

“The Prophet Puzzle” Revisited

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IN HER 1974 ESSAY, “THE PROPHET PUZZLE: Suggestions Leading Toward a More Comprehensive Interpretation of Joseph Smith,” Jan Shipps confronted the anomalies in the historical record concerning Smith, noting: “What we have in Mormon historiography is two Josephs: the one who started out digging for money and when he was unsuccessful, turned to propheteering, and the one who had visions and dreamed dreams, restored the church, and revealed the will of the Lord to a sinful world.”¹ To resolve this “schizophrenic state of Mormon history, with its double interpretive strand of Joseph Smith as a man of God and Joseph Smith as a kind of fraud who exploited his followers for his own purposes,” Shipps called for a more fully integrated view of Smith, one that allows for the complexities of human personality. More than twenty years later, Smith remains an enigma for historians, believer and skeptic alike.

My intent is not to rehash evidence on both sides of the prophet/fraud issue, but to suggest a possible solution to Shipps’s “prophet puzzle.” Unraveling the complexities of Smith’s character and motives is difficult, but before the puzzle can be solved, all the pieces, or at least the most significant ones, must be gathered and correctly interpreted. Some of these, in my opinion, have been overlooked, ignored, or mishandled—pieces which I believe reveal previously hidden features of Smith’s complex, conflicted, and gifted personality. Throughout, however, one would do well to bear in mind Marvin S. Hill’s warning that those who attempt such endeavors “must write with courage, for no matter what they say many will disagree strongly.”²

1. Jan Shipps, “The Prophet Puzzle: Suggestions Leading Toward a More Comprehensive Interpretation of Joseph Smith,” *Journal of Mormon History* (1974): 19. Shipps’s essay was reprinted in D. Michael Quinn, *The New Mormon History: Revisionist Essays on the Past* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 53-74. Citations in this essay are to the first printing.

2. Marvin S. Hill, “Brodie Revisited: A Reappraisal,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 7 (Winter 1972): 85.

I

The most obvious solution to Shipps's puzzle is to suggest that Smith was a "pious deceiver" or "sincere fraud," someone who deceives to achieve holy objectives. Admittedly, the terms "pious deceiver," "sincere fraud," and the like are not wholly satisfying. Nevertheless, "pious" connotes a sincere religious conviction, and my use of "fraud" or "deceiver" is limited to describing *some* of Smith's activities—the possible construction of plates from tin as well as his claim that the Book of Mormon is a translation of an anciently engraved record, for example—not to Smith's perception of himself. In other words, Smith may have engaged in fraudulent activities while at the same time believing that he had been called of God to preach repentance in the most effective way possible. In fact, this was the thesis of Lutheran minister Robert N. Hullinger's 1980 book, *Mormon Answer to Skepticism: Why Joseph Smith Wrote the Book of Mormon*.³ Responding to Shipps's complaint that the Book of Mormon "has by and large been neglected as a source which might facilitate a better understanding of Joseph Smith's early career,"⁴ Hullinger attempted to discover Smith's motives for writing the book by examining the book's rhetoric, and concluded: "Joseph Smith ... regarded himself as [a] defender of God."⁵ "Even if one believes that Joseph Smith was at best a scoundrel," he observed, "one still must account for the Book of Mormon."⁶ Indeed, the book's religious appeal—its defense of God, Jesus Christ, and spiritual gifts, and its call to repentance—argues strongly against presuming that Smith's motives were malicious or completely self-serving.⁷

Marvin S. Hill has similarly cautioned against seeing Smith in either / or terms, insisting that one balance the implications of Smith's 1826 trial

3. Robert N. Hullinger, *Mormon Answer to Skepticism: Why Joseph Smith Wrote the Book of Mormon* (St. Louis: Clayton Publishing House, 1980); reprinted as *Joseph Smith's Response to Skepticism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992). For convenience, I have used the second edition.

4. Shipps, "Prophet Puzzle," 10.

5. Hullinger, *Joseph Smith's Response to Skepticism*, xv.

6. *Ibid.*, xvi.

7. In assuming the role of prophet, Smith was not necessarily acting maliciously or selfishly. In this regard, Smith's comment to Oliver B. Huntington is most interesting. Huntington recalled: "Joseph Smith said that some people entirely denounce the principle of self-aggrandizement as wrong. 'It is a correct principle,' he said, 'and may be indulged upon only one rule or plan—and that is to elevate, benefit and bless others first. If you will elevate others, the very work itself will exalt you. Upon no other plan can a man justly and permanently aggrandize himself'" (quoted in Hyrum L. Andrus and Helen Mae Andrus, comps., *They Knew the Prophet* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1974], 61).

with his private and genuine expressions of religious concern.⁸ In his 1972 review of Fawn Brodie's influential biography of Smith, *No Man Knows My History*, Hill criticized her for ignoring the religious side of Smith's personality and portraying him as essentially irreligious. "[Brodie] says little about the rationalizations Joseph would have had to go through where his religious role was imposed upon him," Hill observed. "Brodie was never able to take us inside the mind of the prophet, to understand how he thought and why. A reason for that may be that the sources she would have had to use were Joseph's religious writings, and her Smith was supposed to be irreligious."⁹

