

THE HISTORICAL JOSEPH

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Joseph Smith the Mormon Prophet. By John J. Stewart. Salt Lake City: Mercury Publishing Company, 1966. 256 pp. \$4.00. Hyrum Andrus, Professor of Modern Scripture at Brigham Young University, has written two books on Joseph Smith and is preparing a four-volume work on the life and thought of the Prophet.

Professor Stewart has given us a well-written biography of Joseph Smith. The book is divided into sixteen chapters, many of which draw their titles from key statements in Mormon literature that concern the events treated in the chapter. Judged by its nature and content, Professor Stewart's book is designed to introduce Joseph Smith as a man who claimed to be a prophet of God to the general reading public. As an introductory work, it serves an appropriate purpose and is essentially accurate. The reader's attention is kept alive by the steady flow of events and by the interesting way in which Stewart presents the history of the Mormon Prophet.

Professor Stewart corrects some misconceptions about Joseph Smith thoughtlessly perpetuated by many writers. One of these is the myth that the Mormon Prophet was essentially a visionary man with no real ability in practical affairs. Brigham Young, according to this version, was a down-to-earth realist with few if any significant spiritual qualities. The truth is that both men had great spiritual powers, and both relied implicitly upon the manifestations of the Holy Spirit in their lives. In his ability to commune with the Infinite, however, Joseph Smith was far superior to Brigham Young. Both men were also natural leaders. But here again, Joseph Smith possessed abilities far above those of Brigham Young. Brigham Young did exceed the Prophet in the ability to accumulate wealth according to nineteenth century practices. But in the ability to organize men and project plans and schemes designed to benefit people, Joseph Smith was far in advance of his successor. It is difficult, if not impossible, to find one practical operation initiated by Brigham Young in the West that was not patterned after something Joseph Smith did.

There are some limitations in Professor Stewart's work that should be noted. It is not a comprehensive nor a profound analysis of the Prophet. The writer frequently relies upon a single source of information, the Prophet's *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, when other sources that would enhance the accuracy of the story are readily available. Having read this book, the serious student of early Mormon history is left to ponder the merits and demerits of another general, and at places superficial, treatment of the life of Joseph Smith.

Though well written, the volume lacks depth and at times is in error, not so much in the general picture it reflects as in the details. Samuel Smith was a younger, not an older, brother of the Prophet (p. 9). Alvin, the eldest brother, died in 1823, not in 1824 (p. 22).¹ Martin Harris did not visit noted

¹ One task of an historian is to re-check accepted facts against original evidence. The date generally accepted for Alvin's death is November 19, 1824. But this is obviously an error. For example, on September 25, 1824, the *Wayne Sentinel*, a weekly periodical published at Palmyra, New York, carried an article written by Joseph Smith, Sr., repudiating rumors that Alvin's body had been exhumed and dissected. To counter these rumors, the elder

linquists in the East merely to satisfy his own curiosity concerning the record Joseph Smith claimed to possess. When the angel Moroni revealed the ancient record in 1823, he stated that "the scripture must be fulfilled before it is translated, which says that the words of a book, which are sealed, were presented to the learned; for thus has God determined to leave men without excuse, and show the meek that his arm is not shortened that it cannot save."² After Joseph Smith obtained the plates, his mother therefore explained: "The first step that he was instructed [by the Lord] to take in regard to this work was to make a *facsimile* of some of the characters, which were called reformed Egyptian, and to send them to some of the most learned men of this generation and ask them for the translation thereof."³ It was to fulfill this requirement that Martin Harris was sent by the Prophet to the East.

Another erroneous view which Professor Stewart accepts and passes on to his readers concerns the history of the translation of the Book of Mormon. After Martin Harris lost the manuscript book of Lehi, the Prophet did not "start over" again by translating the Small Plates of Nephi to take the place of the lost manuscript (pp. 26-27). Instead, a thorough study of the problem indicates that he continued translating from the Plates of Mormon until he had finished this part of the Book of Mormon.⁴ Only then did he translate the Small Plates of Nephi. Professor Stewart also perpetuates the popular, but erroneous, view that Joseph Smith received instructions to translate the Small Plates of Nephi shortly after the loss of the Book of Lehi. The revelation containing these instructions (now section 10 of the Doctrine and Covenants) is currently dated as having been received in the summer of 1828. The original date assigned to this revelation (and that which was given in every printed edition of the revelations until many years after the Prophet's death) was May, 1829. Despite what historians read into the meaning of Joseph Smith's introduction to this revelation, historical evidence conclusively supports the original date. Not until May, 1829, after Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery had been translating for some time, did they receive instructions to translate the Small Plates of Nephi and fill the historical gap caused by the lost manuscript.

