Affidavits Revisited

Joseph Smith's New York Reputation Reexamined by Rodger I. Anderson (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 178 pp., $9.95.

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IN *ANOTHER PART OF THE TWENTIES* (1977), Paul A. Carter upended all of the stereotypes advanced by historians about the 1920s. The jazz age was really more of a waltz than most people thought; the nation, which had supposedly become urban, was still more rural and agricultural than statistics showed; the politics of Republican ascendancy were really less one-sided than most believed; and so on. In *Joseph Smith's New York Reputation Reexamined*, Rodger Anderson carries this type of analysis even further, overturning the scholarship, precepts, and myths about Joseph Smith before 1830, tying them to stakes, setting them afire, and dancing around them until they have lost their power of persuasion.

If Anderson's approach is heavy-handed, much of what he says is important and revealing. His work revolves around nineteenth-century affidavits and interviews about Joseph Smith's early life. D. Philastus Hurlbut, an excommunicated Mormon who in 1833 interviewed Smith's former neighbors in upstate New York, obtained several damaging affidavits which described the Smith family as destitute, lazy, and shiftless, as drunkards and scam artists who dug for buried treasure. These affidavits portrayed Joseph Smith as perpetrating the hoax of Mormonism on an innocent world. Published in 1834 in E. D. Howe's *Mormonism Unvailed*, this view of the Prophet was accepted as truthful by most non-Mormons until the 1960s.

Forty-seven years after the Hurlbut affidavits, in 1880, Frederic G. Mather interviewed nine of Smith's early contemporaries. These by-now elderly people confirmed Hurlbut's basically negative opinions of Joseph Smith. Probably in reaction to Mather's work, in 1881 William H. and E. L. Kelley, Reorganized Church apostles, visited Palmyra and also talked with long-time residents. Their work, published in the *Saints' Herald*, contradicted the Hurlbut/Mather research on almost every score. They reported that the Smiths, though poor, were hard-working, frugal, and upstanding citizens in the community. In 1888 non-Mormon writer Arthur B. Deming interviewed Joseph Smith's contemporaries in Palmyra one last time before their deaths, and his work verified the Hurlbut/Mather research. Deming's *Naked Truths About Mormonism* proved almost as significant in fueling anti-Mormon fires as had the Hurlbut affidavits fifty-five years earlier.

For the next seventy-five years or so, the polemicists on either side chose whichever set of recollections suited their purposes. Most outside of Mormonism accepted without serious question the Hurlbut/Mather/Deming findings; most within the movement relied on one form or another of the Kelleys' findings. No one attempted any sophisticated analyses of these research efforts until the 1960s.

The first to do so was Hugh Nibley, who attacked the efforts of Hurlbut, Mather, and Deming in *The Myth Makers* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1961). At least to the satisfaction of those who were predisposed to accept any refutation of the affidavits, Nibley demolished these efforts to "smear" Joseph Smith's reputation, charging that many of Hurlbut's witnesses later retracted their affidavits when the Kelleys interviewed them nearly fifty years later. Even if they offered no retraction, virtually all of them contradicted each other. According to Anderson, Nibley was wrong on these and other points. Hurlbut's witnesses did not retract their earlier statements; the Kelleys visited only one of those originally interviewed by Hurlbut, and he reaffirmed his original statement. Anderson further contends that Nibley created the supposed contradictions by misquoting the witnesses and engaged in "illogic, unsupported speculation, factual errors, indiscriminate and arbitrary use of sources, disregard of context, and a lack of scholarly standards." In all, Anderson concludes, "Nibley's argument fails on every significant point" (p. 22). He dismisses Nibley after a single chapter entitled, sarcastically enough, "The Myth Makers."

Anderson spends the rest of the book dealing with the much more sophisticated and legitimate review of investigations of Joseph Smith's reputation made by Richard Lloyd Anderson in a 1970 *Brigham Young University Studies* article called "Joseph Smith's New York Reputation Reappraised." The similarities between the authors' names and the titles of their works are all that the two investigators and their approaches have in common. Rodger Anderson also refutes almost every one of Richard Anderson's arguments, concluding that the article fails because of the "misrepresentation of his contents and circumstances surrounding the compilation of the affidavits; failure to consider alternative interpretations for the evidence; and invalid conclusions based on faulty premises" (p. 28).