Among the first lines Smith wrote in his new journal, which he began keeping in November 1832, was: "Oh my God grant that I may be directed in all my thoughts Oh bless thy Servant Amen." A few days later he wrote: "Oh Lord deliver thy servant out of temptations and fill his heart with wisdom and understanding."¹⁰ Such passages, which Brodie either ignored or was unaware of, reveal Smith's inner, spiritual world, and those who ignore this, who fail to recognize a deeply spiritual dimension to Smith's character, or who count his profession of religion as contrived, throw away a major piece of the prophet puzzle. I am convinced that those who wish to understand Smith on his own terms must escape the confinement of Brodie's paradigm.

At the same time, one cannot turn a blind eye to Smith's willingness to deceive. One of the clearest indications of this is his public denials of teaching and practicing polygamy while privately doing so.¹¹ But perhaps of more relevance is his activity as a treasure seer. This is one of those pieces of the puzzle that, I believe, has been mishandled, or at least not fully appreciated by Mormon scholars generally. Some wish to compartmentalize Smith's treasure-seeing activity as irrelevant to his prophetic career, or to view it as some kind of psychic training-ground for

8. Marvin S. Hill, "Joseph Smith and the 1826 Trial: New Evidence and New Difficulties," *Brigham Young University Studies* 12 (Winter 1972): 232.

9. Hill, "Brodie Revisited," 74-75.

10. See Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1984), 16, 17; and Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith: Volume 2, Journal, 1832-1842* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1992), 2, 5.

11. See Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy: A History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986), 61. On 26 May 1844 Joseph Smith countered those who were accusing him of practicing polygamy, stating: "What a thing it is for a man to be accused of committing adultery, and having seven wives, when I can only find one" (Joseph Smith, Jr., et al., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 7 vols. [2nd ed. rev.; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1948 printing], 6:411). Such statements from the pulpit succeeded in misleading many of the Saints who remained unaware that Smith was privately practicing polygamy until the church made a formal statement in 1852.

the developing prophet.¹² If these perspectives are not entirely inaccurate, they are at least incomplete.

Despite an attempt to minimize his early involvement in treasure searching, Smith was in reality an aggressive and ambitious leader among the competing treasure seers of Manchester, New York. It was in fact his unparalleled reputation as a treasure seer that drew Josiah Stowell to hire Smith, not as a digger, but as a seer to locate treasure.¹³ From November 1825 until his arrest and court hearing in South Bainbridge in March 1826, Smith was employed by Stowell and others to locate treasure not only in Harmony, Pennsylvania, but also at various locations in the southern New York counties of Broome and Chenango.¹⁴ During the 1826 proceeding, Smith admitted under oath that he had been actively engaged as a treasure seer for the past three years and that he had recently decided to abandon the practice because it was straining his eyes.¹⁵ It was not without reason that Smith tried to conceal these facts in his history: if he did not consider them at odds with his role as prophet, he at least found them easier to omit than to explain.

It is when we examine specific examples of Smith's treasure seeing that apologetic or traditionalist explanations run aground. Jonathan Thompson, for instance, testifying in Smith's defense at the court hearing, reported that on one occasion Smith located a treasure chest with his seer stone. After digging several feet, the men struck something sound-

12. Richard Bushman, who concludes that "[t]he Smith family at first was no more able to distinguish true religion from superstition than their neighbors" and "were as susceptible to the neighbors' belief in magic as they were to the teachings of orthodox ministers," believes Smith's treasure-seeking activities were irrelevant to his subsequent career as a prophet (*Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984], 72). Whereas Michael Quinn attempts to demolish the barriers between magic and religion and, in accepting Smith's activities as a treasure seer as "real," sees Smith's activities as a treasure seer as part of his development as a prophet (*Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* [Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987], 46). See also Richard L. Anderson, "The Mature Joseph Smith and Treasure Searching," *Brigham Young University Studies* 24 (Fall 1984): 489-560, which attempts to combine both perspectives.

13. Besides not telling about his procurement of a seer stone from the Chase family in 1822, Smith concealed the major role he played in Stowell's treasure-digging venture in Harmony, Pennsylvania, by portraying himself as merely a hired hand (Smith, *History of the Church*, 1:17; see also Dan Vogel, ed., *Early Mormon Documents* [Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996], 1:67-68).

14. See Dan Vogel, "The Locations of Joseph Smith's Early Treasure Quests," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 27 (Fall 1994): 213-27.

