

The Psychology of Prophetic Charisma: New Approaches to Understanding Joseph Smith and the Development of Charismatic Leadership

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THE ISSUE OF CHARISMATIC LEADERSHIP—whether in religious, political, or other types of groups—has been the focus of widespread popular and scholarly attention. The word "charismatic" derives from the name of the Greek goddess Charis and suggests that the person perceived as charismatic possesses very special, quasi-divine "gifts" or qualities. In the early twentieth century, German social theorist Max Weber provided a particularly insightful assessment of some of the larger issues associated with such leadership, an assessment which continues to influence scholarly thought. In popular parlance, however, the word "charismatic" suggests that someone has, for whatever reasons, been able to attract a substantial personal following.¹

Despite the interest that the phenomenon of charisma has generated over the years, surprisingly few serious efforts have been made to reconstruct and analyze systematically the psychological dynamics and social interactions of

1. For Weber's major writings on charismatic leadership, see his "The Sociology of Charismatic Authority," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. and trans. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 245-52; "Three Types of Legitimate Rule," *Berkeley Publications in Society and Institutions* 4, no. 1 (Summer 1958): 6-15; *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, trans. A. M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons (New York: Free Press, 1964), 358-73; and *On Charisma and Institution Building*, S. N. Eisenstadt, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968). This article is a revised version of a paper I presented at the annual conference of the Mormon History Association in Aalborg, Denmark, on July 1, 2000.

charismatic individuals. Psychological analyses of specific charismatic individuals are legion, of course (witness the fascination with Hitler),² but few studies have convincingly combined qualitative and quantitative assessments of significant numbers of individuals at a particular time and place.

One notable exception to the generally impressionistic studies of particular charismatic individuals is the path-breaking study, *Prophetic Charisma: The Psychology of Revolutionary Religious Personalities* by psychologist Len Oakes. The book uses both qualitative and quantitative measures to analyze the psychological characteristics of the leaders of twenty contemporary New Zealand religious/communal groups and their followers. Oakes conducted in-depth interviews with the leaders of these groups and with two or three key associates from their top leadership cadre. These interviews lasted many hours—or days, in some cases. In addition, both leaders and followers in the groups completed a standard psychological inventory known as the Adjective Checklist, which provided a quantitative sense of how they compared psychologically with a standard population.³

Len Oakes has special strengths which allow him to combine participant-observer involvement with and detachment from his subject. For eleven years from 1980 until 1991, while doing the original research and writing for this study for his Ph.D. in psychology at the University of Auckland in New Zealand, Oakes was both a member of and the historian for an extraordinary New Zealand communal experiment, the Centrepoint Community, which might be characterized as a cross between the Esalen Institute, the Rajneeshees, and the Oneida Community.⁴ The leader of the Centrepoint community, Bert Potter, was viewed by many

2. Among the myriad assessments of the sources of Hitler's personality and impact, see especially Ron Rosenbaum, *Explaining Hitler: The Search for the Origins of His Evil* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1999); John Lukacs, *The Hitler of History* (New York: Random House, 1997); R. G. Waite, *The Psychopathic God: Adolf Hitler* (New York: New American Library, 1977); and Ian Kershaw's *Hitler, 1889-1936: Hubris* (New York: Norton, 1999) and *Hitler: 1936-1945, Nemesis* (New York: Norton, 2000).

3. Len Oakes describes his methodology and approach in *Prophetic Charisma: The Psychology of Revolutionary Religious Personalities* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 1-24, 199-214. Oakes discusses the literature on charismatic leadership, analyzing the perspectives of Max Weber, Heinz Kohut, and Erich Fromm (25-43). Oakes's study involved a total of twenty leaders (three of them deceased, but approached through their writings and other sources) and 136 of their followers, who were interviewed and/or surveyed, either in person or retrospectively, for the New Zealand portion of the research (202). Substantial additional research on Australian groups also was conducted after Oakes completed his Ph.D. dissertation in Psychology at the University of Auckland in 1992.

4. On the Centrepoint Community, see Len Oakes, *Centrepoint: The Story of a New Zealand Community* (Auckland, New Zealand: Benton Ross, 1986). Oakes is currently editor of the journal *Psychotherapy in Australia*. He has participated in some forty seminars under a wide range of contemporary leaders in psychology and social theory, including Albert Ellis, R. D. Laing, Larry Constantine, Joseph Barber, Eva Reich, Michael Barnard, Robert Dawson, Rob McNeill, Ken Keyes, and others. He first met Bert Potter in 1972, joining the Centrepoint Community as its historian from 1980 through 1991.

