

REVIEWS

Two Perspectives on the Life and Times of Joseph Smith

Richard Lyman Bushman with the assistance of Jed Woodworth. *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005. 740 pp., and H. Michael Marquardt, *The Rise of Mormonism, 1816–1844*. Longwood, Fla.: Xulon Press, 2006, 696 pp.

Reviewed by Newell G. Bringham, Professor of History and Government, College of the Sequoias, Visalia, California

The year 2005, marking the two hundredth anniversary of the birth of Joseph Smith, Jr., witnessed the publication of two important book-length studies on Mormonism's founder. The first, Richard Lyman Bushman's long-awaited biography *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, is a massive 742-page study, meticulously researched and highly detailed in its presentation. It appeared in September 2005 from the nationally prominent, New York-based publisher, Alfred A. Knopf. In contrast, H. Michael Marquardt's *The Rise of Mormonism, 1816–1844*, an almost equally long, 680-page work, is not a biography, per se. Independently published by the author through Xulon Press of Longwood, Florida, Marquardt's carefully researched work devotes significant attention to Joseph Smith.

Both Bushman and Marquardt note how their differing perceptions of Mormonism's truth claims influenced their respective presentations. Bushman acknowledges his personal quandary as a "believing historian"—a life-long, practicing Latter-day Saint—in dealing with the myriad controversies involving Joseph Smith. His religious orientation, notwithstanding, Bushman, in his own words, attempts "to look frankly at all sides of Joseph Smith, not ducking any of the problems" (xix).

Marquardt outlines his own religious odyssey. He converted to Mormonism in 1961 after being "introduced to the story of Joseph Smith's visionary experiences." Following baptism he commenced his study into Mormon origins. Such research, however, caused doubt and ultimately disbelief. As Marquardt frankly states, "Fifteen years later, I resigned my [LDS Church] membership" (v). Marquardt's work is scholarly and based on careful research into a variety of primary sources. He sought to evaluate "the various conflicts that involved the Mormons"—this giving him "a

better understanding of the social, economic, and political happenings at the time discussed in the book" (vi).

The differing perspectives of Bushman and Marquardt notwithstanding, each scholar provides valuable insights into Mormonism's founder. Bushman's biography breaks new ground in a number of areas. Particularly valuable is his careful consideration of the Mormon leader's "religious thought." While conceding that it "is not easily encapsulated or analyzed," Bushman states: "His teachings came primarily through his revelations, which like other forms of scripture, are epigrammatic and oracular." Smith "never presented his ideas systematically in clear, logical order; they came in flashes and bursts," while "his most powerful thoughts" take the form of "assertions delivered as if from heaven" (xxi).

Nonetheless, Bushman conveys a certain rationale about the evolution of Smith's religious thought as he seeks to "recover the world of a prophet" (xxii). "The signal feature of [Joseph's] life was his sense of being guided by revelation." His revelations "came to him as experiential facts" (xxi). As a result, the Mormon leader is "the closest America has come to producing a biblical-style prophet—one who spoke for God with the authority of Moses or Isaiah" (xx).

Bushman confronts the 1820 First Vision, providing his own explanation for Smith's three seemingly conflicting accounts of this foundational event. In the first (1832) account, the vision came as a result of Joseph's devout prayer for the forgiveness of his sins, resulting in "a personal conversion"—one in which Smith "saw the Lord in the light and heard his words of forgiveness" (39). But at the same time, it represents an "abbreviated form" of Smith's total religious experience. As "Joseph became more confident, more details came out" (40). In the 1835 and 1838 accounts, Smith recalls seeing two distinct divine anthropomorphic personages—the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ. There was also a shift of emphasis in God's message from one of "personal forgiveness" to concern over the "apostasy of the [existing] churches." Bushman asserts: "Joseph's own salvation gives way to the opening of a new era of history. The promise of forgiveness through faith in Christ was dropped from the narrative, and the apostasy of Christian churches stood as the central message of the vision" (40).

