

REVIEW

By Any Standard, a Remarkable Book

Richard Lyman Bushman with the assistance of Jed Woodworth, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 740 pp., \$35.00

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By any standard this is a remarkable book. Sixty years ago Knopf published Fawn Brodie's *No Man Knows My History*, a biography of the Mormon prophet by a disaffected Mormon who, according to her own biographer, had already decided before she began her writing that Joseph Smith was "not a true prophet."¹ This study by Bushman is, in contrast, a biography by a believer who said he would write faithful history but still examine "all sides of Joseph Smith, facing up to his mistakes and flaws" (Preface, xix). It is fair, then, to ask: How faith-promoting is this biography and to what degree does Bushman examine all sides of Joseph Smith? That Knopf has permitted Bushman to write such a biography illustrates how much the climate of opinion among historians regarding religion and the Mormons has changed since 1945.

To be fair to Bushman, it should be said that, as a "faithful" Mormon historian who would study Joseph Smith, he must base his work on evidence while striving for truth, and yet preserve as far as possible the most fundamental elements of the faith as understood by the Church. This requirement necessitates that he give preference to the defenders of the faith in their arguments and discount the doubters. He says that this is justifiable because the critics are largely amateurs while those defending are better trained. My impression is that both sides are largely amateurs—that defenders of the faith, despite their university degrees, often write outside their fields of specialization and may not always be qualified to judge of which they speak.

One example of this approach in Bushman is his dependence on Ariel L. Crowley for an argument that the Anthon transcript characters are Egyptian (577). Crowley was no Egyptologist. I know of only one fully qualified Mormon Egyptologist today, and his views were not considered. Bushman is open to severe criticism here. Having an assistant cite opposing views in the footnotes seems disingenuous since Bushman disregards them.

There is much to praise in this work. It is well written and interesting. It is based on enormous, although not exhaustive research, much of it done by others. Fortunately Bushman avoids claiming final answers. He attempts to see Joseph in his own time and place in American history and gives the Prophet his just due as

one of the most significant religious leaders of his day. He begins by discounting Brodie's ridiculous charge that the Smith family was irreligious (21-27). Lucy Mack Smith's history proves the contrary.

The author says there were no serious problems in the Smith family in Joseph's early years (20), yet admits that Joseph Smith Sr. was a drunk and that there were rifts on religious matters in the family. He also admits their poverty (55).

Bushman says that Joseph's family all believed the story of his visions (55) but is well aware that Lucy and three of her children were members of the Presbyterian Church until 1830 (70-71). If Joseph's 1838 account of his first vision is correct where he is told that all the churches are wrong and he should join none of them, why does a "believing" Lucy disregard the Lord's message? Of course, if the 1832 account is more accurate, then the Lord does not instruct Joseph to join no church and Lucy is off the hook. Alvin's death, she said, turned her off on the whole business for a while. It is difficult to get consistency in the foundation stories, but inconsistency does not disprove them. It is also difficult to get a consistent story from the Bible about the birth and resurrection of Jesus, but we should not expect scientific precision here.

Bushman is struck with Joseph's genius, and rightly so. But it bothers me that he argues for the Prophet's divine inspiration by first claiming that Joseph did not amount to much in his youth before receiving it. Bushman resorts to the old argument that his Palmyra neighbors said nothing good about him (35-36). Why believe Joseph's antagonistic neighbors about his youth? It is obvious they did not know him well. Bushman recognizes that Abraham Lincoln came from the dregs of American society about the same time as Joseph but despite his enormous disadvantages became the nation's greatest president. Shakespeare, too, did not have the benefit of an education at Oxford or Cambridge but still remains, in all likelihood, the greatest writer in the English language. Genius is astonishing and always hard to measure. The problem is we do not know enough about what influenced Joseph in his earliest years.

Bushman is wrong, though, to discount what we do know. We now know a lot more about the role of the village seer, a folk function dating back to medieval times. Such seers used divining rods, searched for buried treasure, and discovered ancient sacred writings. As a "money digger," Joseph may have inherited this role. Also, from Lucy's narrative, we know that Alvin apparently contributed to Joseph's early thinking. Better to acknowledge some possible influences on the Prophet than to deny his youthful potential.

