

# Rediscovering the Context of Joseph Smith's Treasure Seeking

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ONE NIGHT IN 1811 IN ROYALTON, VERMONT, Joseph Smith, Sr., dreamed he was in a barren, silent, lifeless field. A spirit advised the elder Smith to eat the contents of a box that promised "wisdom and understanding." Immediately, "all manner of beasts, horned cattle, and roaring animals, rose up on every side in the most threatening manner possible, tearing the earth, tossing their horns, and bellowing most terrifically all around me, and they finally came so close upon me that I was compelled to drop the box, and fly for my life" (L. Smith 1853, 57). I think I know how the elder Smith felt. For, as a historian of rural America during the early Republic, I find myself in an analogous situation when I encounter documents like Joseph Smith, Jr.'s, 18 June 1825 letter to Josiah Stowell advising:

You know the treasure must be guarded by some clever spirit and if such is discovered so also is the treasure so do this take a hasel stick one yard long being new Cut and cleave it Just in the middle and lay it asunder on the mine so that both inner parts of the stick may look one right against the other one inch distant and if there is a treasure after a while you shall see them draw and Join together again of themselves (*Church News*, 12 May 1985).

Or when I read Martin Harris, writing to W. W. Phelps in 1830:

Joseph Smith Jr first come to my notice in the year of 1824. In the summer of that year I contracted with his father to build a fence on my property. In the corse of that work I aproach Joseph & ask how it is in a half day you put up what requires your father & 2 brothers a full day working together? He says I have not been with out assistance but can not say more only you better find out. The next day I take the older Smith by the arm & he says Joseph can see any thing he wishes by looking at a stone. Joseph often sees Spirits here with great kettles of coin money. It was Spirits

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who brought up rock because Joseph made no attempt on their money. I latter dream I converse with spirits which let me count their money. When I awake I have in my hand a dollar coin which I take for a sign. Joseph describes what I seen in every particular. Says he the spirits are greived so I through back the dollar (*Church News*, 28 April 1885).<sup>1</sup>

What had been a relatively plain and comprehensible documentary landscape suddenly comes alive with the inexplicable: with people matter-of-factly talking of guardian spirits, divining rods, seer stones, and treasures that move in the ground. As the current controversy over these newly publicized documents attests, new "wisdom and understanding" can be perplexing, even frightening.

But these new documents need not be so perplexing and frightening if we reconstruct the cultural context of rural America in the early nineteenth century, a context where treasure-seekers were neither fools nor deceivers, where treasure-seeking was part of an attempt to recapture the simplicity and magical power associated with apostolic Christianity. To recapture that context we need to exorcise the persistent spirit of Philastus Hurlbut, whom I'm using here to represent the entire nineteenth-century cult of rationality that so complicates our attempt to understand people in the past who mixed magic with their Christianity. For we today have inherited that cult's rigid insistence that magic and Christianity are polar opposites when in fact they have usually been inseparable and natural allies.

Magic is a particular way of looking at the universe. Magic perceives the supernatural as inseparably interwoven with the material world while the pure "religion" of definition divorces the two, separating them into distinct dimensions. Magic detects supernatural entities throughout our natural environment, intermediaries between man and God, spirits both good and evil that can hurt or help men and women both materially and spiritually. To minimize harm and secure benefit, people who believe they dwell in a magical cosmos practice rituals intended to influence the spiritual beings, the supernatural entities. In contrast, abstract "religion" strips the natural environment of its spirits and relocates God's divine power to a distant sphere. The sharp distinction between "magic" and "religion" seems clear and straightforward, but anthropologists and religious historians have repeatedly discovered that magic and religion have at most times and in most places been interwoven. Few people anywhere have ever possessed a religious faith shorn of hope that through its pursuit they could manipulate the supernatural for protection and benefit in this life as well as the next. Moreover, our century's neat distinction between magic and religion is laden with the value judgment that magic is superstitious, deluded, and irrational, if not downright evil, while religion is the lofty, abstract expression of our highest ideals (Jarvie and Agassi 1970; Nadel 1957; Thomas 1971, 25-77, 636-68).