15. The trial transcript was published in "A Document Discovered," *Utah Christian Advocate* (Salt Lake City) 3 (Jan. 1886): 1. Concerning Smith's confession, Justice Albert Neely recorded in his docket: "[Smith] has occasionally been in the habit of looking through this stone to find lost property for 3 years, but of late had pretty much given it up on account of injuring his Health, especially his eyes, made them sore—that he did not solicit business of this kind, and had always rather declined having anything to do with this business."

ing like a board or plank. Excitedly they asked Smith to look into his stone again, probably to verify the source of the sound as there was apparently some doubt. But, as Thompson reported, Smith "would not look again pretending that he was alarmed ... on account of the circumstances relating to the trunk being buried [which] came all fresh to his mind, that the last time that he looked, he discovered distinctly, the two Indians who buried the trunk, that a quarrel ensued between them and that one of said Indians was killed by the other and thrown into the hole beside of the trunk, to guard it as he supposed." Despite failing to uncover the trunk, Thompson remained a believer in Smith's "professed skill," explaining to the court that "on account of an enchantment, the trunk kept settling away from under them while digging."

Those who believe Smith literally translated the Book of Mormon from anciently engraved plates or who attempt to dismiss his previous treasure-seeing activities as irrelevant have difficulty with Thompson's testimony. Central to their conundrum is the knowledge that Smith used the same stone later to translate the Book of Mormon. The implications are obvious: if Smith *actually* translated and received revelations with his stone, as Mormon apologists maintain, didn't he also locate *real* buried treasure by the same means? Specifically, in the instance that Thompson reported, was there an actual trunk and did Smith really see the two Indians who had fought over it?

Any explanation of Joseph Smith must account for the details provided by Thompson's friendly testimony if it is to be taken seriously. As I view it, there are three possible interpretations, none of which fits comfortably with traditionalist views of Smith and his subsequent work as a translator: (1) Smith saw a treasure chest in his stone that was not really there; in other words, his visions and revelations were the product of his imagination; (2) Smith saw nothing in his stone but only pretended that he did; and (3) Smith saw a real treasure chest in his stone which, no matter the explanation, was never recovered. Thus, to be consistent, apologists must either accept the treasure-seeking lore of Smith's day as reality—including belief in seer stones, mineral rods, guardian spirits, bleeding ghosts, enchanted treasures that slip through the earth, and the like—as D. Michael Quinn has done,¹⁶ and thereby reject rationalist categories of historical investigation, or come face-to-face with a Joseph Smith who either consciously or unconsciously deceived.

The fact that Smith allowed family and friends—even those hostile to his claims such as Lucy Harris and Isaac Hale—to handle the plates while

16. "Unfortunately," Quinn states, "Mormon apologists have in the past accepted rationalist categories of superstition and fraud rather than Smith's and his supporters' affirmations of supernatural powers from the perspective of folk magic" (Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 46).

covered with a cloth or concealed in a box excludes the possibility of an unconscious fraud. Likewise, a detailed examination of Smith's activities as a treasure seer presents examples not easily explained as Smith's self-deception. Josiah Stowell, another believer in Smith's gift, testified at the same court hearing that Smith said that he saw in his stone a treasure "on a certain Root of a stump 5 feet from [the] surface of the earth, and with it would be found a tail feather." After digging, Stowell said that they "found a tail feather, but the money was gone, that he supposed that [the] money moved down." The discovery of an object not normally found underground becomes either proof of Smith's true gift or evidence of his fraudulent activity, for the deluded do not accomplish such feats. In this instance, rather than accept Stowell's explanation for the treasure's disappearance, it seems easier to suggest that Smith planted the tail feather during a previous visit to the area or, more likely, during the process of digging. It may have been this kind of activity that gave Smith an edge over his competitors, perhaps also explaining how he excelled them in reputation.

Despite the apparent evidence of conscious fraud, I would caution against viewing Smith's activity as a treasure seer in either/or terms, for it is possible that Smith was both deluded and deceptive in his operations. In other words, Smith may have been sincere in his claims about seeing treasures and guardian spirits in his stone but was sometimes tempted to provide proof through fraudulent means, either to satisfy his followers or silence his enemies. Although the evidence for fraud is more easily demonstrated, nevertheless Smith's complaint about being persecuted for his gift, if not pure rhetoric, may have been sincere after all.

In the Book of Mormon, Smith does not deny the treasure-seer's world view but integrates it with his subsequent religious beliefs, describing cursed and slippery treasures (Hel. 12:18-19; 13:17-22, 31; Morm. 1:18-19) while restricting the use of the seer stone to translating (Mosiah 8:13-18). The fact that Smith's claimed interviews with the heavenly messenger were concurrent with his treasure seeing and that he later used the same stone to translate the Book of Mormon excludes any explanation that attempts to separate the two roles.¹⁷ If Mormon historians remain unpersuaded by the preceding analysis, as I suspect they will, they will at least better understand the dilemma of which Shipps speaks.

17. Marvin S. Hill has similarly argued that "there was certainly more continuity between the money-digging religious culture and the early Mormon movement than some historians have recognized. Joseph Smith began receiving revelations as a prophet in 1823, and thus began assuming the role central to his religious movement long before he abandoned his money digging in 1827" (*Quest for Refuge: The Mormon Flight from American Pluralism* [Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989], 20).

