful if the work had been better organized and clearer distinction made between the documents and the editorializing.

The most recent approach to Mormon origins is Milton Backman's *American Religions and the Rise of Mormonism* (Salt Lake City, 1965), which relates Mormonism more fully than previous histories to the religious environment in which it arose.

#### WANTED: MORE RESEARCH AND WRITING ON MORMON ORIGINS IN NEW YORK

In writing of those who were members of the Church in December, 1830, Joseph Smith affectionately looked back on "the little flock, which in all, from Colesville to Canandaigua, New York, numbered about seventy members."<sup>30</sup> It is understandable that in 1830 little was being written or said about Joseph Smith, outside his immediate environment, and that even less was being said about his small band of followers. As Mormonism increased in size, power, and significance, Joseph Smith became more important not only to his own people but to Americans in general. It is now time to raise the question of whether enough has been written about the ordinary people involved in the beginning of the Church—with the purpose of understanding more about their backgrounds, their possible contributions, and the impact the new movement had on them. This question leads directly to a larger question:

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<sup>30</sup>DHC, Vol. 1, p. 132.

Is there not a need for new research and fresh literary approaches to all aspects of Mormon history?

In order to comprehend the history of any movement or institution, one must be familiar with the context in which it grew. Most twentieth-century scholars who have written on Mormonism have attempted to relate Joseph Smith and the early Church to their environment, but for the most part this has been done very superficially. There has been no major treatise designed specifically to place Mormonism in its political, economic, and social setting. Cross and others have suggested some comparisons between the New York revival and those of Kentucky, showing that the New York experiences were less hysterical in nature.<sup>31</sup> Further studies of the beliefs of people in western New York and their comparison with Joseph Smith's ideas would be welcome.

Inasmuch as Mormonism eventually became a strong political force in its own right, a major treatment of the political setting in which Mormonism arose would be helpful. While we already know the chief political problems of the time, and secondary sources could probably give us much of the political history of western New York and Ohio, there is little available that brings it all together with specific reference to its impact on the infant Mormon Church and some of its members.<sup>32</sup> In what way did the political climate help or hinder the spread of Mormonism? Did mistrust of the other groups help prepare the atmosphere for the Mormon persecutions?<sup>33</sup> What was the political climate of western New York, and what were the political philosophies of the first Mormon converts? To what degree were they influenced by the trends toward greater democracy, and how might this have influenced their behavior as Church members?

A related, but perhaps larger, set of questions has to do with the economic and social background of Mormonism.

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<sup>31</sup>See also Mario S. De Pillis, "Mormon Communitarianism, 1826-1846" (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1961).

<sup>32</sup>Some ideas are provided in G. Homer Durham, *Joseph Smith, Prophet-Statesman* (Salt Lake City, 1944); and Hyrum L. Andrus, "The Second American Revolution: Era of Preparation," *BYU Studies*, Vols. 1-2 (Autumn 1959-Winter 1960), pp. 71-100.

<sup>33</sup>A good starting point might be David Brion Davis, "Some Themes of Counter-subversion: An Analysis of Anti-Masonic, Anti-Catholic, and Anti-Mormon Literature," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, Vol. 47 (September, 1960), pp. 205-224.



What was the actual economic structure of western New York, and how did the small band of Mormons fit into it, both before and after they joined the Church? To what degree was western New York still a social or economic frontier, and what difference did that make as far as the prospective Mormon converts were concerned? Where is there a description of the effect of the Erie Canal upon the region, not only economically but also in terms of increased communication and hence the better circulation of ideas? The Erie Canal certainly increased the flow of traffic between eastern and western New York and at the same time made traffic between New York and Ohio much less difficult. Did this facilitate the communication of ideas between eastern Ohio, a "hotbed" of the Disciples of Christ, and western New York, where Mormonism originated? What did the early Mormons do for a living, and what was their general economic and social status? Where did they come from, and how long had they been in New York? To what churches, if any, did they belong, and what religious and other social ideas did they bring with them into Mormonism? Why were they converted, and how long did they remain in the Church? Where were future converts living at the time, and how do all of the above questions apply to them?<sup>34</sup> How well were they prepared for Mormonism as it developed through the 1830's? Some historians may even wish to speculate as to whether Mormonism could have succeeded as well had Joseph Smith chosen to remain in New York rather than migrate to Ohio in January of 1831.