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<sup>1</sup> I have added punctuation and necessary capitalization to the Smith-Stowell and Harris-Phelps letters. Between completion of this article and publication, new technical evidence presented at Mark Hofmann's preliminary hearing has challenged these two letters' authenticity. Perhaps forged, the documents skilfully summarize treasure seekings' nuances and links to early Mormonism as amply documented in other sources.

Hurlbut was a Mormon apostate who, in 1833, zealously collected affidavits in Palmyra and Manchester, New York, from people who described the Smith family's treasure-seeking. Hurlbut's affidavits (and subsequent anti-Mormon writers) implied that treasure-seeking was an ignorant superstition whose devotees were either credulous dupes or cunning con-men equally driven by materialistic greed (Howe 1840, 231-64; Tucker 1867, 20-22). Convinced that the Smiths were neither credulous nor devious, Mormon historians long denied that the family sought material treasure with occult methods. In the process, they implicitly accepted Hurlbut's premise that actual treasure-seekers were indeed deluded by superstition or driven by greed (Nibley 1961). This acceptance is readily understandable given that over the course of the nineteenth century, most Americans came to live in a disenchanted world that discredited magic; by the late nineteenth century, treasure beliefs seemed too incredible, too fantastic for anyone but fools or con-men to pursue. Consequently, the recent rediscovery of conclusive evidence that the Smiths were deeply involved in treasure-seeking is disconcerting for those Mormons who accepted the equation of treasure-seeking with ignorant superstition and cunning greed.

Indeed, although most recent Mormon historians recognize the Smiths's treasure-seeking, they remain sufficiently haunted by Hurlbut's premise to minimize folk magic's long-term influence on Joseph Smith, Jr., and its significance to the early Mormon faith (Bushman 1985; D. Hill 1977; M. Hill 1972; Newell and Avery 1984). The root of the problem is that, in assessing treasure seeking's meaning, historians are tempted to posit too stark a dichotomy between tradition and modernity, between magic and religion. They stress the ancient roots, continuity, and unity of occult beliefs across time and space. They refer to a wide array of very different belief complexes — Rosicrucianism, freemasonry, divining, alchemy, phrenology, astrology, visions, dreams, faith-healing — from different times and places as if their differences were unimportant — as if the essential point was that they were all occult, that they were all magical, that they were, in effect, all parts of a traditional world that had not yet discovered truly abstract religion and rational inquiry. By treating occult beliefs as a whole they miss the fact that specific beliefs are extremely revealing about the particular culture in place and time that develops them. Consequently they imply that the early Republic's treasure-seekers subscribed to a set of beliefs unchanged from the ancient Egyptians. Surely they are correct that venerable folk beliefs provided the intellectual raw materials exploited by the treasure-seekers, but they slight a second critical element: the degree to which those seekers actively, energetically, and innovatively reworked those beliefs to meet the challenges of their own place and time. To recognize the treasure-seekers' creativity we need to shed our assumption that what we call tradition was an immutable monolith. We cannot fully understand the treasure seekers if we continue to think of them as simple anachronisms, as practitioners of the timeless occult who were oblivious to, or rebellious against, the larger, cosmopolitan culture's trend toward empirical rationalism.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Here I differ with Quinn (1986, 48-49) and with Walker (1986). For a fuller statement of my views on the unique nature of the treasure-seeking practiced in America during

Indeed, I would argue that Joseph Smith, Jr.'s, transition from treasure-seeker to Mormon prophet was natural, easy, and incremental and that it resulted from the dynamic interaction of two simultaneous struggles: first, of seekers grappling with supernatural beings after midnight in the hillsides, and, second, of seekers grappling with hostile rationalists in the village streets during the day. Confronted with uncooperative spirits and with rationalism's challenge, over time the treasure-seekers adopted more complex and explicitly empirical techniques. Aware that the respectable considered them credulous fools, the seekers were determined to prove to themselves, if not to others, that they were in fact careful and canny investigators of the supernatural. In their quasi-scientific religiosity, these treasure-seekers were much more akin to their contemporaries, the spiritualists, than to ancient and medieval magicians. This is especially evident in the life of Joseph Smith's first and most important convert, Martin Harris: fellow treasure-seeker, and witness and financier of the Book of Mormon (Wood 1980).

