

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Haitian Mormons

May I add some thoughts to Jennifer Huss Basquiat's fine article ("Embodied Mormonism: Performance, Vodou, and the LDS Faith in Haiti," 37, no. 4 [Winter 2004]: 1–34)?

My own experience was more recent (2000–02), more rural (her focus was Port-au-Prince and the upscale, by Haitian standards, Pétionville Ward), and more involved with organizational matters. My impressions do not counter hers. Indeed, they broaden the scope and deepen the implications of what she has stated so well.

Basquiat mentioned the visionary inclinations of the Haitians she interviewed. They have no problem with Joseph Smith and the First Vision. They themselves receive such manifestations or know someone right around the corner who does, and these personal manifestations play fast and loose with doctrinal purity. She mentions their "casting historical Mormon figures (including the present prophet) in an ancestor's role." They thus have a profound respect for authority figures—I would add, at a distance, and with a disdain for established hierarchies and procedures. They have adopted their own "definitional ceremonies" to which they have added,

since Basquiat's study, the temple in the Dominican Republic. I found a widespread fondness for the temple but for reasons that might startle mainline Mormons. The appeal is based on the love of secrecy, ritual, the feeling of being initiated into the mysteries. Basquiat could have a field day exploring this area, especially in light of her emphasis on Vodou.

You can imagine me, armed with my *Handbook of Instructions*, marching onto this playground. It was an administrative nightmare. But stepping back a bit, I came to realize that what I was witnessing was the Church of the New Testament or, if you will, the early days of the Restoration. In both cases, the challenge was to institutionalize an ideal, to channel the revelatory spirit into an organizational framework; in short, to reconcile the blinding vision with the need for survival.

The early Christian Church made the accommodation by adopting Greek philosophy and Roman organization and thus establishing doctrinal orthodoxy and its enforcing procedures (clergy and sacramental constraints). The Christianity inherited by the West, whether Catholic or Protestant, built upon this approach.

Now, however, traditional west-

ern Christendom is in decline. The new centers arise in warmer climes, including Africa, the seat, we should remind ourselves, of the earliest expansion of the faith.

All of which brings me back to this article, my experience in Haiti, and a previous stint in East Africa. I think we have not yet begun to realize the implications of our boast of a “world-wide” Church. The interface of the Church with Haiti or, to a much greater extent, Africa, will not leave either party unchanged. What we are witnessing in these parts of the world is a throwback to an earlier age when the Saints were accustomed to a much more free-flowing spirit, did not see efficiency as the highest of organizational values, focused on ritualistic and charismatic aspects of the faith as unifying factors, and found doctrinal purity a sometime thing.

A forbidding future? Maybe. But it will liven up the landscape.

Gary Huxford
Monmouth, Oregon

Folklore Rebutted

In “From Captain Kidd’s Treasure Ghost to the Angel Moroni: Changing *Dramatis Personae* in Early Mormonism,” 36, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 17–42, Ronald Huggins attacks Joseph Smith by claiming that a “money-digger’s yarn” was transformed into “restoration history.”

Huggins believes that “careful study” allows one “to trace the story’s development from its earlier to its later version” (19, 22).

Huggins’s work, however, hardly qualifies as a “careful study.” He seems to be unaware, for example, of Mark Ashurst-McGee’s definitive article “Moroni: Angel or Treasure Guardian?” *Mormon Historical Studies* 2, no. 2 (2001): 39–75.

Ashurst-McGee argues that the issue “requires an application of the basic standards of source criticism and good history”: (1) First-hand accounts take precedence over secondhand accounts; (2) Sources composed closer to the time of the event take precedence over sources composed later on (48).

Applying these standards, Ashurst-McGee analyzes primary sources in chronological order. Huggins, in contrast, ignores these standards and misses key documents. A prime example is the Willard Chase affidavit. Huggins claims that Chase’s account of the plates—featuring black clothes, a black horse, a disappearing book, and a toad that turns into a spirit—preserves “the earliest version of the story” (22). Only later, Huggins argues, did Joseph speak of revelation and an angel.