It is on points such as these that Professor Stewart reveals his shortcomings as an historian. To cite another example, the only reason Oliver Cowdery desired to translate was because he was not content with being a mere scribe (p. 28). Stewart fails to mention that before that time Cowdery had received the keys of translation jointly with the Prophet, giving him the right to translate.⁵ Again, Professor Stewart mentions that Joseph Smith once ordained David Whitmer to be his successor and that this fact is evidence that Joseph was very impressed with David in the early years of their association (p. 30). But a thorough analysis of the matter affords a different conclusion. David

Smith and others had visited the grave and uncovered the body and found it to be undisturbed. This evidence indicates that Alvin could not have died in November of that year. The headstone at his grave bears the date of November 19, 1823.

² *Messenger and Advocate*, I (February, 1835), 80.

³ Lucy Mack Smith, *History of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City, 1954), p. 114.

⁴ Due to the limitations of time and space, the facts that bear out the above conclusions cannot be given here. This writer expects to present them in the first volume of a contemplated four-volume work on the Prophet.

⁵ Doctrine and Covenants, 6:25-28.

Whitmer was chosen to preside over the High Council in Zion. This council was a presiding body in the Church, on the General Authority level of church administration.⁶ Until the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles was organized in 1835, the High Council in Zion stood next to the First Presidency in the government of the Church. In the proper order of succession in the Priesthood, David Whitmer, who had been ordained an apostle, stood next to the Prophet in the event of Joseph's death or apostasy.⁷ The fact is that Joseph Smith was very reluctant to call Whitmer to that high position; and it was only after he had expressed serious doubts about David's dedication and loyalty to the cause of Zion that he reluctantly proceeded with the appointment.

Professor Stewart points to Joseph Smith's lack of ability as a grammarian as the only reason the manuscript of the Book of Mormon went to the printer "woefully lacking in punctuation, capitalization, paragraphing, and other mechanical and grammatical details" (p. 34). Had Joseph Smith been properly schooled in the rules of grammar it seems proper to conclude he would have attended to these matters. But the fact should also be stated that the Prophet claimed that the Book of Mormon was a translation of an ancient document, and in ancient times punctuation marks were not used. Some forms of punctuation originated in Alexandria, then the center of ancient learning, several centuries after Lehi left Jerusalem. But even then it was not until the 9th century after Christ that division of sentences by period, colon, and semicolon began. Professor Stewart fails to mention this side of the story and accredits the whole matter to the Prophet's lack of education, whereas the evidence indicates that Joseph Smith was not interested in tampering with the manuscript by inserting the needed grammatical details. It is better to have an accurate translation that is ungrammatical than an inaccurate one that is grammatically polished. Punctuation marks can make a difference in the meaning conveyed by a document. Having been a school teacher, Oliver Cowdery had a fair knowledge of the rules of grammar and could have taken care of these matters, had the Prophet so desired. But it was only when the printers raised the issue and put pressure on him that Joseph Smith reluctantly permitted the manuscript to be punctuated.

In summary, Professor Stewart has made a conscientious effort to give the reader an unbiased biography of Joseph Smith. He has used as a primary source the Prophet's own history — a body of information as complete and accurate as any historical collection known to man. Here Stewart's work stands in vivid contrast to most, if not all, treatments of Joseph Smith by non-Mormon writers. Though this book is inaccurate in some points of detail, it is well written and worthy of the general reader's attention.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 107:37. After the Saints left Missouri, this body was disorganized since it was designed to sit at the center place of Zion.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 18:9. See also *Journal of Discourses*, VI, p. 320, where Brigham Young states that David was an apostle. As the "second Elder" in the Church, Oliver Cowdery should have been considered as the Prophet's successor, but at this time he was out of favor due to serious indiscretions on his part.