II

Hullinger's devout-fraud thesis has the advantage of harmonizing many disparities in the historical record concerning Joseph Smith, and explains much of his motives and character that otherwise remains elusive. But Hullinger, in my opinion, did not go far enough, for—like Brodie—he never attempted to explore the underlying assumption of his thesis. In other words, what were the rationalizations or, more precisely, the inner moral conflicts of an individual who deceives in God's name while also holding sincere religious beliefs?

In rejecting Brodie's paradigm, one need not confuse Smith's inner, spiritual world with the prophet-image that he projected to his followers. Those close to Smith eventually discovered the disparity between the mantle and the man, between the persona and the person. Historians too must distinguish between the public and private Joseph Smith, between the myth and the man, and peel back the layers of Smith's public image, created to satisfy the demands of his followers, to reveal the "real" Joseph Smith, or at least his true beliefs and assumptions. We must seek to discover the emotional, spiritual, and intellectual "reality" from which he operated. It is not enough to know that Smith was religious, or had a spiritual dimension to his character, one must know what those beliefs were—for what is privately believed, as opposed to publicly taught, makes all the difference.

Sometimes private beliefs can be clearly stated but withheld from the public, as with plural marriage. But often privately held beliefs and assumptions are unconsciously or unintentionally revealed in the implied or connotative meaning of texts. The remainder of this essay examines the texts of the Book of Mormon and Smith's early revelations, highlighting instances in which he articulated the ideas and philosophies of an apparent religious pretender, even the very principles upon which a pious deception could be founded.

A revelation dictated by Smith in March 1830—the very month that the Book of Mormon came off the press—is most revealing of Smith's early state of mind. Directed at Martin Harris, the revelation defends Universalist doctrine, a seeming reversal of Book of Mormon teaching,¹⁸

18. Dan Vogel, "Anti-Universalist Rhetoric in the Book of Mormon," in Brent Lee Metcalfe, ed., *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 21-52. Actually, the Book of Mormon's attack on Universalism seems to focus on those who believe in no punishment after death. Only in one instance does the Book of Mormon attack Restorationists (2 Ne. 28:8). However, in this passage the Book of Mormon does not attack their belief directly but rather their attitude of taking the punishment for sin too lightly. Regardless, Alma speaks of the "punishment, which also was eternal as the life of the soul" (Alma 42:16). The revelation's concept of atonement is also at odds with the Book of Mormon's teachings about the necessity of an "infinite" atonement (2 Ne. 9:7; Alma 34:10, 12), a concept Universalists rejected.

and advances an unorthodox version of Jesus' atonement.¹⁹ A close examination of this revelation reveals not only Smith's private belief in Universalism but also an unintentional glimpse into his pious rationalizations.

Despite scriptural references to the torment and suffering of the wicked, the revelation declares "it is not written that there shall be no end to this torment" (D&C 19:6), explaining that the terms "eternal punishment" and "endless punishment" simply mean "God's punishment," that "eternal" and "endless" are synonyms for God's name (vv. 10-12). In other words, "endless" and "eternal" have reference to the nature or quality of the punishment, not to its duration.²⁰

While one might wish to conclude that Smith was simply placating Harris, whose Universalist beliefs may have caused him some misgivings about the book he had promised to sponsor financially, I suggest that the Restorationist tone of the revelation reflects Smith's true theological leanings—leanings he would develop further in his 1832 vision of three heavens (D&C 76). The revelation itself suggests a reason for the conflicting doctrines, stating that God has purposely used misleading language in order "that it might work upon the hearts of the children of men" (D&C 19:7). In other words, God sometimes deceives humankind for their own good. This is exactly the kind of rationalization one expects of a pious deceiver or religious pretender.

Not surprisingly the revelation invokes secrecy concerning its contents. Fearing that its teaching of a temporary hell would encourage sinners to remain unrepentant, the revelation instructs its recipients to "preach nought but repentance; and show not these things, neither speak these things unto the world, for they can not bear meat, but milk they must receive: Wherefore, they must not know these things lest they perish" (BofC

19. By 1830 the Universalist denomination was overwhelmingly Unitarian, denying the deity of Jesus and rejecting orthodox concepts of the Atonement. Of course, there was the odd Universalist church like the one in Charleston, South Carolina, that declared in 1829 its belief in trinitarianism (see *The Evangelists' Manual: or a Guide to Trinitarian Universalists* [Charleston, S.C., 1829]). On an individual level the matter was fluid, as is illustrated in a letter from M. Wing to his brother living in Montpelier, Vermont, dated 10 March 1827. The orthodox brother writes: "You should not blame me David, for not correctly representing the sentiments of the Universalists for there are hardly two societies that agree in every thing. Those in this neighborhood, & a majority, I believe, elsewhere, believe there is no other punishment than what takes place in this world. But that which gave me most pain, was your denial of the Divinity of the Son of God. It is not necessarily connected with Universalism, & I did not suppose you had embraced it. ..." (as quoted in Rick Grunder, *Mormon List* 23, Mar. 1987, [15]).