group members—in a kind of New Age sense—as "God." When I visited the group in 1986, members told me openly in the presence of Potter himself that if Potter were gone, the group would disband. Eventually, after Potter was arrested one time too many for illegal drug possession in 1990 (and then later for engaging in sexual relations with underage girls), the community did largely disband. During this troubled time, Oakes, like many other thoughtful members of the group, felt profoundly let down by Potter, and he left.⁵

Based on his intensive research, personal experience, and wide reading on similar groups, Oakes has developed in *Prophetic Charisma* a typology of the psychology of charismatic leaders and the stages in their vocation for leadership. Much as Erik Erikson posited a set of developmental stages through which normal individuals may pass during their lives,⁶ Oakes suggests a set of interrelated sequential stages through which prophetic leaders may progress, laying out the complexities and ambiguities of each stage.⁷

This article will review some key points in Oakes's analysis of the dynamics of prophetic leadership, then briefly evaluate the extent to which the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith, Jr.'s charisma and sense of mission may be illuminated by, or bear on the validity of, Oakes's theoretical framework. No single theoretical framework, of course, can "explain" the nature of religious genius and charismatic leadership.⁸ Nevertheless, I shall argue that Oakes's well-artic-

5. This personal disillusionment undoubtedly helps account for the poignant and sometimes bitter undertone of the chapters concerning Oakes's *Prophetic Charisma* entitled "The Soul of the Prophet," 165-75, and "Decline or Fall?" 176-84. In an undated letter I received from Oakes in April 1990, he told me how Potter, who publicly crusaded against drugs, had been busted for possession of a \$15,360 (N.Z.) supply of LSD and also for possessing and supplying MDMA (also called "ecstasy"). He'd been sentenced to three and one-half years in jail on drug charges. Oakes noted: "We all gave it our best shot in court, but you can't save someone from himself."

6. See Erik Erikson's *Childhood and Society* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), and *Identity and the Life Cycle* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994).

7. Thomas Robbins's review in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 37 (December 1998): 764, describes *Prophetic Charisma* as "a wonderfully provocative and fascinating book."

8. If any single framework could account for the complexity of genius, the phenomenon would be far less interesting. See my article, "The Psychology of Religious Genius: Joseph Smith and the Origins of New Religious Movements," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 26 (Winter 1993): 1-22, which presents an alternative but complementary approach to Oakes, emphasizing the possibility that some manifestations of religious genius may be associated with manic-depressive tendencies. For other recent treatments on the nature of genius, particularly in its religious and psychological dimensions, see Arnold M. Ludwig, *The Price of Greatness: Resolving the Creativity and Madness Controversy* (New York: Guilford Press, 1995); Harvey Mindess, *Makers of Psychology: The Personal Factor* (New York: Human Sciences Press, 1988); Anthony Storr, *Feet of Clay—Saints, Sinners and Madmen: A Study of Gurus* (New York: Free Press, 1996); and Philip Jenkins, *Mystics and Messiahs: Cults and New Religions in American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

The great advantage of both the manic-depressive and the narcissistic interpretations of the roots of charismatic religious leadership is that they are not necessarily reductionistic regarding content of the message itself. Either manic-depression or narcissism, or both in concert, might provide

ulated theory of how a sense of prophetic vocation develops—with both the promise and the pitfalls inherent in that development—offers an important new way of beginning to grapple with many complex, contradictory, and seemingly intractable aspects of "the Prophet Puzzle," to use Mormon historian Jan Shipps's term.⁹ Besides Joseph Smith, many other charismatic religious, communal, and even political figures might also be illuminated by this analysis.

The approach in this article is primarily naturalistic. I focus on human factors, both psychological and social, which may have influenced human behavior. Although such an approach—or any naturalistic approach—may be viewed as "reductionistic" by committed religious believers who are convinced that the hand of God is the one factor which encompasses and supersedes all others, my intent here is to present an open-ended analysis compatible with the hypothesis of religious inspiration.¹⁰

As the late Leonard Arrington said in the preface to his path-breaking economic history of nineteenth-century Utah, *Great Basin Kingdom*, the approach to Mormonism in this study is "that religion, as with all social institutions, must be judged according to its usefulness in attacking the ageless problems of humanity. . . . The true essence of God's revealed will, if such it be, cannot be apprehended without an understanding of the conditions surrounding the prophetic vision, and the symbolism and verbiage in which it is couched."¹¹ Similarly, as William James indicated in the first chapter of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, the only ultimate test of the validity of religious inspiration is practical—in Jesus' words, "By their fruits ye shall know them" (Matt. 7:20). James adds: "If there were such a thing as inspiration from a higher realm, it

the *occasion* for creative activity, but neither is associated with any particular *content* for that creative activity or product. Moreover, the possibility that the human agent promulgating any specific message might have eccentricities or "feet of clay" bears no relation to the validity of the insights expressed. For example, Isaac Newton might well have had a severely eccentric or flawed personality, but his laws of celestial mechanics must be judged on their own merits.