Bushman likewise confronts other controversies. In Joseph's bringing forth of the Book of Mormon, Bushman acknowledges that "magic and religion [melded] in Smith family culture . . . with magic serving [a]

purpose in [Joseph's] life" as a sort of "preparatory gospel" (50-51, 54). But, as Bushman further notes, the Book of Mormon's "manifest message [was] Christ's atonement for the world's sins"—a "Christian message [that] overwhelms everything else" (107-8).

Bushman also provides enlightening insights into other aspects of the Book of Mormon, underscoring its complex, multifaceted nature. "The restoration of literal Israel was the [book's] centerpiece," that is, its call for the gathering of all righteous individuals to an American Zion in preparation for the millennium and the Second Coming. The "favored people" to be restored were the Jews and especially the American Indians (103-4). Bushman also characterizes this work as a "document of profound social protest"—a reaction against "the dominant culture of Joseph Smith's time," specifically "the amalgam of Enlightenment, republican, Protestant, capitalist, and nationalist values" characteristic of Jacksonian America (104).

Bushman rejects outright those naturalistic interpretations that, in his words, "have reduced the book to almost pure autobiography," clearly referring to the work of such scholars as Dan Vogel, Robert D. Anderson, and William Morain. He does, however, concede that "one can imagine Joseph seeing himself in the text" through the words and actions of various Book of Mormon prophets. This work may have outlined "the possibilities for" Joseph Smith as "a young man still forming his own identity. Nephi, the leading character in its opening books, was like Joseph, a strong younger brother, the one to have visions and teach the others" (105-6).

Bushman outlines Smith's evolving theological concepts as they assumed greater complexity and uniqueness—thereby setting Mormonism apart from other Christian denominations. By the mid-1830s, Smith's teachings emphasized the importance of "the priesthood, endowment, and exaltation" as "distinguishing doctrines" (194).

Also carefully discussed are Smith's later doctrines introduced during the early 1840s. Among these was the temple endowment ceremony, compared by some observers to Masonic ritual but which Bushman argues was "more akin to aspects of Kabbalah." In Bushman's words: "The fundamental trajectory of the endowment coincided with the passions and expectations of mystics for centuries past and especially with the Kabbalistic dream of conjunction with the divine" (451).

Even more radical were Smith's teachings concerning the nature of

God. In 1841 he taught that “there is no other God in heaven but that God who has flesh and bones” (420). And in 1844, through the King Follett sermon, characterized as “the culminating statement of Joseph’s theology,” the Mormon leader promoted eternal progression. Specifically, each human being had the potential of becoming a god while, conversely, God had in an earlier time been a mortal being before progressing to Godhood. This important doctrine promoted the concept of plural gods. “The King Follett doctrines” in the words of Bushman “sound profoundly American. Every man a god and a king fulfilled democratic aspirations to a degree unknown in any other religion. Joseph’s assertions that ‘all mind is susceptible of improvement’ opened up the possibility of limitless growth” (537).

Bushman also provides frank, penetrating insights into the Mormon leader’s complex personality. Most conspicuously, Joseph Smith expressed rough-hewn attributes reflective of his lower-middle-class, frontier background—such qualities clearly inspiring the book’s subtitle, *Rough Stone Rolling*. “Smith called himself a rough stone, thinking of his own impetuosity and lack of polish” (xx)—this taken from a May 21, 1843, speech in which the Mormon leader compared himself to a “huge, rough stone rolling down from a high mountain.” Bushman further notes Smith’s immersion in “the culture of honor,” a system that “bred deep loyalties to friends and family, while instilling a fierce urge to avenge insults. . . . The greatest fear in life, a fear stronger than death or damnation, was public humiliation. . . . In this culture . . . the Smiths had a clannish loyalty to one another, and a fiery resentment against the slightest derogation of their worth” (295).

As a result, Smith exhibited certain “learned behaviors” including an “easily bruised pride” that made him “unable to bear criticism” and resulted in his rebuking “anyone who challenged him” (295–96). He had difficulty rising “above the fray in the serene majesty of his calling,” all too frequently involving himself “in a series of small quarrels, domestic disturbances, and squabbles” (295). Smith “was sensitive to insults and could not stand to be crossed” (xx). “He lashed back at critics and could be a bulldog when contradicted” (177). “When he was insulted, betrayed, or attacked, anger poured from his heart” (371).