Three interrelated characteristics loom large in every account of Martin Harris: substantial agricultural prosperity, limited formal education, and a restless religious curiosity. He was an honest, hard-working, astute man honored by his townsmen with substantial posts as fence-viewer and overseer of highways but never with the most prestigious offices: selectman, moderator, or assemblyman. (See Ronald G. Walker's essay in this issue; it is my source for information about Harris.) In the previous generation in rural towns like Palmyra substantial farmers like Harris would have reaped the highest status and most prestigious offices. But Harris lived in the midst of explosive cultural change as the capitalist market and its social relationships rode improved internal transportation into the most remote corners of the American countryside. The agents of that change were the newly arrived lawyers, printers, merchants, and respectable ministers who clustered in villages and formed a new elite committed to "improving" their towns *and* their humbler neighbors. The village elites belonged to a new self-conscious "middle class," simultaneously committed to commercial expansion and moral reform. Because of their superior contacts with and knowledge of the wider world, the new village elites reaped higher standing and prestigious posts from their awed neighbors (Johnson 1978).

Utterly self-confident in their superior rationality and access to urban ideas, the village elites disdained rural folk notions as ignorant, if not vicious, superstitions that obstructed commercial and moral "improvement." Through ridicule and denunciation, the village middle class aggressively practiced a sort of cultural imperialism that challenged the folk beliefs held by farmers like Martin Harris (Bushman 1985, 6-7, 71-72). Harris's material prosperity was comparable to the village elite's but, because of his hard physical labor and limited education, culturally he shared more with hardscrabble families like the Smiths. A village lawyer needed only scan Harris's gray homespun attire and large stiff hat to conclude that a farmer had come to town. A village minister

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the early Republic, see Taylor (1986). My views on the volatility of cultures labeled "traditional" have been influenced by Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) and Young (1983).

could tell from Harris's "disputatious" arguments for "visionary" religion that this was a country man who preferred reading his Bible to attending learned sermons.

A proud and sensitive man, Harris disliked the village elites for belittling his culture and for preempting the status that in the previous generation in rural towns like Palmyra would have gone to substantial farmers. Because western New York's village elites cooperated through membership in Masonic lodges, Harris's involvement in the anti-Masonic movement attests to the resentful suspicion he felt toward men with extensive external contacts and greater worldly knowledge. But this does *not* mean that he withdrew into a timeless, unchanging folk culture in utter rejection of the wider world and its new ideas. Instead he tried to defend his beliefs by proving to himself and others that the village elites' ridicule was misplaced, that the supernatural world of angels, spirits, and demons was every bit as "real" and subject to scientific understanding as the natural world, that indeed the supernatural was just that extension of the natural that men did not yet fully comprehend but could and would if they were willing to "experimentally" explore the spiritual dimension. In effect he meant to refute the respectable people's condescension by demonstrating that he was more wise than they, that his investigations opened the secrets of existence in a manner that the narrow-minded elite foreclosed. Small wonder then that his favorite biblical quotation, paraphrased from 1 Corinthians 1:27, was "God has chosen the weak things of this world to confound the wise."

Like the Smiths and thousands of other rural folk in the arc of hill towns stretching from Ohio east to Maine, Harris was a "Christian primitivist," a religious seeker who thoroughly scoured his Bible and his dreams in a determined effort to directly know his God. Dissatisfied with abstract religion, primitivists sought tangible contact with the divine. Terrified of living alienated and isolated from God's voice, seekers longed for the reassurance of regular spiritual encounters in dreams, visions, inner voices, and uncanny coincidences. They aptly called their search "experimental religion." The early Republic's seekers insisted that the established denominations had lost the original simplicity and spiritual power of the apostolic Christian church when the faithful experienced miracles and spoke in tongues. They believed that their day's respectable denominations had lapsed into empty forms and rituals that deadened their members' ability to reestablish direct mystical contact. By insisting on direct, individual encounters with divinity, seekers disdained any temporal authority that presumed to govern individual conscience. They hoped to reestablish the apostolic Christian churches where members helped one another to directly experience the divine. Confident that this reestablishment would usher in the millennium, every seeker played a crucial role in a critical struggle with cosmic consequences. Every moment and every action raised the stakes as the climactic conflict between Christ and Antichrist drew nearer. This was the sort of role that Martin Harris longed to play. Most "Christian primitivists" found their way into the Methodists, Freewill Baptists, or Christ-ians, as did Harris temporarily, but neither he nor the Smiths felt satisfied with any existing church for long (M. Hill 1969, 355-56; Hatch 1980; Wood 1980, 371).