9. Jan Shipps's essay, "The Prophet Puzzle: Suggestions Leading toward a More Comprehensive Interpretation of Joseph Smith," first appeared in the *Journal of Mormon History* 1 (1974): 2-20, and was reprinted, along with a number of other important essays, in Bryan Waterman, *The Prophet Puzzle: Interpretive Essays on Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999), 25-47.

10. For my approach to such issues, see my articles "New Perspectives on the Mormon Past: Reflections of a Non-Mormon Historian," *Sunstone* 7 (January-February 1982): 41-45; "A Personal Odyssey: My Encounter with Mormon History," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1983): 87-98; and my MHA Presidential Address, "A Personal Odyssey Revisited: My Continuing Encounter with Mormon History," *Journal of Mormon History* (forthcoming, Spring 2004).

11. Leonard J. Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom: Economic History of the Latter-day Saints, 1830-1900* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1958), vii, ix. This Classic study, ironically, was originally categorized by the LDS Church Library in Salt Lake City as an "anti-Mormon" work (See Leonard J. Arrington, *Adventures of a Church Historian* [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998], 34).

might well be that the neurotic temperament would furnish the chief condition of the requisite receptivity."¹²

I

In *Prophetic Charisma*, Oakes posits a five-stage process in the development of the religious prophetic vocation. At the heart of this analysis is what Oakes calls an initial period of "Early Narcissism." Oakes's primary concern here is to understand why prophetic figures eventually come to believe that their own perceptions provide a universally valid basis for understanding both the nature of reality as well as how others ought to live properly in the world. This "narcissistic" orientation toward the world, Oakes argues, ultimately derives from early childhood experiences. In those experiences, the prophet-to-be is protected by his mother or primary caregiver for an unusually long time from the inevitable disappointments and adjustments of coming to terms with a larger world in which he is *not* omnipotent, *not* the primary center of attention.

Eventually, however, a crisis occurs which shatters the idyllic impression that the world revolves around the young child. Rather than trying to adapt to the outside environment as normal people do, the developing charismatic personality attempts instead to adjust the world to him. He sees everything and everyone in terms of their impact on him; he cannot genuinely relate to others independent of this underlying personal self-absorption. Oakes emphasizes that this narcissistic orientation of the prophet toward the world can make him both an unusually strong and effective leader and unusually vulnerable psychologically, especially when people fail to acknowledge his primacy.¹³

This initial experience of the world does not, according to Oakes, lead immediately to the prophetic vocation, but instead to a second stage of "Incubation." During this stage, the future prophet is

...at first perplexed by the indifference shown toward him by others. In trying to understand this, he may conclude that there is "something special" about him and "something wrong" with the world. This experience may drive him to develop a revelation of salvation that recruits others and explains his failure to get the love he assumes is his right.¹⁴

12. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: New American Library, 1958; orig. 1902), 37.

13. Oakes, *Prophetic Charisma*, 44-73. Oakes gives three examples of well-known figures whose early life experiences illustrate these dynamics: Werner Erhard, the founder of "est"; Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, the controversial leader of the Rajneeshies; and Swami Vivekenanda, the founder of the Vedanta Society, who helped popularize yoga in the West at the turn of the twentieth century. Oakes notes, "Narcissistic people seldom seek therapy, preferring to focus on problems in the world rather than in themselves" (56). Narcissistic leaders, according to Oakes, display "a subtle detachment" and "a certain fearlessness," associated with "acute insight into other people," which tend to attract those who are less self-confident. Yet if the prophet's primacy is questioned, he feels threatened and may react with intense anger.

14. *Ibid.*, 21.

This incubation process, when the prophet-to-be is at loose ends and "wandering in the wilderness," is not brief and sharply defined, but rather a long-term crisis during which the prophet struggles, often initially without much success, to understand himself, his distinctiveness, and his future calling. The future prophet has a curious sense of detachment from others and from normal life though he eventually gains experiences and skills that will later stand him in good stead (especially in areas such as teaching, preaching, selling, counseling and alternative healing, and entertaining). At this stage, prophets develop images of themselves which later become important in their charismatic appeal.¹⁵

If the future prophet is able to gain some recognition from the world, he may move into the next step toward his prophetic career, "Awakening." This can be a profoundly powerful process, often of a mystical or quasi-mystical nature, which transforms and focuses the future leader's goals and sense of mission. Oakes discusses a variety of examples of such experiences which lead individuals not simply to a personal conversion to another faith, but to an attempt to convert the entire world (or a specific subset thereof) to the prophet's new understanding of the nature of reality.¹⁶ One is reminded of the phenomenon described by anthropologist Anthony F. C. Wallace in his "revitalization movements" analysis as a "mazeway resynthesis," a transformation of the perceptions and life of a prophet around a new or revitalized paradigm he feels compelled to share with others.¹⁷ This awakening, Oakes stresses, is not usually a single, life-transforming realization, but rather the product of a series of interconnected events, extended over time, which gradually reorient the prophet's understanding of the world: "Awakening solves some problems for the prophet—it changes his view of himself and the world—but it may cause others. As a result of awakening, the prophet assumes the mantle of God's messenger—a burden from which many initially recoil, asking aloud, 'Why me, Lord.'"¹⁸

After the Awakening comes a fourth stage, which Oakes calls "Mission." During this stage, the prophet's mission becomes clear. To recruit followers, the leader advances a bold claim to be the source of ultimate goodness for others.