20. This is not unlike the argument of Unitarian-Universalist Hosea Ballou (see *A Treatise on Atonement* [Randolph, VT: Sereno Wright, 1805], 161-62).

16:22-23, emphasis added; compare D&C 19:21-22).²¹ Despite publicly posing as a believer in the traditional heaven and hell, Smith was privately a Universalist and therefore did not fear an eternal, never-ending hell that would have troubled most pious deceivers.

Like previous religious pretenders, Smith may have taken comfort in such biblical examples as Abraham and Jacob. Fearing for his life, Abraham instructed his wife Sarah to withhold their true marital status from the Egyptians and present him instead as her brother (Gen. 12:10-20; 20:12). This was a half-truth, certainly, but a deliberate deception nonetheless.

Perhaps responding to those who found it difficult to excuse Abraham's behavior,²² Smith included in his Book of Abraham a predictable variation on the already troubling story. Instead of Abraham telling his wife to lie about their marital status, Smith has God instruct Abraham to tell Sarah to lie (Abr. 2:22-25/Gen. 12:11-13).²³ Thus in excusing Abraham, Smith introduced the more troubling proposition that God is sometimes the author of deception. This assertion would have outraged orthodox believers, that is, had they been paying sufficient attention to

21. When published in the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants, this passage was altered to explain why its stipulated secrecy had been violated by publication: "show not these things unto the world *until it is wisdom in me*. For they cannot bear meat *now*" (D&C 19:21-22). And the phrase "neither speak these things" was deleted. Publication of this revelation in 1833 and 1835 was to Smith's advantage as it improved his position with those having difficulty accepting his 1832 vision of three heavens, because it provided the needed transition between the Book of Mormon and the vision.

22. Commenting on Abraham's defense in Genesis 20:12 that he had not lied but only suppressed part of the truth, Methodist Adam Clarke, for example, said: "*What is a lie?* It is any action done or word spoken, whether true or false in itself, which the doer or speaker wishes the observer or hearer to take in a *contrary* sense to that which he knows to be true. It is, in a word, any action done or speech delivered with *the intention to deceive*, though both may be absolutely true and right in themselves" (*The Holy Bible ... With a Commentary and Critical Notes* [New York, 1810], s.v., Gen. 20:12). Making no excuses for Abraham, Clarke criticized the ancient patriarch and concluded: "Had Abraham possessed more charity for man and confidence in God at this time, he had not fallen into that snare from which he barely escaped."

23. This portion of the Book of Abraham, absent from all extant manuscript copies, was probably written in Nauvoo shortly before publication in the *Times and Seasons* in 1842 (see "The Book of Abraham," *Times and Seasons* 3 [15 Mar. 1842]: 719). Susan Staker has suggested that Smith's alteration of Genesis should be understood in the context of the prophet's secret polygynous and polyandrous marriages in Nauvoo. She argues that Smith's Book of Abraham version seemed to justify the secrecy and deception he requested of his wives. See Susan Staker, "'The Lord Said, Thy Wife Is a Very Fair Woman to Look Upon': The Book of Abraham, Secrets, and Lying for the Lord," 17 Aug. 1996, Sunstone Theological Symposium, Salt Lake City, copy in my possession.

Smith's teachings.²⁴ It was nevertheless a concept that fit with Smith's personal and private theology.

Jacob's deception of Isaac is perhaps the most striking example from the Bible (Gen. 27). At the instigation of his mother Rebekah, who agreed to receive the curse should Isaac discover the deception (v. 13), Jacob extracted the first-born's blessing from his blind father by pretending to be his older twin brother, Esau. Of course, the deception is justified on the grounds that Esau had incorrectly left the womb first and that deception was necessary to fulfill God's will. In the popular commentary of Smith's day, Methodist Adam Clarke dismissed the suggestion of some that Rebekah was acting under "Divine inspiration," but nevertheless quoted one ancient Chaldaic Targum that renders Rebekah's words differently from the Hebrew or Septuagint versions: "It has been revealed to me by prophecy that the curses will not come upon thee, my son." Seemingly aware of the story's possible misuse, Clarke warned that the author of Genesis "nowhere says that God would have any man to copy this conduct."²⁵

Despite such biblical precedent, Universalism remains a major element in Smith's ability to rationalize his fraudulent activities, both as a treasure seer and later as a prophet. Where the Book of Mormon and March 1830 revelation worry that Universalism leads to laxity towards God's commandments, we find an explanation for Smith's own tendency to fall into "divers temptations to the gratification of many appetites offensive in the sight of God."²⁶ Combined with a belief that God sometimes deceives in order to save his children, Universalism helps explain how Smith could perpetrate a religious deception while at the same time having the appearance of a deep and sincere faith. Those who continue to overlook this aspect of his private belief system will never understand his evolution as a prophet.