The Chase document, however, fails both of Ashurst-McGee's tests. First, it is not a firsthand account. Rather than hearing of the plates directly from Joseph, Chase heard of them from the Prophet's father. Even if he recalled the conversation accurately, his secondhand version at best represents the view of Joseph Sr. Second, multiple sources were composed before Chase's 1833 statement. A careful study should look first at the early firsthand witnesses and second at the early written sources.

Firsthand accounts—in the order these individuals spoke with Joseph Smith—include the following:

1–2. Lucy Mack Smith's 1844–45 history and William Smith's 1883 reminiscence. The Smiths heard of the plates from Joseph on September 22 or 23, 1823. Lucy wrote that Joseph was contemplating religious questions, that a bright light entered the room, and that Joseph "looked up and saw an angel of the Lord" (Lavina Fielding Anderson, *Lucy's Book: A Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith's Family Memoir* [Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2001], 335). According to William, "[Joseph] told us how the angel appeared to him, . . . and that the angel had also given him a short account of the inhabitants who formerly resided upon this continent" (Dan Vogel, ed., *Early Mormon Docu-*

ments, 5 vols. [Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998–2003], 1:496).

3. Lorenzo Saunders's 1884 interview. Saunders said that Joseph told him about the revelation, the plates, and the angel "in the summer before Alvin died" (EMD, 2:159). Saunders thus pinpoints his conversation with Joseph as falling between the first visit of Moroni on September 22, 1823, and Alvin's death on November 19, 1823.

4–5. Joseph Knight's reminiscence, ca. 1835–47, and Joseph Knight Jr.'s 1862 history. The Knights heard the story from Joseph Smith in November of 1826. Joseph said Joseph Smith had been visited by a personage who instructed him to do the will of God in order to obtain the plates (EMD, 4:15). According to Joseph Jr., the Prophet "had seen a vision, that a personage had appeared to him and told him <where> there was a gold book of ancient date buried, and if he would follow the directions of the Angel he could get it" (EMD, 4:71).

Accounts emphasizing a treasure guardian came later. Benjamin Saunders reported in 1884 that he had heard Joseph say, "there was something down near the box that looked like a toad that rose up into a man which for-

bid him to take the plates" (EMD, 2:137). This conversation took place in 1827, shortly after Joseph obtained the plates. Similarly, Joseph and Hiel Lewis, who talked to Joseph in the spring of 1828—and recorded their version in 1879—said Joseph told of a dream where he saw a man with a long beard, "who appeared like a Spaniard" and whose throat was "cut from ear to ear, and the blood streaming down" (EMD, 4:304).

While all of these individuals claimed to have heard Joseph's story between 1823 and 1828, no documents have survived from that crucial period. The earliest sources include the following:

1. Jesse Smith's letter of June 26, 1829. In the first known written record of the plates, Jesse Smith, Joseph Sr.'s hostile older brother, mentioned disapprovingly that Joseph Jr. had written "that the angel of the Lord has revealed to him the hidden treasures of wisdom & knowledge, even divine revelation" (EMD, 1:552).

2. Lucius Fenn's letter of February 12, 1830. In the earliest account by someone not associated with Mormonism, Lucius Fenn wrote that "there has been a bible found by 3 men but a short distance from us . . . an angel appeared to these 3 men and told them that there was a bible concealed in such a place and

if one of them would go to that place he would find it" (EMD, 5:268).

3. Rev. Diedrich Willers's letter of June 18, 1830. Willers, a local minister, reported that Joseph Smith "claimed that the angel of the Lord had appeared and made known to him that . . . there were golden plates hidden in the earth on which was written the fate of a Jewish prophet's family" (EMD, 5:272).

