

Mormon Magic

Early Mormonism and the Magic World View by D. Michael Quinn (Salt Lake City, Utah: Signature Books, 1987), 314 pp., \$14.95.

Reviewed by Alan Taylor, assistant professor of history, Boston University, Boston, Massachusetts.

UNTIL RECENTLY, MOST MORMON writers have been pressed onto the defensive by the insistence with which anti-Mormons have exploited every hint that Joseph Smith, Jr.'s, family practiced folk magic. Consequently, the mounting evidence for the Smiths' involvement in folk magic threatens to entrap Mormon naysayers. In a challenging and thorough reinvestigation of Christian magic's role in early Mormonism D. Michael Quinn, a devout Mormon as well as a skilled historian, boldly steals a march on his faith's critics and reveals an escape from the defensive trap. After an exhaustive exploration of an often dense and difficult evidentiary thicket, Quinn emerges with his faith not merely unscathed but reinvigorated. Building upon the pioneering work of Richard L. Bushman, Donna Hill, Marvin S. Hill, Jan Shipps, and Ronald W. Walker, Quinn concludes that both anti-Mormons and defensive Mormons have shared a mistaken premise: that folk magic in the early American republic was an irrational and irreligious challenge to Christianity. He shatters that premise by carefully documenting—principally from Mormon sources—how inextricably interwoven magic and faith were in both the folk Christianity of Joseph Smith's youth and in the Mormon church of his maturity.

Quinn suggests that Joseph Smith, Jr.'s recovery of the golden plates culminated

several generations of preparation by a family committed to the experimental pursuit of spiritual knowledge and power. At the start of the nineteenth century his father, Joseph Smith, Sr., lived in Vermont where he found many like-minded men, chiefly interrelated Connecticut Yankees. A group of them rallied around Nathaniel Wood and Justus Winchell of Middletown, Vermont, to found a sect of Christian Primitivist treasure-seekers known as the New Israelites—a collective spiritual experiment that went badly awry because the participants overestimated their knowledge of divine power. In contrast to previous Mormon historians, Quinn is inclined to accept the circumstantial evidence that Oliver Cowdery's father and the elder Smith were New Israelites—who consequently appear to have been a premature dress rehearsal for the Mormon church. Following the sect's sudden collapse in 1802, the leaders fled to northern and western New York. In the early 1820s Justus Winchell and a shadowy long-time associate and fellow seer named Luman Walter (or Walters) periodically joined the treasure-seeking conducted in Palmyra, New York, by the elder Smith and his sons.

Recognizing the limits of his own spiritual powers, the elder Smith prepared a son—at first eldest son Alvin, after his death the third son Joseph, Jr.—to advance the family's mission. The third son grew up sharing his family's and his neighbors' conviction that deflecting demons and communicating with angels was essential to their well-being in this world and their salvation in the next. By employing magical techniques to communicate with angels and to battle with the evil spirits who guarded treasure troves, Joseph Smith, Jr.,

exercised and developed his seeric gifts. Quinn suggests that Winchell and Walter jointly played a John the Baptist role by giving Joseph magical parchments “designed to be used by an unmarried, pure young man or woman in summoning and communicating with a divine spirit as part of a treasure quest” (p. 110). The preparations began to pay off on the night of 21–22 September 1823 when young Joseph achieved an epiphany with the spirit/angel Moroni: “the dramatically successful result of ritual magic, specifically necromancy, communication with the dead” (p. 119). Following Moroni’s directions and employing treasure-seeking’s techniques, young Joseph acquired and translated the Book of Mormon. His translations, revelations, and system of “temple endowment” all borrowed magical concepts in an effort to communicate a new faith to his contemporaries (pp. 150–91), much as the Apostle Paul drew upon “contemporary magic to teach in terms the common people could understand” (p. 4). After Smith’s death, many rank-and-file Mormons, as well as several leaders (most notably Heber C. Kimball, Orson Pratt, and Brigham Young) clung to Christian magic as a means of communicating with the divine. Only in the late nineteenth century did the Church begin to campaign against folk magic.

Quinn draws upon a broad array of evidence to make his case. He accepts the evidence in the affidavits of contemporary but hostile witnesses when they describe the actions of the Smiths (rather than their presumed motives) and when the hostile accounts are compatible with the testimony of friendly observers—especially Martin Harris, Lucy Mack Smith, and Brigham Young. Indeed, Quinn points out that the Smiths’ folk magic can be thoroughly documented exclusively from the observations of early Mormons convinced that magic enabled their prophet to contact the divine (pp. 146, 194–95). Quinn persuasively links to the Smith family, and astutely analyzes, several artifacts used in magical

rituals: Hyrum Smith’s dagger for inscribing magic circles (pp. 55–56), a silver Jupiter talisman worn by the prophet on the day he died (pp. 66–71), his serpent-headed and Jupiter-symbolized cane (p. 72), and the family’s three parchments (or “lamens”) inscribed with Christian magical symbols (pp. 78–110). Quinn fearlessly ventures onto more uncertain ground to speculate that certain coincidences of Joseph Smith, Jr.’s life with astrological expectations may have reinforced his family’s faith in a magical world view—if they had read any of the cited works which, Quinn concedes, he cannot document (p. 59). The astrological speculation is clever and interesting, but it is inconclusive and overlong and threatens to distract readers from the judiciousness with which he approaches the other, sounder evidence for the Smiths’ Christian magic.

Despite a valiant effort, Quinn fails to clarify the elusive (and usually illusive) distinction between magic and religion. On the one hand he recognizes that in examining the practice of any particular faith it is virtually impossible to disentangle the two (pp. xii–xvi); and yet in his title and most of his text he insists upon a distinct “magic world view” that presumably sets Joseph Smith’s generation apart from our own. I think he starts out on the right track when he argues that “magic” perceives life, spirit, and power in all matter—organic and inorganic (p. xii). Consequently, those who subscribe to “magic” believe that they can empirically learn rituals to master and manipulate the life-spirit-power all around them. The premise is spiritual, but the logic is scientific. But Quinn does not follow up that promising definition of “magic” to counter-define “religion” as an effort (and invariably an incomplete effort) to divorce spirit from matter and set divine power off in a distinct, distant, and immaterial realm. Such a divorce renders it impossible for individuals to immediately and precisely affect their circumstances by manipulating their spiritual content. Instead, Quinn settles for an unsatisfactory