Bushman takes a hard look at Joseph Smith's personality and notes how much he disliked being opposed or contradicted (235-50). He indicates that Joseph was frequently involved in quarrels in defending his reputation but hedges in telling how often this would lead to physical confrontations. One of these is relegated to a

footnote where the Prophet boxed the ears of a minister and physically kicked him out of his house when the man called Joseph a fraud (619 note 6).

Bushman acknowledges difficulty dating the First Vision since Joseph and others give conflicting dates (39–40). The time of the great revival which Joseph describes in his 1820 account is a problem which Reverend Wesley Walters used to discount the entire First Vision story, saying the revival came in late 1823 or early 1824. The issue is a tough one, despite Milton Backman's argument that there was a revival in 1819, since Lucy Mack Smith seems to agree with Walters that the revival took place after Alvin's death in 1823.

Bushman avoids contending as some do that there is no essential difference between Joseph's 1832 and 1838 accounts of the First Vision. He sees Joseph adjusting his story to the appropriate audience. He apparently sees some theological development here but does not enlarge on it. He fails to notice that in the 1832 version Joseph says he had decided for himself that all the churches were wrong but alters this statement in 1838 by saying that it never occurred to him until the Lord told him so. Joseph was not above rewriting his history to improve its dramatic effect. Is Bushman looking at "all sides" of Joseph Smith here? Bushman correctly sees that the Prophet's full understanding of the nature of the Godhead did not come until the King Follett discourse.

Bushman begs the question about the Book of Mormon plates (58) when he argues that Joseph's story is documented while some historian's speculations have no supporting documentation; hence, we have to give Joseph's accounts more credence. Surely Bushman does not mean to say that because Joseph's history is written it is undoubtedly true; *whether* it is true is the issue here.

I can't make out what Bushman wants us to believe about the Indians. I think the DNA issue may bother him more than he lets on. He says at one point that the Book of Mormon is about the Indians and that it promises that they will ultimately triumph on this continent (99). But he also says that it is not about the Indians, that the word does not appear in the text (96). He asks why Joseph Smith would be motivated to write a volume on the history of the Indians (95), forgetting the very great interest in Indians among Methodist and other missionary societies. Also, there is a lot said about the possible origin of the Indians in the Palmyra newspapers. Had Bushman researched them more carefully he would know this. Bushman admits that the Book of Mormon was the missionary tool taken by the elders to the Indians on the western frontier in Missouri (122). He is aware of problems with popular views of Book of Mormon archeology and appropriately says nothing about the ruins in Central America (97). He borrows John Sorensen's argument that Book of Mormon geography occupies only a small space in the Americas. But Bushman quotes Joseph as saying that the scripture is a history of the Indians in the western United States (94) which does not sound like a small region.

There are hitches in the analysis. Bushman argues that, since the Book of Mormon is different from Ethan Smith's *View of the Hebrews*, there must be no connection (96–97). He may be right in his conclusion, but the construction of his argument is faulty. If Joseph was influenced by this source, he did not necessarily have to copy every detail. Keen human intelligence does not work that way.

Although Bushman insists that the historicity of the Book of Mormon is fundamental (92), he comes perilously close in a place or two to saying that Joseph wrote the Book of Mormon. For example, he says Joseph told a reporter that he wrote the Golden Bible (396). Bushman comments elsewhere: "In some respects the Book of Mormon can be seen as a revelation of Joseph Smith, that it can be read as a document of profound social protest against the dominant culture of Joseph Smith's time." The book is against "increasing wealth and inequality, against the subjugation of the Indians, against the love of riches" (164). Bushman does not stress how frequently the Book of Mormon warns that acquisitiveness and wealth can lead to disbelief and apostasy. He overlooks what the Lord told Joseph regarding the Book of Mormon: "Behold, thou wast called and chosen to write the Book of Mormon" (D&C 24:1). Does this reveal a side of Joseph Bushman hasn't considered?