Harris's restless search for sustained encounters with God and his angels led him to associate with the nearby Smith family, who shared his concerns. By the 1820s the Smiths had achieved local notoriety with the village respectables and local influence among the rural folk for their expertise with visions, dreams, and treasure-seeking. Contrary to Hurlbut's assumptions, there was no contradiction between the Smith's religious seeking and their treasure-seeking. Indeed, for the Smiths and many other hill-country Christian primitivists, treasure-seeking was an extension of their "experimental religion." It represented a cross-fertilization of material desire and spiritual aspiration. Sure that they dwelled in a magical landscape alive with both evil (demons) and good spirits (angels), treasure-seekers believed that Christ would reward those who battled evil, certainly in the next life, and perhaps with a treasure in this one. They proceeded with a sort of empirical spirituality, testing their faith against guardian spirits and using prayers, Bibles, and religious pamphlets in their digging rituals. They insisted that the presence of anyone of dubious morality or incomplete faith doomed the attempt to recover a treasure. It was no accident that the Smiths' leading collaborator in their Palmyra treasure-seeking was Willard Chase, a Methodist preacher (Bushman 1985, 72). Because of this intersection with religious seeking I prefer to call them treasure-seekers rather than the more sordid-sounding money-diggers. And if we recognize this intersection, then they do not appear such a bad lot for the Smiths to have associated with (Taylor 1986).

One interpretation current among Mormon historians sees Joseph Smith, Jr., as a reluctant treasure-seeker egged on by his father and neighbors who ill-understood the spiritual purpose of his gifts and twisted them to material ends (Bushman 1985, 69–76). This sets up a false distinction between what was inseparable in treasure-seeking (at least, in treasure-seeking as practiced by the Smith family): spirituality and materialism. Moreover, never in his life did Joseph Smith do anything by halves, always plunging forward with apparently boundless enthusiasm, conviction, and energy. It rings false to read his treasure-seeking differently. Recognizing this, Mormon historian Michael Quinn recently observed, "It really seems pointless for Mormon apologists to continue to deny the extent and enthusiasm of Joseph Smith, Jr.'s, participation in treasure-digging throughout the 1820s" (Quinn 1986, 48).

Instead of seeing young Joseph's treasure-seeking as an early and reluctant false step we ought, as Jan Shipps argued twelve years ago, to regard it as an essential early stage of a life-long process by which he grappled with the supernatural in search of the spiritual power that came by accumulating divine wisdom. She wrote, "If the prophet's preference for leaving the money-digging part of his career out of the picture is ignored . . . a pattern emerges which leaves little room for doubting that Smith's use of the seerstone was an important indication of his early and continued interest in extra-rational phenomena, and that it played an important role in his spiritual development" (1974, 14). Joseph Smith eagerly pursued treasure-seeking as a peculiarly tangible way to practice "experimental religion," as an opportunity to develop his spiritual gifts through regular exercise in repeated contests with guardian

spirits. Because it was the contest itself that interested him, the repeated failure to recover gold did not discourage his efforts. Indeed, Martin Harris observed in his letter to Phelps, that the spirits appreciated Joseph "because Joseph made no attempt on their money." Joseph was after something more than mere material wealth: by accumulating spiritual understanding he hoped to attain divine power. He earnestly wanted to become godlike. So he wore a silver Jupiter talisman inscribed, "Make me, O God, all powerful" and testified that when he looked at his seerstone he "discovered that time, place and distance were annihilated; that all the intervening obstacles were removed, and that he possessed one of the attributes of Deity, an All-Seeing Eye" (Quinn 1986, 61; Kirkham 2:365–66).