15. *Ibid.*, 74-97.

16. *Ibid.*, 98-113. Based on the experiences of the twenty New Zealand leaders, Oakes takes issue with the "standard model" of mystical experience that sees it as "a sudden, unprecedented, once-in-a-lifetime, total, and permanent transformation of the person wrought by supernatural means" (101). Rather, he sees awakening as "most often a series of interconnected events" that are "extended in time" and that encompass and rearrange "all aspects of one's life" (104). Oakes also argues, after a lengthy discussion, that "it seems likely that awakening is much less important in the lives of prophets than is often assumed" (110).

17. See Anthony F. C. Wallace's seminal articles, "Revitalization Movements," *American Anthropologist* 58 (April 1956): 264-81, and "Mazeway Resynthesis: A Biocultural Theory of Religious Inspiration," *Transactions of the New York Academy of Sciences* 18 (1956): 626-38, as well as his revealing study of the Seneca prophet, Handsome Lake, in *The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca* (New York: Vintage, 1972). Also highly suggestive is Kenelm Burridge's essay "The Prophet" in his *New Heaven, New Earth: A Study of Millenarian Activities* (New York: Schocken, 1969), 153-63.

18. Oakes, *Prophetic Charisma*, 22.

The boldness of this claim induces a fascinating effect, arousing faith, hope, and love in the hearts of those who become his followers. In pursuing his mission, the leader heads an organization dedicated to supporting him and spreading his truth. He begins to function somewhat as a manager, relying on whatever managerial skills he possesses as well as certain qualities which induce compliance with his wishes. He adopts a double strategy to retain and expand his following, first, by ensuring that the daily lives and mundane concerns of his followers are adequately taken care of and, second, by devising rituals that allow for the experience of transcendence.¹⁹

According to Oakes, successful prophets at this stage are typically "practical, warm, down-to-earth, pragmatic, and, above all caring leaders."²⁰ The leader's inner life is quite different from that of his followers: "The leader risks becoming preoccupied with issues of power and may be tempted to bend his teaching to self-serving ends, subordinating his vision to his need for control. The prophet is accused of being power-mad, but this is not quite so. Rather, power is necessary to realize his divine vision, which may be narcissistic at base, but in itself power holds little interest."²¹

At this point, Oakes defers his discussion of the final stage of the prophetic vocation in order to present his reflections on "The Followers and Their Quest" and "The Soul of the Prophet." The first of these sections examines the much discussed basis of attraction of charismatic groups for their members. Oakes argues that treatments stressing the "oppressed" nature of those attracted to such groups are misleading: "[P]eople join such groups for a wide variety of reasons . . . They come from all levels of society and comprise pretty much all types of people."²² He stresses the positive factors that lead people to join such unconventional groups: People "join the leader *for* something."²³

Using materials derived from his research and his broad general reading and experience, Oakes attempts to understand the "deeper agenda" attracting individuals to such groups. He mentions two open-ended questions which brought striking responses from the close associates of charismatic leaders, namely: "What has been your major change or achievement in your time here (with the leader)?" and "If something happened which forced you to leave the group and (the leader) and you could never return, what would be your most enduring memory?"²⁴ Oakes finds that: "Many followers before joining a charismatic group, actively search for a vehicle for their great work. . . . Rather than follow-

19. *Ibid.*, 22.

20. *Ibid.*, 121.

21. *Ibid.*, 122.

22. *Ibid.*, 124.

23. *Ibid.*, 126.