But at the same time, Joseph Smith “hated contention,” desperately wanting “to live in harmony with his brothers and sisters” (295). This desire was at the center of the Mormon leader’s relentless goal of building

his envisioned Zion—a place in which “there would be no lacerating offenses, no insults, no vengeance, no infringement on honor. . . . The Saints would live together amicably, escaping the ceaseless round of insults and reprisals, of rebuke and reconciliation.” All would be “of one heart and one mind” (302).

Paradoxically, Joseph Smith used his contentious personality in winning followers and retaining their loyalty. In Bushman’s words: “Joseph’s impulsiveness looks raw [to] modern eyes” but to his lower-middle-class flock of believers he appeared “vivid and strong. . . . The expression of [such] feelings bound people to him” (303).

Besides Smith’s combative nature, a second attribute ensured his success as a visionary leader: his “iron will” (xx). Smith “had to be tough. A weaker, gentler soul could scarcely have survived the incessant hammering at the head of the Church” (177–78). Smith possessed a third attribute—an ability to both identify and bond with his followers. Such individuals Bushman characterizes as “plain people of little education and much zeal.” Smith presented himself as “one of them, an ordinary man among ordinary men” (160). Smith, in fact, along with his ever-growing family, lived in strikingly modest circumstances—“more like a poor Methodist itinerant than a prophet and seer leading a church” (170). Smith “was happiest in the company of plain men” (485). He did not pursue personal wealth, an attribute possibly rooted in his own limited skills and success as a capitalist-businessman. Eschewing material self-aggrandizement, Smith diverted Church economic resources toward temple building and/or the purchase of land and resources for the poor converts flocking to Mormonism’s gathering place.

A fourth quality that enabled Smith to succeed was his skill as an organizer. He “thought institutionally more than any other visionary [leader] of his time” (251). As Smith increased his own authority, he empowered his followers by creating a layered, open priesthood organization. Established over time was an array of priesthood offices, resulting in a non-professional lay organization composed of almost all adult male members. Smith’s creation of an elaborate priesthood organization ensured “the survival of his movement” beyond his death (251).

In general, Richard Bushman has crafted a multi-faceted portrait of Joseph Smith, based on extensive primary sources, many previously unavailable, unknown, or under-utilized. Enhancing his presentation, Bushman has synthesized information from the outpouring of scholar-

ship produced by the New Mormon History. To his credit, the author forthrightly acknowledges “naturalistic interpretations” at variance with his own frame of reference as a believing Latter-day Saint. Rounding out this biographical portrait and, indeed, broadening the book’s focus beyond Mormonism per se is the author’s success in placing Joseph Smith within the larger context of his Jacksonian American environment. Bushman, moreover, draws comparisons with other contemporary religious leaders—including fellow visionaries Ann Lee, William Miller, Ellen G. White, and Mary Baker Eddy.

Its outstanding strengths notwithstanding, Bushman’s biography is wanting in several ways. On a fundamental level, the biography falls short in presenting the drama of a “life being lived.” While Bushman is effective in discussing the often-conflicting interpretations of Joseph Smith’s life, his overall story line lacks literary flourish, not reaching the status of biography as art. The prose is tedious, often overly detailed—thus interrupting the flow of presentation. This problem is further complicated by a tendency to jump forward or backward in time. Also, in places, the story line moves away from Joseph Smith himself, reading more like a history of the LDS Church. As a result, Bushman’s book sometimes gives the impression of being an encyclopedic compilation rather than a re-creation of the life and times of Mormonism’s founder.

Also problematic is Bushman’s treatment of Joseph Smith’s scriptural writings relative to the all-important issues of race and status of dark-skinned people. I found unconvincing his argument that the Book of Mormon’s “curse” represented by the “skin of blackness” was “wholly cultural and frequently reversed” (98). I also found inadequate Bushman’s analysis of race in Smith’s later scriptural writings. In discussing the Book of Moses, Bushman does not even mention the prominent role assigned certain biblical counterfigures identified with black people—namely Cain, Ham, and Canaan. Instead, Bushman vaguely alludes to “visions of light and truth [that] alternate with evil and darkness” (136).