To help answer the foregoing questions two projects are indispensable: (1) a biographical profile of early church members, and (2) an analysis of the status of the infant church as its leaders prepared to leave New York. Well-researched biographical sketches on each of the early converts would be an invaluable asset. They should include not only the "little flock" struggling to get the Church started in 1830 but also others who came into the Church during the next few years. A more sympathetic biography of Joseph Smith that matches in literary quality the skillful presentation of Fawn Brodie is needed, as is a more accurate and objective biography of Hyrum Smith. Richard L. Anderson has been working on a

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<sup>34</sup>Excellent introductions to these problems are given in the Cross and Ellsworth studies, cited above.

study of the "Three Witnesses"—Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris; it is hoped that his proposed book will include the period of Mormon origins as well as their later experiences. Others converted during the New York period who warrant biographical studies are Joseph Smith, Sr., Lucy Mack Smith, William Smith, Samuel Smith, and Parley P. Pratt.<sup>35</sup>

A start toward these biographical studies may be seen in the fact that at least fifty-five of the seventy New York Mormons are identifiable through the listings given in the "History of Joseph Smith." Brief and generally inadequate biographical sketches may be found on only twenty-three of these people in Andrew Jenson's *L.D.S. Biographical Encyclopedia*. From these sketches one may draw a few interesting conclusions, although not with any assurance that this represents an accurate social profile. The average age of the group was thirty-one.<sup>36</sup> The oldest person, Joseph Smith, Sr., was fifty-nine, and the youngest, Porter Rockwell, was fifteen. Fifteen of the twenty-three were thirty years of age or under. The occupations of most were not given by Jenson but there was at least one shoemaker, one physician, a miller, and several farmers. It might also be said that the new Church was a family-and-friend affair. Of the fifty-five identifiable persons, there was a direct family-friend relationship with the Smiths of at least thirty-one. The Smith family included Joseph Sr., Lucy Mack, Joseph Jr., Hyrum, Jerusha (Hyrum's wife), Katherine, William, Don Carlos, and Emma (Joseph's wife). The Knight family had long been on friendly terms with the Smiths, and the names listed include Joseph Sr., Polly (his wife), Joseph Jr., Newell, and Sally (his wife). Emily Coburn was a sister of Newell's wife, and Mr. and Mrs. Hezakah Peck were probably related to Polly Peck, the wife of Joseph, Sr. Another close associate of Joseph Smith's was, of course, Oliver Cowdery. Cowdery was a good friend of the Whitmer family, and eventually married Elizabeth Ann Whitmer. Other members of the Whit-

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<sup>35</sup>Two important early leaders have been the subject of book size biographies: The McKiernan dissertation on Sidney Rigdon, cited above, and Harold Schindler, *Orrin Porter Rockwell: Man of God, Son of Thunder* (Salt Lake City, 1966). There are also theses at BYU on Emma Smith and T. B. Marsh, and T. Edgar Lyon's thesis at the University of Chicago on Orson Pratt.

<sup>36</sup>This does not include Joseph Knight Sr., whose birthdate is not known.



mer family included Peter Sr., Mary (his wife), Peter Jr., Christian, Anne (his wife), John, Jacob, Elizabeth (his wife), Catherine, and David. Catherine Whitmer was married to Hiram Page. Martin Harris, of course, was also a friend of the Smiths. Undoubtedly other members of the "little flock" were close friends or relatives of some of these families and when the list of identifiable persons includes five Jolleys, four Rockwells, two Culvers, and the Pratt brothers, Parley and Orson, one is indeed impressed with the importance of family and friends in the early growth of Mormonism. When it is also remembered that the real beginning of the Church in Ohio was the result of the conversion of Parley P. Pratt's friend Sidney Rigdon and his closest associates, the point becomes even more impressive.

Needed also is an analysis of the status of the Church as the New York period came to a close. It is important to know, not only how the Church was organized, what the members believed, and how large it was, but also the way the Church developed later in order to understand what new directions it took and what factors remained constant from the New York period on. A brief, preliminary analysis suggests that the infant Church consisted of some seventy members, many of whom (and we do not know how many) were preparing to leave their homes for Ohio early in 1831. The Church was called the Church of Christ, although its members were nicknamed "Mormonites" by outsiders. The organization was very simple, the leadership consisting of only a First and Second Elder, but the basis for a more elaborate organization had been established. Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery were called apostles, and Church members had already been given to understand that a Quorum of Twelve was soon to be established. The offices of elder, priest, teacher, and deacon had been "restored," and their duties described, and the foundation for a broad missionary program had already been laid. It is not known whether Church members were aware of Joseph Smith's First Vision, but it is clear that they considered him a Prophet who received divine revelation and therefore were willing to submit themselves to his direction. They accepted as scripture not only the Bible but also the Book of Mormon, which they believed had been translated by Joseph Smith through divine power.