24 *Ibid.*, 126. Oakes used other open-ended questions which elicited sometimes striking responses. One involved Joseph Smith's "No man knows my history" statement shortly before his death (200). In a letter to me on 20 July 1992, Oakes commented on one response: "I had a hunch that asking what Smith meant by that statement might produce some interesting material, as well as answering for me the question of what was the 'true' 'inner' 'deeper' message of the prophet. It was

ers being spontaneously swept off their feet by a leader, or a group of followers 'constructing' a leader, both leader and follower find each other for their own purposes."²⁵

Oakes describes a series of stages a follower may experience after joining a group, a sort of "natural history of the follower." The new follower begins by enthusiastically embracing the group in a sort of honeymoon stage, then undergoes a difficult process of trying to adjust and find an appropriate niche within the group; at some point he experiences a sense of let-down and disappointment as the group's imperfections become apparent, and eventually he decides either to leave the group or to stick with it despite its limitations.²⁶ Oakes says:

Ex-members who still felt warmly about the leader were those who had succeeded in their great work. They had used the group for their own purposes and moved on at the right time. Success gave them a new appreciation of the leader, gratitude for his help but also pragmatism about his faults. They no longer needed to believe in him so intensely. Usually by the time they were successful they had witnessed some of the leader's less savoury attributes—his mistakes and excesses. They held few illusions about his nature but retained a fondness. After success they felt restricted by the group and needed a new challenge.²⁷

In this chapter and throughout much of his analysis, Oakes describes a range of psychological dynamics which might apply to *all* of us. This provides us a certain "shock of recognition," which could make Oakes's work of interest to the general public as well as to scholars and students in fields such as history, anthropology, sociology, political science, and religious studies.²⁸

kind of an attempt to canvass expert opinion. . . . I thought you might be interested in an answer given to me by the leader of the New Zealand Rastafarians. With hardly a pause he said 'Oh, I know what he means by that. He is a holy man. He means "No man knows my heart like God knows it."' I don't know if you are as moved by that reply as I am, but what a world it would be if only we could all know each others' hearts as only God does (using "God" as a metaphor etc etc)."

25. Oakes argues that many followers of charismatic religious leaders "have a goal they are aiming for, and following a charismatic leader is their strategy for achieving this goal" (*Prophetic Charisma*, 125). He adds that the followers' "great works were not consciously expressed as such" and defines "great work," in this context, as "a hope held for future possibilities for transformation of one's self. It can be deduced retrospectively from the changes that the follower makes in his life after joining the group" (127).

26. *Ibid.*, 131-43.

27. *Ibid.*, 139.

28. The idea that Oakes's insights might have broader applicability resonated strongly with Robert Flanders, who wrote in a letter to me on 20 February 1998 (in response to a copy of my eighteen-page letter evaluating a book manuscript I had sent to Syracuse University Press on 25 November 1995): "I cannot emphasize too much the impact upon me of your brilliant description and analysis of Oakes work. . . . At the bottom of your page 13 you said, 'It strikes me that Oakes is describing. . . psychological dynamics that apply to *all* of us.' I had been thinking about the universality of Oakes's insights as I read your account, and stopped at that point, struck by your conclusion which was like an exclamation point to my own thought."

In "The Soul of the Prophet," Oakes discusses the paradoxical, contradictory, and unpredictable ways the prophet behaves because "every leader in the study appeared to have split off part of his or her self in order to pursue their vision."²⁹ All the charismatic figures Oakes studied seemed to have focused so intensely on their mission that other aspects of their lives and awareness were downplayed, ignored, or repressed entirely. Consequently, they had "blind spots" about weaknesses in their own motivation and behavior, weaknesses that were obvious to all who knew them, but which the leaders themselves could not see or admit. Oakes further explains that ultimately the prophet needs his followers more than they need him. He notes that the prophet often has what he describes as an infantile, magical view of the world "wherein one need only wish to make it so" and, as a result, the prophet often has a willingness to distort reality.³⁰ The prophet also displays a peculiar experience and transcendence of time often associated with memory distortions.³¹ Oakes concludes this chapter by arguing that "what the prophet knows as reality has some of the qualities of a dream, with fluid boundaries between the real and unreal, self and other, past and future, between God and humankind."³²

Finally, Oakes considers the last of the five stages in his typology of prophetic vocation, which he titles pessimistically, "Decline or Fall?"³³ In this chapter, he highlights two types of prophetic personalities, "messianic" and "charismatic." He argues: "The messianic types were not prey to the kind of erratic and provocative behaviours to which charismatic types are prone. . . For messianic prophets the orientation to an external God keeps them in touch with reality and in rough conformity with society's norms, whereas the orientation to an inner God on the part of charismatic prophets inclines them towards conflict with society and hastens their demise."³⁴

29. Oakes, *Prophetic Charisma*, 80-84, 165.

30. Ibid., 171. In this regard, Oakes is especially caustic in his discussion of L. Ron Hubbard's prevarications, noting: "He couldn't understand when others refused to take him seriously because *he took himself so seriously that he believed his own lies*" (emphasis in the original).

31. Ibid., 172-75. In a striking statement, Oakes speculates: "Is it possible that the narcissistic mind locates its meanings as much in the future as in the past? In the telling of a great lie, the lie would not be felt as false because it would not be compared with facts located in memory. Rather, it would be compared with "facts" from an imagined, yet-to-become *future that is experienced as just as real as the past*" (174; emphasis in original).