At one point, Bushman reveals a strange way of thinking about the Book of Mormon and its story. He argues that it is true, not because of what it says, but for what it does not say—namely ignoring early Republican values and turning the American story upside down. It is absolutely unique in this approach, Bushman maintains. He is right about the anti-Republicanism in the scripture, but he might have reconsidered his argument had he known more about American religion in the eighteen and nineteenth centuries and how existing Protestant churches reacted to the early Republican values.

Actually the churches ignored Jefferson's justification for religious freedom—that no two men can think alike because their opinions are shaped by their experience and all men's experiences differ. The churches all claimed to be the true church (as Joseph once said) and thus demanded that everyone accept their doctrine and authority. My point here is that the old-line churches turned their back on the Enlightenment and were also anti-Republican to a considerable extent. Despite Bushman's argument, the Book of Mormon may not be entirely unique here.

Bushman makes no attempt to bridge the gulf between the Book of Mormon's means of salvation and Joseph's later emphasis on temple ordinances. But he excels in his treatment of Joseph's mature theology, giving it more attention than most biographers. I strongly commend his efforts here and see it as a "must" read for those interested in Joseph's life.

Bushman is aware that Joseph Smith wrote the testimony of the witnesses in the Book of Mormon (79). Thus, in court, such "testimony" would probably be

considered hearsay and inadmissible. But he repeats much of the traditional story regardless. He may or may not be aware that Martin Harris belonged to several different churches during his lifetime and that, after he left Mormonism, he became a missionary for the Shakers in England in the middle 1840s. A potential convert was told by Martin Harris that, as a witness, he did not see the plates with his natural eyes.² This was also reported by S. Burnett who wrote to "Br Johnson" in 1838 that he just "heard Harris say in a meeting that he never saw the plates with his natural eyes, only in a vision." Harris insisted he "knew" the Book of Mormon was "true," that he "hefted the plates repeatedly in a box, with only a tablecloth . . . over them but he never saw them only as he saw a city through a mountain."³ Can Bushman really consider all aspects of Joseph's story and still preserve the faith? The Book of Mormon witnesses are a difficult subject to deal with in all openness and candor and still do justice to traditional Church understandings.

He affirms in dealing with Zion's Camp that the Saints had no intention of invading Missouri—despite the fact they did so with an armed force (236–42). He ignores what Justus Morse, a sharpshooter in the camp, said on the subject: "[The] whole company was armed with guns, pistols, and knives, and we expected to deliver said 'lands' from the mob who occupied them, and to avenge the Lord on his enemies as provided in the Prophet's revelations."⁴ Bushman is right that, in the end, Joseph backed off from using force because he faced superior numbers and a governor who would not call upon the state militia to protect the Saints. Yet Joseph wrote to Emma that his purpose had been to "terrorize" the Missourians (250). How could this be done without invading with a large army?

Bushman seems contradictory in what he says about the Church and democracy. In one place (153) he says the Church is very democratic in its use of lay priesthood. Then he changes his mind and says it is not democratic because, in a democracy, the people are sovereign; but in the Church, the Lord and his spokesman-prophet are sovereign (265). He says Joseph's "was a religion for and by the people. It was not of the people—electoral democracy was absent—but if democracy means participation in government, no church was more democratic" (559). By this latter definition Hitler's Germany might be called democratic. Lots of people participated: the SS, the Gestapo, the army, and the navy. My dictionary shows us that Bushman's second definition is the better one, that "democracy is a political system in which the supreme power is held and exercised by the people." It is opposed, my dictionary says, to anything authoritarian. Thus, it is hard to accept Bushman's argument that the early Church was democratic. Nonetheless, I like the point he makes that American federal democracy, in which local government leaders were sovereign, could provide no justice for the Saints in Missouri.