III

The opening portion of the Book of Mormon includes the story of

24. In this regard one might consider the reaction of Warren Parrish to a similar situation involving Sidney Rigdon, a counselor in the First Presidency. Among other things Parrish, who was in May 1837 quickly becoming disenchanted with Mormonism, accused Rigdon of "lying & declaring that God required it at his hands" (Warren Parrish to Bishop Newel K. Whitney, 29 May 1837, Newel K. Whitney Papers, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah).

25. Clarke, *The Holy Bible*, s.v., Gen. 27:13.

26. Joseph Smith, Manuscript History of the Church, Book A-1, 5, Joseph Smith Papers, archives, Historical Department, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah, hereafter LDS archives (Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:63). The phrase "to the gratification of many appetites" was subsequently stricken from Smith's History.

Nephi obtaining the brass plates through deception and murder (1 Ne. 4). Despite the Spirit's command, Nephi is hesitant to kill the drunken and defenseless Laban. "Never at any time have I shed the blood of man," Nephi protests (v. 10). This is not unlike the moral dilemma that Abraham faced when commanded to sacrifice his son Isaac, only that Nephi actually carries out the directive (Gen. 22:1-14; cf. D&C 132:36, 50-51). The Spirit reissues the command and reasons with Nephi: "Slay him, for the Lord hath delivered him into thy hands; behold the Lord slayeth the wicked to bring forth his righteous purposes. It is better that one man should perish than that a nation should dwindle and perish in unbelief" (1 Ne. 4:12-13; cf. John 11:50). Overcoming his aversion to murder, Nephi cuts Laban's head off with his own sword. Dressed in Laban's armor, Nephi—like biblical Jacob—deceives Laban's servant into giving him the brass plates. Thus by crossing moral lines Nephi accomplished the Lord's errand and thereby preserved the Hebrew scriptures for future Nephite generations.

I suggest that on the evening of 21-22 September 1823 seventeen-year-old Joseph Smith spent a sleepless night struggling with his own moral dilemma, whether or not to proceed with his story of finding gold plates. On the following morning, as the story goes, while returning from the field an angelic messenger appeared to him and—similar to the exchange between the Spirit and Nephi—chastised him for not telling his father about the plates as previously instructed. Smith had hesitated, fearing that he would not be believed. But the angel commanded him to tell his father and promised that he would "believe every word."²⁷ This was a decisive moment in Smith's career, although the story takes on a different cast if one views Smith as a pious pretender. In this instance, the event becomes the moment of Smith's resolve to cross moral lines, perhaps with the Spirit's urging, to invent the existence of the plates for a good cause. While Nephi pretended to be the evil Laban to gain access to the brass plates, Smith would pretend to be Mormon, the ancient editor of the plates.

The Book of Mormon's version of Adam's fall also lends itself to pious rationalizations. A radical departure from orthodox Christianity, the Book of Mormon declares that the Fall was part of God's plan, that it would ultimately produce more good than evil: "Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy" (2 Ne. 2:25). Similar to Nephi, Joseph's Adam found it necessary to violate God's commandment not to eat of the tree of knowledge in order to fulfill a higher law and bring about a greater good. Smith was not the originator of what is some-

27. Lucy Smith, "Preliminary Manuscript," 81, LDS archives (Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:291).

times called the "fortunate Fall," but for more than obvious reasons he was attracted to an otherwise obscure idea.

The essence of what probably attracted the would-be prophet to the fortunate Fall is clearly set forth in the words of fifth-century theologian St. Augustine: "The works of God are so wisely and exquisitely contrived that, when an angelic and human creature sins ... it fulfills what He willed."²⁸ English poet John Milton portrayed Adam as uncertain if he should even repent of his sin, since by it God had produced so much good that otherwise would have remained undone: "O goodness infinite, goodness immense!/ That all this good of evil shall produce,/ And evil turn to good; more wonderful/ Than that which by creation first brought forth ..." In order that "much more good ... shall spring" from his sin, Milton's Adam decides to delay repentance trusting in God's mercy.²⁹ Thus, unlike Eve, Adam had willfully sinned and knowingly brought both spiritual and physical death upon himself—all for the good of humankind. The advantages of the fortunate Fall for the pious deceiver are obvious, and Smith was perhaps attracted to it because it seemed to justify the ethically contradictory actions of his own mission.