32. Ibid., 175.

33. Ibid., 176-84. By using "decline" or "fall," Oakes does not refer to the possibility of the movement's success, but rather to the way in which prophets deal differently with their impending mortality. He argues that "messianic" prophets, who emphasize loyalty to a larger ideal rather than to themselves, are often prepared to gradually step aside and facilitate the transition of new leadership into positions of power, while "charismatic" prophets, who emphasize loyalty to themselves more than to their larger ideals, are more likely to attempt to retain full power for as long as possible, frequently with disastrous results.

34. Ibid., 177.

The messianic type usually adopts the posture of being merely a vehicle for God or God's mouthpiece. This enables him to admit mistakes, to compromise, and to advance a less than total claim. If the messianic leader fails it is only God's vehicle which is at fault. Hence the messianic type really advances no special claim for himself other than the possession of God's grace. But the charismatic type is, by Max Weber's definition, "exemplary" and usually claims to be God in one guise or another. This is a more precarious and seductive role; if he fails then God has failed, and if he succeeds then he has proof that he really is God and may become ever more grandiose and self-indulgent, a clear recipe for failure.³⁵

The prophet's credibility founders most over his failure to be truly human, that is, to reflect on his behavior, to doubt himself, to concede error and to show genuine regret for hurt to others. This lack unnerves and embarrasses the followers. They bring with them enormous good-will and loyalty, but when the leader shows not mere refusal but sheer inability to admit any insufficiency, when vain boasting and ranting, naive invincibility alternate with bouts of self-pity and paranoid fantasies, and when the followers sense that the leader's fancies are more important to him than their welfare, their affections change.³⁶

Oakes argues that while many prophets found and lead successful movements, the tendency toward prophetic failure is higher than in other types of leadership, especially in the case of what he has termed "charismatic" prophets.³⁷

II

Oakes's insights might prove helpful in better understanding the dynamics of the Mormon prophet, Joseph Smith, Jr., as well as other charismatic religious and communal figures. Oakes's analysis seems most useful not as a Procrustean bed into which we cram personalities who are far too complex to be easily comprehended by lesser minds, but rather when used as good historians use social theory, namely, to suggest fresh perspectives for analyzing difficult issues. Let us briefly examine each of Oakes's postulated five stages in the development of the sense of prophetic vocation and how they might help us better understand Joseph Smith's distinctive development and sense of mission.

Oakes's first stage, "Early Narcissism," suggests the value of re-examining the nature of Joseph Smith's strong personal ties with his mother Lucy Mack Smith as well as the larger family dynamic, which scholars have seen as a key to both the strengths and weaknesses of Smith's leadership. Scholars from Fawn Brodie to Richard Bushman to more explicitly psychohistorical writers such

35. *Ibid.*, 177-78.

36. *Ibid.*, 180-81.

37. *Ibid.*, 182-83.

Jess Groesbeck, Robert D. Anderson, and William D. Morain have all emphasized the distinctive sense of a Smith *family* mission and the powerful role played by Lucy Mack Smith in developing and sustaining that sense of family mission. Could Oakes's perspectives help us arrive at a better understanding of those Smith family dynamics and how they may have influenced Joseph Smith eventually to assume a role not only as leader of his family but also as prophet, seer, and revelator for a new religious movement?³⁸

Oakes's second stage of prophetic development, "Incubation," might prove fruitful in understanding the sharp divergences in public perceptions of the young Joseph Smith and his family. Clearly, young Joseph and his family were "seekers," filled with a deep sense of their family heritage and distinctiveness, yet struggling to understand what role God might have for them in his larger plan. This sense of "special-ness" felt by both Joseph and his mother, combined with the world's rejection of that self-perception, clearly extends throughout the crucial decade of the 1820s when Joseph was experiencing his initial visions and what he would eventually describe as his "translation" "by the gift and power of God" of the Book of Mormon.³⁹

The Incubation may be seen as overlapping and influencing the third stage of Smith's prophetic development, his "Awakening." Oakes alerts us to the possibility, increasingly being explored by Mormon scholars, that Joseph Smith's initial visionary experiences may have been more complex and extended over a longer period of time than often has been acknowledged. Instead of a single,

38. From the vast literature on this complex subject, let me simply mention the following works here: Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet*, 2nd. ed. rev. (New York: Knopf, 1971); Donna Hill, *Joseph Smith: The First Mormon* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1977); Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984); William D. Morain, *Joseph Smith, Jr., and the Dissociated Mind* (Washington, D. C.: American Psychiatric Press, 1998); Robert D. Anderson, *Inside the Mind of Joseph Smith: Psychobiography and the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999); Jess C. Groesbeck, "The Smiths and Their Dreams and Visions," *Sunstone* 12 (March 1988): 22-29; David Persuitte, *Joseph Smith and the Origins of The Book of Mormon*, 2nd. rev. ed. (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company, 2000); and Waterman, *The Prophet Puzzle*. Primary documentation is provided in Lavina Fielding Anderson, ed., *Lucy's Book: Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith's Family Memoir* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2001), and in documentary collections on Joseph Smith discussed in the following footnote.