Bushman, on skimpy evidence, dates the restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood during the summer of 1830, realizing that there is no contemporary

of Joseph Smith who said it was 1829. But part of the discussion (158) is not clearly written, and I wonder if an assistant did not produce this passage. Brigham Young, Parley P. Pratt, and others said emphatically that the Melchizedek Priesthood was "revealed" and restored by Peter, James, and John in Kirtland in June of 1831. There is no ambiguity in Brigham's statement: "In the year 1831 the prophet went to Ohio. . . . They held a General Conference . . . then Joseph received a revelation, and ordained High Priests. . . . When he received the Melchizedek Priesthood he had another revelation. Peter, James and John came to him. . . . When he received this revelation in *Kirtland* the Lord revealed to him that he should begin and ordain High Priests."⁵

Brigham describes two events here, the restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood followed by the ordaining of high priests—both in 1831 in Kirtland. It is as clear as anything Brigham ever said. This issue can be disturbing to some Latter-day Saints, but it does not have to be. If the priesthood was restored in June 1829, as tradition holds, still the most important parts of the Restoration had already occurred: that is, the appearance of the Father and the Son, the visits of Moroni, and the translation of the Book of Mormon. If the Restoration was in the summer of 1830, then it came after the Church was organized. If it was in 1831, then Joseph received a few more revelations but nothing crucial to the integrity of the story. If it came in 1831, then the Lord had his own timetable that does not always square with our logic, but He provided what was needed when it was needed.

Bushman's rather traditional treatment of the Civil War prophecy is strained (191–92). Great Britain did not intervene in the war. Neither the blacks nor the Indians staged more than local rebellions. Since Joseph thought the millennium would come in forty or fifty years, he was not looking beyond this time in his prophecy.

Bushman plays down Joseph's part in the military activities in Daviess County and with the Danites, although Albert Rockwood, a loyal Latter-day Saint, tells a different story about Joseph, the Danites, militarism, and millennialism in Mormon thinking at the time.⁶ Strangely, Bushman admits that Joseph may have been guilty of treason in Missouri in attacking state militia who were acting under Samuel Bogart's direction (364, 371, 374). He says Joseph endorsed Rigdon's war of extermination speech but fails to see that this language opened the door morally for Governor Boggs's version of extermination.

Bushman says that the Nauvoo Legion was essentially ceremonial in nature, used for parades and other holiday purposes (372). But he recounts at least three occasions where the legion took more than ceremonial action, especially when it intervened to escort Joseph and his Missouri kidnappers to Nauvoo rather than allow him to be taken back to Missouri to stand trial (372, 471, 470, 500). A new study by Richard E. Bennett, Susan Easton Black, and Donald Q. Cannon dem-

onstrates conclusively how mistaken he is here.⁷ Bushman has trouble with Joseph's belligerence here and elsewhere, especially in Nauvoo near the end of Joseph's life.

The biographer shows good insight in what he says about the endowment ceremony as it emerged in Nauvoo. Joseph may have borrowed signs and symbols from the Masons for his temple ceremonies but certainly gave them an entirely different meaning, a meaning that brings his inspiration into play. Bushman recognizes that a genius may gather ideas from many places but makes of them what he will (448–52). This is Joseph Smith. If the Prophet drew on environmental influences, it does not necessarily mean that he therefore lacked divine inspiration.

Citing one example in Nauvoo, Bushman affirms that Joseph was tolerant of other beliefs (415–16); but his own study casts doubt on that claim. He forgets how Joseph in 1832 said he knew all the churches were wrong and how in 1838 said that he hated the “tumult of opinions” among the churches. In Kirtland, Missouri, and Nauvoo, how tolerant was he of dissent? His destruction of a dissenting newspaper in Nauvoo led ultimately to his death. In 1842 Joseph said, “Conflicting opinions, the clash of doctrines, the diversity of sentiment [exists]. Let the Melchizedek priesthood be introduced and men be subject to their teaching and their sectarian, narrow contracted notions would flee away. . . . The anarchy and confusion that prevails among men would disappear.”⁸ Joseph's distaste for a diversity of opinion could not be put more plainly. He once said: “The opinions of men, so far as I am . . . concerned are . . . as the crackling of thorns under the pot, or the whistling of the wind.”⁹