Similarly, Bushman downplays the racial implications of the Book of Abraham. While conceding that “priesthood [was] a theme running through the entire work,” Bushman asserts that “Joseph’s concern . . . was with civilization and lineage more than race, Pharaoh, Ham, and Egyptus figure in one lineage and Abraham in another. The implications for modern race relations interested Joseph less than the configuration of family ties and the descent of authority” (289). Unfortunately, Joseph Smith’s

successors, starting with Brigham Young, interpreted the Book of Abraham much differently, making it a scriptural proof text for the pernicious racist practice of denying priesthood ordination to worthy black men.

I also found extremely deficient Bushman's discussion of plural marriage. A crucial aspect of early Mormonism, Smith's embrace of this controversial practice led directly to his assassination, yet Bushman devotes a mere 20 pages of his 567-page narrative to this topic. I was unpersuaded by his assertion that Joseph Smith's involvement with Fanny Alger during the mid-1830s represents Smith's earliest effort to promote polygamy as an essential Mormon practice based on doctrine. Equally serious is Bushman's failure to discuss the dynamics of Smith's relationship with the thirty-one other women he allegedly married. The vast majority of Smith's wives are not even mentioned by name, and even those who are come across as vague, shadowy figures. It would seem that, at the very least, Bushman could have named the thirty-two women who, he acknowledges, heeded the Mormon leader's command to promote a practice that he proclaimed essential for their eternal salvation.

Also wanting is Bushman's discussion of Smith's rationale for vigorously promoting polygamy. Bushman simply argues that Joseph Smith embraced plural marriage as a matter of divine commandment. What was the influence of other factors, specifically the dynamics of evolving Mormon doctrine, and possible social-cultural influences? These omissions are perplexing, given Bushman's careful consideration of social-cultural influences on Smith's other actions. Bushman offhandedly suggests that Smith pursued plural wives "to create a network of related wives, and kinsmen that would endure into the eternities. . . . Like Abraham of old, Joseph yearned for familial plentitude. He did not lust for women so much as he lusted for kin" (445). One wishes that Bushman had further pursued this intriguing hypothesis.

A related inadequacy is Bushman's treatment of the marital relationship of Joseph and Emma. The Mormon leader's sometimes warmly affectionate, sometimes difficult, relationship with his first wife, Emma, is described throughout the text, although Bushman's narrative generates more questions than answers. What formed the foundation of Joseph and Emma's mutual attraction, especially given their contrasting personalities and the strong opposition of Emma's parents to the match? Furthermore, if Joseph Smith sincerely believed polygamy to be divinely sanctioned, as Bushman asserts, why would he withhold from Emma details of his exten-

sive involvement and particularly its divine foundation? Given what Bushman sees as Emma's sincere belief that Joseph was, indeed, a divinely ordained prophet, why didn't she support her husband in this practice?

Also problematic is the larger issue of gender in this biography. While conceding that "women were conspicuously absent" and "invisible in the organization" and "absent from most ritual events" throughout the 1830s (212, 310), Bushman fails to explore the reasons for such exclusion. He also leaves unexplained the rationale behind the Mormon leader's dramatic turnabout in the early 1840s, creating/allowing the significant female roles institutionalized in the Relief Society and the temple endowment. To what extent was such female involvement related to the concurrent introduction of plural marriage? Or was it more the product of Joseph Smith's evolving cosmology which gave family a central role? Were Smith's actions motivated by the burgeoning woman's rights movement in American society, culminating in the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848?

Such problems notwithstanding, Richard Bushman's biography is a landmark work, deserving attention from all students of the life and times of Joseph Smith and the early Latter-day Saint movement. It significantly illuminates Smith's life, carefully elucidating his shortcomings as well as strengths. A complex, multifaceted work, much like its biographical subject, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* will serve as an essential point of departure for all future studies.