39. Young Joseph's complex struggle to understand himself and his role is very evident in the studies cited here in the preceding footnote, and in the comprehensive documentary collections now being published on Joseph Smith's early experiences, including Dean C. Jessee, comp., *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002); Scott A. Faulring, ed., *An American Prophet's Record: The Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1989); Lavina Fielding Anderson, ed., *Lucy's Book: Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith's Family Memoir* (Salt Lake City: Signature, 2001); and Dan Vogel, ed., *Early Mormon Documents*, vols. 1-4 (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1996-2002); and Anderson, ed., *Lucy's Book*. When the authoritative eleven-volume scholarly edition of virtually all known contemporary documents by or about Joseph Smith is completed by historians of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, it will provide a resource unsurpassed for any major religious movement.

clearly identifiable "First Vision" experience, for example, Joseph Smith (like Malcolm X, who compressed two pivotal visits to the Middle East into one Meccan epiphany in his *Autobiography*),⁴⁰ may have retroactively combined key elements from several powerful early visionary experiences into a compelling narrative of his call to mission.⁴¹ Smith's long delay, from 1823 to 1827, in beginning his "translation" of the Book of Mormon plates also makes better sense if one considers the possibility that he was still struggling with just how his sense of mission might best be expressed.⁴²

40. The "canonized" version of Malcolm X's trip to the Middle East and to Mecca—which is presented as a single occurrence leading to a dramatic reversal of his earlier belief in the racial exclusiveness of the Nation of Islam—is found in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, written with the aid of Alex Haley (New York: Grove Press, 1966), 318-42. A supplement and corrective to aspects of Malcolm X's Autobiography is presented in Bruce Perry, *Malcolm: The Life of a Man Who Changed Black America* (Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill, 1991). Perry's biography refers to Malcolm's trip to the Middle East in 1959, including an unsuccessful attempt to visit Mecca. During that first trip, Malcolm increasingly began to see the flaws in the Black Muslim's "white devil" stance (205-06). This Middle Eastern experience predated by five years Malcolm's second, completed Meccan pilgrimage, described on pages 260-268 of Perry's biography, which occurred in April 1964 after he had already split from the Black Muslims. Perry notes that the *Autobiography* claimed that Malcolm "first began to reappraise" Elijah Muhammad's "white devil" theory on his 1964 trip, "despite his earlier trip and the cordial relations he had maintained with Dr. Shawarbi and other fair-skinned Muslim scholars, diplomats, and officials" since 1959 (264).

41. The complexity of Joseph Smith's visionary awakening(s) has been a hotly debated issue, especially since the publication of the significantly different versions of the "first vision" in Dean C. Jesse, "The Early Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision," *Brigham Young University Studies* 9 (Spring 1969): 275-294. Historian James B. Allen emphasizes the greater importance of Joseph Smith's "first vision" to present-day Mormons than to his nineteenth-century contemporaries, who placed greater stress on the Book of Mormon as a key source of authority (Allen, "The Significance of Joseph Smith's First Vision in Mormon Thought," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 1, no. 3 (Autumn 1966): 28-45). Consider, for example, Oliver Cowdery's early history of the church which omits the "first vision" entirely, stressing rather the role of the 1823 vision which eventually led to Joseph Smith's dictation of the Book of Mormon (Cowdery, "Early Scenes and Incidents in the Church," *Messenger and Advocate* 1-2 [1834-1835]). This shift in emphasis is also discussed in Dale L. Morgan, *Dale Morgan on Early Mormonism: Correspondence and a New History*, ed. John Phillip Walker (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1986). My own take on the "first vision" is suggested in my article, "First Visions: Personal Observations on Joseph Smith's Religious Experience," *Sunstone* 8, no. 5 (September-October 1983): 39-43. Richard L. Bushman brilliantly reconstructs the extent and character of visionary experiences contemporary to those of Joseph Smith (Bushman, "The Visionary World of Joseph Smith," *Brigham Young University Studies* 37, no. 1 [1997-98]: 183-204).