Newspapers also provide valuable information, but here again Huggins mismanages the sources. He quotes an 1831 statement from Abner Cole, editor of the *Palmyra Reflector*, that "it is well known that Jo Smith never pretended to have any communion with angels, until a long period after the pretended finding of his book" (EMD, 2:246, emphasis Cole's). Cole's claim supports Huggins's thesis, but a systematic look at the earliest newspaper accounts shows something else:

1. *Wayne Sentinel*, June 26, 1829, the first-known newspaper account of the Book of Mormon: "Much speculation has existed, concerning a pretended discovery, through superhuman means, of an ancient record, of a religious and a divine nature and origin, written in ancient characters, impossible to be interpreted by any

to whom the special gift has not been imparted by inspiration" (EMD, 2:218–19).

2. *Palmyra Freeman*, ca. August 1829: "[Golden Bible] proselytes give the following account of it. In the fall of 1827, a person by the name of *Joseph Smith* . . . reported that he had been visited in a dream by the spirit of the Almighty and informed that in a certain hill in that town, was deposited this Golden Bible, containing an ancient record of a divine nature and origin" (EMD, 2:221).

3. *The Reflector*, Palmyra, January 2, 1830, Abner Cole's first extensive treatment of Joseph Smith: "We do not intend at this time, to discuss the merits or demerits of this work. . . . The *Book*, when it shall come before the public, must stand or fall according to the whims and fancies of its readers. . . . we cannot discover any thing *reasonable*. . . . As to its religious character, we have as yet no means of determining. . . ." (EMD, 2:231–34).

Huggins fails to mention that Cole radically changed his tune *after* Joseph Smith demanded that Cole stop illegally printing excerpts from the Book of Mormon. Before the confrontation with Joseph, Cole took a wait-and-see attitude—afterwards, he ridiculed Joseph with his "Book of Pukei" parody and claims about treasure dig-

ging and "Walters the Magician" (*Reflector*, June 12, 1830; EMD, 2:231–34).

The pattern is clear: the earliest witnesses, including the Smiths and the Knights, emphasized the religious aspects of Joseph's story. Accounts emphasizing "Captain Kidd" elements, from Saunders and the Lewis brothers, were later developments. Likewise, the first personal mentions of the Book of Mormon, from the likes of Jesse Smith and Lucius Fenn, set the story in a religious context, while later accounts from people such as Abram Benton and James Gordon Bennett focused on Joseph's "magic power" and treasure seeking transformed into a "religious plot" (EMD, 4:96; 3:282).

Finally, newspaper accounts from 1829 on consistently emphasized an ancient record of a "divine nature," with Cole's 1830 "Book of Pukei" being the main exception. In fact, the first mention of Kidd's treasure in an article about Mormonism refers not to Joseph Smith but to a Rochester money digger coincidentally named Smith (*The Gem*, May 15, 1830; EMD, 3:271–73). In a major *faux pas*, Huggins mistakenly claims that this account describes Joseph Smith or one of his brothers (40).

Certainly, all accounts—both

hostile and friendly to Joseph—deserve careful study. Some witnesses apparently conflate one or more of Joseph's visions. Also, even friendly sources include such details as a disappearing book (Joseph Knight Sr.) and a shock that prevented Joseph from retrieving the plates (Oliver Cowdery). Rather than showing that Joseph concocted his story, however, such retellings simply show that he described an experience that included both "religious" and "folk culture" elements. This should not be surprising because, as Ronald W. Walker has pointed out, Joseph grew up in a world that blended "human-kind's deep myths and Christian

ideas" ("The Persisting Idea of American Treasure Hunting," *BYU Studies* 24, no. 4 [1984]: 452). This culture, so different from the technological world we inhabit, also demands serious study by anyone attempting to understand Joseph Smith. The pattern revealed, however, is quite opposite to the one proposed by Huggins: early witnesses described an angel who appeared in a religious context, but, as Ashurst-McGee puts it, later witnesses "defrocked" Moroni by focusing on Captain Kidd's treasure.

Larry Morris
Salt Lake City, Utah