It has been suggested that Mormon doctrine did not really take shape until after Joseph Smith moved to Ohio and came under the influence of the Campbellite preacher, Sidney Rigdon. But many of the beliefs and practices which became permanent parts of the Mormon faith were in the Book of Mormon or in some of Joseph's early revelations, and were thus part of Mormonism even before Joseph Smith left New York. Among the more important of these concepts were the following: faith, repentance, baptism by immersion for the remission of sins, the bestowal of the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands, priesthood authority, the importance of missionary work, the fall of man, doctrine of the atonement of Christ, millennialism, free agency, spiritual gifts, America as a chosen land and the site of the New Jerusalem, and the universality of the Gospel. As Marvin Hill demonstrates in his article in this issue of *BYU Studies*, many of the basic tenets of Mormonism were rooted in the New York period. On the other hand, New York Church members did not teach several doctrines and practices which later became part of the faith: tithing, "preexistence," the "three degrees of glory," eternal marriage, eternal progression, salvation for the dead, plural marriage, and various far-reaching developments in Church organization.

The foregoing material has suggested some of the broad, general approaches which may be taken toward a study of Mormon origins. There are more specific questions which also will bear further study.

1. What additional information can be found on the activities of Joseph Smith and his family between 1820 and 1830? Up to 1827, at least, the sources are sketchy, and more details are needed. Who were their friends? What did they read? Where did they go to church?

2. What transpired between Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon in December 1830? Did Rigdon go to New York with the idea of trying to get Joseph Smith to move to Kirtland? Had he deliberately prepared Kirtland, in any way, for the arrival of the New York Prophet?

3. How many Mormons left New York for Kirtland early in 1831? What did it mean to them to leave?

4. What do we know about the early anti-Mormon writers



who attacked Joseph Smith and his followers? What can we say about their background, personal qualifications, and motivations? Richard Anderson explores some aspects of this question in his essay below.

5. Are we Mormons willing to admit that some of our writers have made mistakes in trying to reconcile conflicting accounts of Joseph Smith's early experiences? A case in point is B. H. Roberts' description of the setting for Joseph Smith's First Vision. Roberts based his conclusion upon an attempted correlation of the accounts of Joseph Smith, William Smith, and Oliver Cowdery.<sup>37</sup> He said that it was in 1820 that a certain Reverend Lane so affected Joseph Smith by his preaching that he was induced to utter the prayer which resulted in that First Vision. In the original sources, however, neither Cowdery nor William Smith mentions the 1820 vision specifically. Both of them place the Reverend Lane in the vicinity of Palmyra in 1823, relating him to the background of the visions that announced the Book of Mormon. Neither Joseph Smith nor his mother mentioned Reverend Lane. It is probable that Roberts came to his conclusion because the revival described by Cowdery seemed similar to the 1820 religious excitement later described by Joseph Smith. Clearing up the confusion of dates does not seem as important here as a frank recognition that there is such confusion. The inconsistencies in early sources do not affect the credibility of Joseph Smith, but our failure to discuss them perpetuates the myth that Mormon writers are not willing "to face the facts."

6. Who was the Reverend Mr. Lane, and when was he in Palmyra? A recent article by a Presbyterian minister, Wesley Walters, casts doubts on the claim that Reverend Lane was in the Palmyra vicinity in 1820.<sup>38</sup> Since Lane has been closely identified with Mormon origins, it becomes essential that we know more about him and his movements. Larry Porter, in his fine essay in this issue, effectively challenges some of Walters' inferences by showing the possibility that Lane may have passed through the Palmyra vicinity in 1820. But more research is needed before a final conclusion can be

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<sup>37</sup>Roberts, *Comprehensive History*, Vol. 1, p. 52.

<sup>38</sup>Wesley P. Walters, "New Light on Mormon Origins from Palmyra (N. Y.) Revival," *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Vol. 10 (Fall, 1967), pp. 227-244.

reached. If Reverend Lane kept a journal, its discovery would prove invaluable in helping construct a more accurate picture of the background of Mormon origins.

7. What evidence do we have, other than the word of Joseph Smith, that there was "an unusual excitement on the subject of religion" in the vicinity of Palmyra in 1820? Up to this point little such evidence has been uncovered, and Walters challenged the story in the article referred to above. Milton Backman, however, has discovered interesting new material which he presents in his important article on the historical setting of the First Vision.