IV

Assuming Joseph Smith to be a pious deceiver, did he—like the Targum's Rebekah or even his own Abraham—believe his deception was inspired of God? Specifically, did Smith believe the Book of Mormon was inspired although he knew it was not ancient history?³⁰ Despite Smith's claims that the Book of Mormon resulted from a purely mechanical process of translation (one in which Smith simply read the translation from

28. As quoted in Sterling M. McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1965), 73.

29. *Ibid.*

30. Some may wish to retain their belief that the Book of Mormon is ancient history despite the possibility that Smith lied about the plates, or that despite his construction of fake plates Smith nevertheless believed he was dictating ancient history. While this is possible, the awkwardness with which he handled Harris's loss of the translation manuscript, particularly his subsequent creation of the "small" and "large" plates of Nephi and the clumsy addition of the explanatory bridge between the two records called "The Words of Mormon," not to mention the convenient revelations issuing therefrom (D&C 3 and 10), suggest conscious fabrication (see Quinn Brewster, "The Structure of the Book of Mormon: A Theory of Evolutionary Development," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 29 [Summer 1996]: 109-40; and Brent Lee Metcalfe, "The Priority of Mosiah: A Prelude to Book of Mormon Exegesis," in *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon*, 395-437).

the seer stone),³¹ he seems to have actually operated from a liberal view of revelation, one that rationalizes the production of fraudulent scripture.

Early in the work of translation, Oliver Cowdery expressed a desire to translate and received permission through a revelation Smith dictated (D&C 8). However, without use of the translator's stone, Cowdery did not know how to proceed. A subsequent revelation explained his failure:

Behold you have not understood, you have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me. But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you: therefore, you shall feel that it is right. But if it be not right you shall have no such feelings, but you shall have a stupor of thought that shall cause you to forget the thing which is wrong; therefore, you cannot write that which is sacred save it be given you from me. Now, if you had known this you could have translated (D&C 9:7-10).

As an experienced rod worker and clairvoyant, Cowdery naturally expected the "translation" to be revealed to him from an outside source. In the previous revelation, God had promised him: "I will tell you in your mind and in your heart, by the Holy Ghost" (D&C 8:2). Now he is being told that "you must study it out in your mind"—that the translation would come from his own thoughts. Thoughts about what? What is there to work out in one's mind if there is nothing there to begin with? If the thoughts come from his own mind, is not that the same as writing the book himself? It is doubtful that Cowdery found such a definition of translation useful—at least, he never returned to the subject although "other records" awaited his attention (D&C 9:2).

Regardless of the outcome, the revelation hints that Smith privately held a definition of translation and revelation that was more liberal than that of many of his followers, one which is so internal that the seer stone and the plates become mere props. Of course, Smith encouraged the view that he was simply reading the God-given translation from his

31. Those close to Smith during the translation—Emma Smith, Martin Harris, and David Whitmer—all describe a mechanical process of translation. For a discussion of this testimony, see Richard Van Wagoner and Steven Walker, "Joseph Smith: The Gift of Seeing," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 15 (Summer 1982): 48-68; and James E. Lancaster, "The Translation of the Book of Mormon," Dan Vogel, ed., *The Word of God: Essays on Mormon Scripture* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 97-112. Smith's inability to translate when Harris secretly switched stones demonstrates that the stone was essential to the translation process, not incidental as some apologists have asserted—at least as Smith explained his gift to his followers (see, e.g., Edward Stevenson to the Editor, 30 Nov. 1881, *Deseret Evening News* 15 [13 Dec. 1881]).

stone when actually he was working the words out in his mind, dictating the words he felt good about and forgetting those not worth remembering. In Smith's view, the words were inspired regardless of their true origin.

Near the close of the Book of Mormon, Moroni writes that "every thing which inviteth and enticeth to do good, and to love God, and to serve him, is inspired of God" (Moro. 7:13). And again, "every thing which inviteth to do good, and to persuade to believe in Christ, is sent forth by the power and gift of Christ; wherefore ye may know with a perfect knowledge it is of God" (v. 16). In another place Christ is made to reason: "These things are true; for it persuadeth men to do good. And whatsoever thing persuadeth men to do good is of me; for good cometh of none save it be of me. I am the same that leadeth men to all good" (Eth. 4:11-12). Thus even if Smith wrote the Book of Mormon himself, under this definition it was inspired of God because it attempts to persuade humankind to do good and to believe in Christ.

Smith's reasoning was simple: the Book of Mormon is of God because "all things which are good cometh of Christ" (Eth. 4:24), for the devil "persuadeth no man to do good, no, not one; neither do his angels; neither do they who subject themselves unto him" (v. 17). Thus he would have extended the principle to include himself: his desire to save others, even if by deception, was a good thing and therefore inspired of God, not Satan, and evil men do not perform good deeds.

Early in his career Smith probably conceived his prophetic role much the same as the Book of Mormon prophets, who for the most part write according to their best knowledge rather than by direct revelation. Mormon, whose early life parallels Smith's—including being "visited of the Lord" at age fifteen—became the editor by "commandment" and records the things he has "both seen and heard" (Morm. 1:1, 5). He was chosen to write the final chapter of his people's history because he is "sober" and "quick to observe" (v. 2). His son Moroni later confesses that he and his father made their records "according to our knowledge" (9:32). Nephi also made his record by "commandment of the Lord" and "according to my knowledge" (1 Ne. 1:3; 9:3, 5; 19:2, 3), and is qualified for the work because he is "highly favored of the Lord" and possesses "a great knowledge of the goodness and the mysteries of God" (1:1). Perhaps Smith, too, believed that he was specially qualified to write scripture, that God had called upon him because of his talent as a story teller and considerable powers of persuasion, that he was inspired by God in the general but not in every particular.