He began small by grappling with the guardian spirits of treasure troves in nocturnal, ritualistic digging expeditions but, through such experiences, matured his concerns toward his ultimate role as the Mormon prophet. By the time he recovered the treasure he sought, it was no longer the mammon of a few years earlier but instead a book of divine knowledge. Translating and publishing that book accelerated his pursuit of divine knowledge's power as he became a prophet guiding a growing number of devoted seekers. If we see Smith's spiritual engagement as a continuum beginning at age fourteen in 1820 and continuing through treasure-seeking and the transitional recovery of the gold plates to his role as the Mormon prophet, then we should not be surprised that he and his followers described what he saw in 1827 differently in 1840 than they did in 1830, that their understanding evolved from talking of guardian spirits to describing angels representing Christ. If we see Smith engaged in a lifelong struggle to master spiritual knowledge, then it is natural that he and his followers continuously reinterpreted earlier episodes (Shipp 1974, 12–14).

Characteristically, Harris felt torn between his fervent desire to experience what the Smiths described and his wary determination to carefully test their abilities, to convince himself that the village scoffers were wrong. Because he was determined to answer rational skepticism, rather than reject its validity, Harris continuously sought empirical evidence to buttress the Smiths's claims. He tested young Joseph's ability to divine with his seerstone the location of a pin hidden in shavings and straw. Like a scientist trying to replicate a colleague's experiments, Harris went treasure-seeking and sought to direct his dreams to encounters with the guardian treasure spirits that the Smiths described. After Smith secured the plates, Harris took two assistants (treasure lore held that at least three men were necessary for a successful dig) to Cumorah to look for the stone box and claimed to see it vanish into the bowels of the earth. In search of contradictions, Harris separately interrogated various members of the Smith family about Joseph's discovery. Although initially denied permission to see the plates, Harris hefted the covered plates and carefully reasoned from their weight that they must be gold or lead, metals the impoverished Smiths could not have purchased. Then he resorted to experimental religion's ultimate test — private prayer — and believed he obtained divine confirmation in an inner voice that urged him to believe the Smiths and assist their translation. Finally, his eager visit to Professor Anthon and other cosmo-

politan experts with the transcribed hieroglyphics attests that he respected worldly learning and felt confident it could promote young Joseph's discovery if the learned would only recognize the evidence Harris laid before them (I've imposed my interpretation on evidence from Walker 1986; Quinn 1986, 47; and Bushman 1985, 104-5).

To conclude, if we recognize the late treasure-seekers' sincere spirituality and quasi-scientific rationality, then we can detect important continuities with early Mormonism (M. Hill 1969, 351). Just as religious aspiration informed treasure-seeking, magic persisted within early Mormonism, as Michael Quinn has so thoroughly documented (1986, 35-38). Joseph used his seerstone to find and translate the gold plates and cherished that stone for the rest of his life. Other Mormons — including David Whitmer, Hiram Page, and Brigham Young — used their own seerstones to seek divine messages, and Oliver Cowdery employed his gift with witch-hazel rods to divine answers to spiritual questions. As President of the LDS Church, the pragmatic, rational Brigham Young testified that he believed in astrology and insisted that treasures were real instruments of divine power: "These treasures that are in the earth are carefully watched, they can be removed from place to place according to the good pleasure of Him who made them and owns them" (Quinn 1986, 51).

Early Mormons persisted in practicing magic because they nurtured a magical world view where the material and the spiritual were interwoven in the same universe. But their cosmology was much more than the timeless occult; indeed, it was imbued with the same spirit of rational inquiry that characterized late treasure-seekers and the spiritualists, for in addition to spiritualizing matter, as did traditional magic, Mormon cosmology also materialized the spiritual. This rendered the supernatural ultimately comprehensible by purposeful human inquiry. As Joseph Smith wrote, "There is no such thing as immaterial matter. All spirit is matter, but it is more fine or pure, and can only be discerned by purer eyes; we cannot see it; but when our bodies are purified we shall see that all is matter" (Hansen 1981, 28). He explained, "A *spirit* is as much matter as oxygen or hydrogen" (O'Dea 1957, 120). He added, "God the father is material, Jesus Christ is material. Angels are material. Space is full of materiality. Nothing exists which is not material" (Hansen 1981, 71). In this view, miracles are not incomprehensible interventions from a distinct supernatural dimension but instead natural phenomena that humans cannot yet understand but eventually will *if through "experimental religion" they pursue spiritual understanding*. For, like the late treasure-seekers, early Mormons conceived of their faith as a progressive, scientific perfection of man's ability to comprehend the cosmos (Wood 1980, 385; McMurrin 1965, 2, 6, 13).