Bushman gives considerable attention to the Prophet's plural marriages and even acknowledges that he was married to ten women who were already married to and living with other men (437). He mentions the possibility that Joseph might have been “a libertine in the guise of a prophet seducing women for his own pleasure” (326) but goes on to argue that, while an answer can never be given from historical sources, plural marriage was, as Joseph saw it, a way of raising a righteous generation on the eve of the second coming. But why did Joseph desire women who were already married? Was Joseph testing the faith and obedience of some of his male followers as Heber C. Kimball suggested? Or was he in some unexplained way demanding the total subservience of all those involved, including some male non-members? Because polygamy on the whole has been a subject that Church leaders have considered best forgotten, this subject may be hard for Church members to deal with. Bushman treats it with some candor and historical accuracy but risks failing in his faith-promoting objectives.

Bushman says that John C. Bennett's allegations about polygamy were what turned public opinion against Joseph in Nauvoo (465). If he had read the down-state Illinois and Iowa newspapers more carefully, he would have found that this is not true. Non-Mormons were not sure what to make of John C.

Bennett, and most of them probably did not believe him. One of Bushman's quotations, in fact, captures their uncertainty, saying, "if Bennett's charges are true" (145; Bushman is citing the *Burlington Hawkeye*, Nov. 10, 1842). Joseph sent the elders out to deny Bennett's assertions, and they seem to have had some effect. What hurt Joseph most was his intrusion into politics and his bloc voting that was a reach for political power. Bushman says that the gathering made Mormon politics inevitable (222), but the gathering did not necessitate bloc voting. Joseph's political practices are better explained by his belief that "monarchical, aristocratic and republican forms of government . . . have in their turn been raised to dignity and prostrated in the dust. . . . All speak with a voice of thunder, that man is not able to govern himself—to legislate for himself. . . . It has been the design of Jehovah . . . and his purpose now, to . . . take the reigns of government into his own hand. . . . When that is done . . . anarchy and confusion will be destroyed."¹⁰ Joseph said the time for these events is now. Thus, the role he played as political boss in Hancock County, his Kingdom of God with its Council of Fifty, and his running for president of the United States on his own party ticket is consistent with his expressed intentions and with his faith in himself as the Lord's anointed.

But the Prophet's sense of priority is what infuriated the Illinoisans. They believed that, with his revelations and his political ambitions, he placed himself above everyone else and menaced republican government. Bushman's analysis of anti-republicanism in the Book of Mormon in addition to the Prophet's published political views suggests that the people of Illinois had reasons to be concerned. Bushman's failure to deal fully with this aspect of Joseph's dispensation constitutes the major limitation of his biography.

I do not wish to end this review on an overly negative note. Despite the fact that Bushman's "look" at Joseph comes up markedly short at times and he does not always examine controversial issues carefully, his book suggests that thought about the Prophet has matured among some faithful Latter-day Saints. If the Mormon people can accept this work, it may get them closer to the real Joseph than anything any other Church writer has produced. But Bushman has opened a lot of doors here and may have invited the Saints to enter where they have no wish to go. By offering alternate arguments rather than specific refutations of gainsayers, he seems only to provide for a stalemate on many issues. This may not be enough to satisfy many Latter-day Saints. Time will tell.

Notes

1. Newell Bringhurst, *Reconsidering No Man Knows My History* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1996), 40.

2. *Millennial Star* 12, no. 10 (May 15, 1850): 155.

3. "Joseph Smith's Letter Book," Letter dated April 15, 1838.

4. Affidavit of Justus Morse, March 23, 1887, Pleasanton, Iowa, Community of Christ Library-Archives.
5. Brigham Young, May 7, 1861, *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London and Liverpool: LDS Booksellers Depot, 1855-86), 9:88-89, emphasis mine.
6. Albert P. Rockwood letters, Beinecke Library, Yale University.
7. Richard E. Bennett, Susan Easton Black, and Donald Q. Cannon, *Joseph Smith and the Nauvoo Legion* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, forthcoming).
8. *Times and Seasons* 4 (December 1, 1842): 24.
9. Andrew Ehat and Lyndon Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith* (Provo, Utah: BYU Press, 1980), 205.
10. "The Government of God," *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 18 (June 15, 1842): 856.