Motivated by a desire to defend Joseph Smith, according to Rodger Anderson, Richard Anderson put forth several arguments which were incompatible with the evidence. Richard Anderson suggested that Philastus Hurlbut had written the 1833 affidavits himself. Two of the affidavits were each signed by several Palmyra-vicinity residents, and Richard Anderson logically concluded that someone must have written the affidavits and then collected the signatures. In the absence of any countervailing evidence, a reasonable assumption was that Hurlbut had done so. From there, it could be argued with some legitimacy that Hurlbut was a heavy contributor to the individual affidavits as well. Richard Anderson based this accusation in part on the similar words and phrases he found in the various affidavits. As a result, he concluded that Hurlbut unduly influenced those he took affidavits from, and that conclusion has been an accepted part of studies of early Mormonism ever since. Rodger Anderson argues, however, that the affidavits may be similar because each person was asked the same set of questions. Even if Hurlbut did write any or all of the affidavits, Rodger Anderson adds, those being interviewed both signed them and swore before witnesses that they represented their positions.

Rodger Anderson also charges Richard Anderson with bringing *a priori* assumptions to his investigation—something which could probably also be said of Rodger Anderson—and refusing to explore evidence or test assumptions that might support the validity of the affidavits. For example, he disqualified witnesses discussing Smith's money-digging past, according to Rodger Anderson, if they had in fact been involved in the work themselves. According to Rodger Anderson, "To prove involvement in money-digging, he argues, the witness must actually have *seen* Smith digging, and since 'one might observe one of the Smiths digging and completely misinterpret his reasons for doing so,' that witness must also have *heard* Smith say he was digging for money" (pp. 40-41). Such a standard of evidence, Rodger Anderson comments, was much too strict, especially when he perceived that Richard Anderson did not hold pro-Smith witnesses to the same standards.

Rodger Anderson concludes that there is no reason not to accept as authentic the affidavits collected by Hurlbut and Deming, or that they were anything other than honest appraisals by people well acquainted with Joseph Smith and his family in upstate New York. While Rodger Anderson does inject some useful skepticism into Richard Anderson's defense of Smith, he makes an either/or assessment with no middle ground. Such a conclusion is just as difficult to accept as is Richard Anderson's. Take, for example, the affidavit Hurlbut took of Willard Chase, from my perspective the most interesting of those first published in 1834. Rodger Anderson says that Richard Anderson distorted the account and then rejected it. While I will not dispute that conclusion, Rodger Anderson's final assessment of Chase's affidavit as a reliable statement has other problems. Chase's affidavit does not mention any firsthand observation of treasure-seeking but shows intense interest in a seerstone Chase said he found while digging a well and then lent to Joseph Smith. He tried to get it back on several occasions, even though he said it was only a "curiosity." Why would he be so concerned unless the stone had some special significance attached to it? Indeed, Chase said he wanted the seerstone to use it to see "what wonders he could discover by looking in it." Other sources demonstrate that Chase was very much involved in money-digging in the Palmyra area, and he was not being entirely truthful when relating information about the subject. His account, while probably generally correct, should not be accepted without careful consideration of all particulars.

A significant revelation, at least for me, was Rodger Anderson's conclusion that the Kelleys' 1881 investigation had serious problems as legitimate historical evidence. Unlike Hurlbut and Deming, the two Reorganized Church apostles took no depositions and gave their witnesses no opportunity to read and sign what they wrote. They took notes during their interviews and then later wrote their report. Rodger Anderson went through the published account, as well as the notes from which it was prepared (housed in the Reorganized Church's Library-Archives), and found that the Kelleys apparently had fertile imaginations, for there is only a passing relationship between their notes and the published article. The published report, in fact, so upset some of the interviewees that at least three of the ten wrote denials of what it contended. Apparently the Kelleys' zest to defend the prophet outweighed their good judgment in presenting their case.

Rodger Anderson has presented an important and challenging study of nineteenth-century efforts to learn about Joseph Smith's early life. His conclusion that the Hurlbut/Mather/Deming research generally reflects the opinions of those interviewed without undue influence from those collecting the material seems relatively sound, although I am less sanguine than the author that some of the details of the Smiths' lives related by those interviewed are entirely truthful. Probably most of those interviewed did consider Joseph Smith to be something of a scoundrel and a charlatan, but whether they reached that conclusion before or after the formation of the Church is a significant question quite beyond the parameters of Anderson's study. His handling of the Kelley research was especially effective and must raise additional questions of historical integrity. A large and useful appendix containing transcripts of all the affidavits and the notes from the Kelley interviews completes the volume. Perhaps this study will spark additional research into this subject; such an accomplishment is as worthy an objective as any historian could ask for.