Through Joseph Smith's agency, treasure-seeking evolved into the Mormon faith. Indeed, Mormon theology represented a continuation of the concerns he had previously pursued through treasure-seeking. An empirical search for divine knowledge and power recurs in his plan of salvation which explains that God's plan for humankind is that they advance in knowledge and power by dealing with matter on the earth. Smith insisted, "A man is saved no faster



than he gets knowledge, for if he does not get knowledge, he will be brought into captivity by some evil power in the other world, as evil spirits will have more knowledge, and consequently more power than many men who are on the earth" (O'Dea 1957, 130). As with Smith's early treasure-seeking contests, obtaining divine exaltation was a matter of learning to understand and control the supernatural laws already known by the most advanced supra-material being, God. Human beings pursued God in this progressive, unending struggle to comprehend and, so, master the universe; in 1844 Joseph Smith explained, "As man is God once was: as God is man may become" (Hansen 1981, 72).

Smith adapted treasure-seeking's promise that the deserving would ultimately reap tangible rewards that were simultaneously and inseparably spiritual and material. A revelation of his describes how the exalted would "inherit thrones, kingdoms, principalities, and powers, dominion over all heights and depths. . . . then shall they be above all, because all things are subject unto them. Then shall they be gods, because they have all power, and the angels are subject unto them" (D&C 132; in Hansen 1981, 79). But, unlike the treasure-seekers who hoped to unite search and recovery in this world, Smith divided the two into different stages in the soul's eternal continuum: seekers were to use this world to perfect themselves but look for their proper reward *only* in the future state, and *not* after midnight in this probationary world's glacial till. This division of search and reward enabled Mormonism to survive, while the earlier and similar New Israelites, a religious sect in Middletown, Vermont, collapsed when its promise of material reward through treasure-seeking in this world failed (Frisbie 1867, 43-59).

In this transformation of treasure-seeking into early Mormonism we see the fruit of the two interactive struggles: of seekers with the supernatural, of magic with reason. Smith had dual reasons for redirecting treasure-seeking's spirituality. First, his personal progressive struggle with spiritual beings for divine knowledge gradually led him to see that the search for literal treasure in this world was a dead end. Second, he recognized that a reputation for treasure-seeking was a handicap in communicating his message to an audience increasingly committed to rationality and a more abstract understanding of religion. To further his proselytizing mission, he and his followers deemphasized his early supernatural explorations as a treasure seer, a deemphasis that has ever since led some Mormons to doubt that he was ever so involved and anti-Mormons to charge that he was insincere. Perhaps it is now possible to recognize that Mormonism's founders were deeply and enthusiastically involved in folk magic but that this does not undermine the sincerity of the Mormon faith (Shippis 1974, 13-14).

#### POSTSCRIPT

Without the unusually rich documents describing Joseph Smith's magical practices, historians studying early American folk magic would be left with little but stray commentary from folklorists collecting the quaint and hostile observers denouncing the unfamiliar. If I am correct that treasure-seeking as

*practiced by the Smiths and other Christian primitivists* was deeply spiritual and that there was a natural continuity from treasure-seeking to Mormonism, then its documentation does not undermine the Mormon faith. Consequently, it would be doubly tragic if the anti-Mormon Philastus Hurlbut's mistaken premise equating treasure-seeking with irreligious greed continued to influence how Mormons reacted to the evidence, particularly if that premise induced the LDS Church to discourage open discussion and the release of further evidence. It would be unfortunate both for the Church and for scholars whose work depends so heavily upon continued access to invaluable sources available nowhere else.

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