8. What information do we have to help us locate correctly the important sites of early Mormon history? Is the present Peter Whitmer home on the actual site of the organization of the Church? Is the present "sacred grove" the actual grove where Joseph Smith had his First Vision? Is the present Smith family home the actual place in which Joseph saw the Angel Moroni? In this issue T. Edgar Lyon has raised some questions which amount to a plea for accuracy in Mormon historical endeavors.

9. *Mormonism Unveiled* presented many statements from Joseph Smith's contemporaries damaging to his character. While such statements are open to suspicion because of the way in which they were collected, the question must still be raised as to what other contemporary evidence is available concerning the youthful character of the Mormon Prophet? Is it possible to find contemporary statements about young Joseph that are more reliable? If he was really obscure before 1830, the search may be difficult. But it should continue. There is some evidence that before he gained notoriety for his religious experiences Joseph Smith and his family were considered honorable and respectable. The "Mormon Origins" group is making every effort to locate further evidence. The search should also continue for early statements regarding the Book of Mormon, particularly the 1827 newspaper article mentioned by Stephen S. Harding.

10. What contemporary evidence, other than Mormon writings, do we have that the New York Mormons were persecuted before leaving the state? Who persecuted them? How? What reasons did they give for so doing?



11. What verifiable accounts do we have of the various court trials experienced by Joseph Smith in New York? Fawn Brodie has published a document purporting to be the transcript of an 1826 trial in which Joseph Smith was found guilty of disturbing the peace, but its authenticity is not beyond question. By the same token Joseph Smith tells the story of two trials in 1830 which ended in his acquittal, but his writings and an 1844 Nauvoo speech by his lawyer, John S. Reid, are the only sources for these.<sup>39</sup> Is it possible to find corroborating evidence for any of these trials or for any other legal difficulties he may have had in New York? An essay on such problems would indeed be a valuable addition to the literature on early Mormon history.

12. Finally, what can we discover about the writing of Joseph Smith's own history of this period? When did he first begin to keep notes? How did he keep them? Who were his scribes and secretaries, and what part did they play in the keeping of the notes and the writing of the history? Dean Jessee, a member of the LDS Church Historian's staff, has done some valuable sleuthing on this problem, the results of which are presented below.

#### WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

The questions raised above only suggest some of the research which yet needs to be done on the history of Mormon origins in New York. It is startling to think that the "little flock" of seventy people could require, at this late date, so much historical attention. But their significance exceeds their number, and the historian is compelled to explore every aspect of their history.

It has been demonstrated that the sources for the period are scarce. Hopefully the new information recovered by the authors of the articles in this issue of *BYU Studies* will demonstrate that new sources can be discovered and will motivate younger scholars to join the search. It is probable that attics, basements, and family trunks still harbor journals, letters, and notes that would throw light on Mormon origins. A further examination of libraries in New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio

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<sup>39</sup>DHC, Vol. 1, pp. 88-96; *Times and Seasons*, Vol. 5 (June 1, 1844), pp. 549-552.

could well uncover newspapers, pamphlets, and even diaries that have previously been passed over.<sup>40</sup> The vast resources of the Church genealogical program could be marshaled to trace the history of some of the earliest converts. The objective, of course, is to amass as large a body as possible of primary material that will become an indispensable tool for Mormon and non-Mormon alike in their further quest for the truth about Mormon origins. When this has been done, we should then concentrate on doing the same thing for the next period.

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<sup>40</sup>While preparing this article, one of the writers located in the Manuscripts Division of the New York Public Library a diary of James Gordon Bennett, founder of the New York *Herald*, of a journey through New York during the summer of 1831. One tantalizing entry is dated Geneva, New York, August 7, 1831: "*Mormonism*. Old Smith [Joseph Smith, Sr.] was a healer—a grand story teller—very glib—was a vender [?]<sup>40</sup>—made gingerbread and butter mints—Young Smith was careless, idle, idolent fellow—22 years old—brought up to live by his wits—which means a broker of small wants—Harris was a hardy industrious farmer of Palmyra—with some money—could speak off the Bible by heart—Henry [*sic*] Rigdon a parson in general—smart fellow—he is the author of the Bible—they dig first for money—a great many hills . . . turned into a religious plot and gave out the golden plates . . . Mormonites went to Ohio because the people here would not pay any attention to them. . . ."