42. Even more controversial have been recent studies stressing the visionary character of the Book of Mormon—not simply its discovery but also, possibly, its dictation. I presented a summary of some possible arguments in this regard in my book *Religion and Sexuality: Three American Communal Experiments of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 294-97, as well as in my article, "New Paradigms for Understanding Mormonism and Mormon History," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 29, no. 3 (Fall 1996): 55-63. A provocative discussion of the Book of Mormon as a possible example of trance dictation is found in Scott D. Dunn, "Spirit Writing: Another Look at the Book of Mormon," *Sunstone* 10, no. 6 (June 1985): 17-26. Other important recent analyses of the Book of Mormon are presented in Robert M. Price, "Prophecy and

Oakes's fourth prophetic stage, "Mission," may help illuminate the powerful and well-directed energy displayed by Joseph Smith after the publication of the Book of Mormon and the founding of his new church in 1830. During that period, Smith showed the full force of his charisma by rapidly attracting and developing a large and dedicated following, and solidifying that support by paying close attention to temporal matters and developing distinctive religious rituals, especially during the final phase of his life in Nauvoo, Illinois (1839-1844). During that final phase, he also began to generate some of his most bitter enemies among previously dedicated followers, who eventually became convinced he was arrogating too much power to himself.⁴³

In the final phase, "Decline or Fall"—which occurs during Joseph's last several years in Nauvoo and especially after the devastating apostasy of his second in command, John C. Bennett, in 1842—Joseph Smith struggled with some of the deeper prophetic tensions, which Oakes explores by contrasting his two types of prophetic personalities, the "messianic" and the "charismatic." Probably no successful prophet fits exclusively into only one of these psychological categories, but it might be revealing to explore the extent to which Joseph Smith might be seen as primarily "messianic" or "charismatic" (using Oakes's terminology) during different periods of his life. My impression is that Joseph demonstrated his "prophetic" qualities most clearly during the earlier stages of his career when he cast himself as God's agent who "translated" the book of Mormon and gave divine revelations about how to prepare for a new dispensation from God, which would eventually usher in the millennium. During this period, Smith was able to separate his own personal desires from his sense of mission, as is reflected in his famous statement, "A prophet is a prophet only when he is acting as such."⁴⁴ By the final years of his life, however, Joseph Smith appears increasingly to have adopted the problematic "charismatic" persona; he tended more and more to identify his own will directly with that of God and thereby alienated some of his previously loyal followers. They came to feel he

Palimpsest," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 35, no. 3 (Fall 2002): 67-82; Brigham H. Roberts, *Studies of the Book of Mormon*, 2nd ed., Brigham D. Madsen, ed. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992); Grant H. Palmer, *An Insider's View of Mormon Origins* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002); and Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe, eds., *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002). Whatever the merits of these particular arguments, scholars of early Mormonism would do well to consider the full range and complexity of Joseph Smith's personal and visionary experiences when trying to understand the nature and appeal of the early Mormon movement.

43. For scholarly accounts critical of Joseph Smith's behavior during his final years in Nauvoo, see Robert B. Flanders, "Dream and Nightmare: Nauvoo Revisited," in F. Mark McKiernan, Alma R. Blair, Paul M. Edwards, eds., *The Restoration Movement: Essays in Mormon History* (Lawrence, Kansas: Coronado Press, 1973), 141-66, and Gary James Bergera, "Joseph Smith and the Hazards of Charismatic Leadership," in Waterman, *The Prophet Puzzle*, 239-57.

44. Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: Period I*, ed. Brigham H. Roberts, 6 vols., 2nd. ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1948), 5:265.

was becoming so autocratic and idiosyncratic that he was a "fallen prophet," unfit to lead the very church he had founded.⁴⁵

These have been preliminary thoughts about difficult issues deserving further exploration. Prophetic charisma raises many complex and important questions. The line between madness and the highest visionary reconstruction of personality is often an extremely fine one. In the words of William James, quoted in the introduction to Oakes's *Prophetic Charisma*, "When a superior intellect and a psychopathic temperament coalesce—as in the endless permutations and combinations of human faculty they are bound to coalesce often enough—in the same individual, we have the best possible condition for the kind of effective genius that gets into the biographical dictionaries. Such men do not remain mere critics and understanders with their intellect. Their ideas possess them, they inflict them, for better or for worse, upon their companions or their age."⁴⁶ Oakes's suggestive analysis may help us better understand the dynamics of how such contradictory prophetic creativity may develop in a prophetic personality, as well as, at a more modest level, how our own minds may work, both at their best and at their worst.

45. The classic account of Mormon Nauvoo is Robert Bruce Flanders, *Nauvoo: Kingdom on the Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965). Key essays interpreting the Nauvoo period and its significance are found in Roger D. Launius and John E. Hallwas, eds., *Kingdom on the Mississippi Revisited: Nauvoo in Mormon History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996). The most comprehensive and balanced study of the complexity of the conflicts in Mormon Nauvoo is found in John E. Hallwas and Roger D. Launius, eds., *Cultures in Conflict: A Documentary History of the Mormon War in Illinois* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1995). For a more positive interpretation, see Gleo M. Leonard, *Nauvoo: A Place of Peace, A People of Promise* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 2002).

46. James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 36-37.