V

In pursuing the prophet puzzle, I have sought to understand Joseph Smith, not condemn him. Smith, to be sure, presents historians with a formidable puzzle, but, as Shipp's said, "The mystery of Mormonism cannot be solved until we solve the mystery of Joseph Smith."³² The paradigm explored in this essay attempts not only to bring Shipp's two Joseph's together but to search out his motives, inner conflicts, and rationalizations, as suggested by Hill. Because this model has the advantage of explaining the historical record more fully than previous attempts, either pro or con, I believe it may be destined to replace Brodie's, at least as far as non-Mormon historians are concerned.

In refining Hullinger's thesis, I suggest that Smith really believed he was called of God to preach repentance to a sinful world but that he felt justified in using deception to accomplish his mission more fully. Like the faith healer who uses confederates to create a faith-promoting atmosphere in which true miracles can occur, Smith assumed the role of prophet, produced the Book of Mormon, and issued revelations to create a setting in which true conversion experiences could take place. It is the true healings and conversions that not only justify deception but convince the pious frauds that they are perhaps after all real healers or real prophets.

What did Smith hope to accomplish by his pious deception? One goal, as the March 1830 revelation shows, was to bring humankind to repentance. Initially, Smith hoped to frighten his fellow humans into repentance and therefore help them avoid the torments of even a temporary hell. Later he used the incentive of higher rewards. Meanwhile, if humankind was saved by incorrectly believing in an eternal hell, to that end Smith believed his method was justified. Whatever the means, he believed his followers would be saved as long as their repentance and faith in Christ were sincere.

What did he believe his own fate would be? Perhaps he believed that with God's sanction he would escape punishment, but there is another possibility, one that takes us to the core of his private world. The March 1830 revelation declares that the unrepentant would suffer for their own sins: "For behold, I, God, have suffered these things for all, that they might not suffer if they would repent; But if they would not repent they must suffer even as I" (D&C 19:16-17). Of course, the idea that humans can suffer as Jesus did for their own sins is viewed by orthodox Christians as an infringement on Jesus' infinite atonement. But in Smith's day it was a concept held by many Restorationists in one form or another. Ap-

32. Shipp, "Prophet Puzzle," 19.

plied to Smith's pious deception, his reasoning perhaps went something like the following: those who believe the Book of Mormon and repent, regardless of the book's true origin, will be saved or, perhaps of more immediate concern, will not be destroyed at Jesus' appearance. For this act, Smith—like Jesus—would suffer in a temporary hell and become a savior to his followers.³³

Smith's March 1830 revelation, the Book of Abraham, the story of Nephi and Laban, and the fortunate Fall demonstrate that Smith believed that God sometimes inspires deception, that some sins are according to his will, or that occasionally it is necessary to break one commandment in order to fulfill a higher law. Smith likened the command to take plural wives to Abraham's moral conundrum (D&C 132:29-37), and in attempting to coax twenty-year-old Nancy Rigdon into secretly becoming a plural wife in 1842 Smith argued that "That which is wrong under one circumstance, may be and often is, right under another. ... Whatever God requires is right, no matter what it is, although we may not see the reason thereof till long after the events transpire."³⁴ We may never know exactly Smith's reasoning, but we can at least say that if he wrote the Book of Mormon, became a prophet, and founded the church as a pious deception, it is evident he had the psychological means of justifying such acts.

33. That Smith's mission of saving souls went beyond the usual calling of sinners to repentance is hinted at when the Book of Mormon applies Old Testament scripture, traditionally interpreted as messianic prophecy, to Joseph Smith. Jesus, for instance, is made to declare concerning the coming forth of the Book of Mormon: "there shall be among them those who will not believe it, although a man shall declare it unto them [Acts 13:41]. But behold, the life of my servant shall be in my hand; therefore they shall not hurt him, although he shall be marred because of them. Yet I will heal him [Isa. 52:13-14], for I will show unto them that my wisdom is greater than the cunning of the devil" (3 Ne. 21:9-10; emphasis added). Here Jesus alludes to Isaiah's suffering servant (previously quoted in 20:43-44), traditionally interpreted as a messianic prophecy fulfilled in Jesus (compare John 12:37-38; Mark 9:12), and applies it to Joseph Smith. On a deeper psychological level, one might view Smith's death as an inevitable extension of a messiah complex. The *Broome County Courier* for 29 December 1831 may have picked up on this theme when it called Smith a "second Messiah."

34. Joseph Smith to Nancy Rigdon, Apr. 1842, *Sangamo Journal*, 19 Aug. 1842, as cited in Jessee, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 508; cf. Smith, *History of the Church*, 5:134-36.