Michael Marquardt's *The Rise of Mormonism: 1816–1844*, although not a biography, covers much of the same ground as Bushman. Marquardt's narrative begins with the Smith family's move to New York in 1816 when Joseph Jr. was eleven. Although Marquardt approaches Smith from a naturalistic perspective, he acknowledges the importance of religious influences on young Joseph—specifically the religious revivals of 1816–17 and 1824–25—as well as the beliefs of various family members. "Joseph, Jr.'s parents taught religious values to their children." In the words of Marquardt "Joseph's religious instruction included hearing sermons, revival homilies, private family worship, and personal Bible studies. Joseph was not uninformed, ignorant, or illiterate" (52).

Marquardt, like Bushman, discusses the Smith family's less-than-successful struggle to escape the grinding poverty of their lower-middle-class status. Marquardt examines the Smith family's involvement with treasure seeking, magic, and the occult. Also like Bushman, Marquardt links such activities to Joseph Smith's subsequent activities as religious

seeker, seer, and translator of the Book of Mormon, and ultimately founding prophet of the Latter-day Saint movement.

Marquardt carefully discusses issues surrounding the three differing accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision. His conclusions differ from those of Bushman, clearly reflective of Marquardt's naturalistic perspective. Smith's 1832 account "of Christ appearing and granting him forgiveness for his sins was similar to [the experiences] of other young people of his day" (52), while the 1835 account of "receiving the forgiveness of sins was not included because the central message was not forgiveness." It was rather "his call to be God's prophet" (494).

By 1838, when the Mormon leader related his third account, it was within the larger context of writing his "history of the [LDS] Church from the earliest period of its [existence] to the present" (491). Thus, its central focus was that all the existing Christian churches were "an abomination in his [God's] sight"—this paving the way for Joseph Smith's restoration of the one true church. Smith presented "various events in relation to this Church in truth and righteousness as they have transpired, or as they at present exist." Marquardt characterizes Smith's rendering "a theological or faith account." The key to understanding Smith's differing versions in "reconstructing" the First Vision is illuminated by Marquardt's observation: "What is important is that memory be authentic for the person at the moment of construction, not that it be an accurate depiction of the past moment" (492).

Marquardt also differs from Bushman in analyzing the Book of Mormon. Discussing the angelic 1823 visitation informing Joseph of the gold plates, Marquardt asserts that the divine personage who appeared to Smith was "named Nephi in his longest 1838 account" and became Moroni only in his later published accounts of this event (494). In his analysis of the Book of Mormon itself, Marquardt points out numerous "anachronisms [that] mark [it] as a work produced after Jesus was resurrected and the Christian church established" (173). He also notes at length the book's "literary dependence on nineteenth century events" (191–201). Furthermore, from Marquardt's perspective, the work also reflects certain crucial autobiographical events, even anticipating the testimony of the Three Witnesses (202–8). "The Book of Mormon evidences a nineteenth-century origin," writes Marquardt, "and can be identified as an example of early American religious fiction" (209). But Marquardt concedes that its central "message . . . was for others to believe in the Jesus

who spoke to Native Americans and who speaks to Joseph Smith" (209). He thus concurs with Richard Bushman on the book's primary purpose.

Marquardt, like Bushman, devotes significant space to the evolution of Mormon doctrine and theology. Foundational doctrines included restoring the true "Church of Christ" with Joseph Smith as its supreme leader, ordained with sweeping powers as its "seer, translator, prophet, apostle, and First elder" (215). In turn, the Church's central mission involved preaching the concept of gathering all true believers to Mormonism's New Jerusalem in preparation for the millennium and Second Coming. This new Zion would rise on America's western frontier, with the conversion and gathering of the American Indians or "remnants of Israel" as promised in the Book of Mormon.

Marquardt further argues that "Joseph Smith's salvation theology was developing into a theology of exaltation" (544), a trend fully evident by the Nauvoo period. Anticipating exaltation theology were certain doctrinal developments during the 1830s: heaven organized in three degrees of glory along with its promise of almost universal salvation. This development facilitated a shift in Mormon's focus away from salvation *per se* and toward the goal of achieving the celestial kingdom in the hereafter.

Closely tied to exaltation theology was an "emphasis on Priesthood authority," which became "an important topic in the Latter-day Saint church" and in Smith's revelations (395). One result was the establishment of new priesthood offices—specifically the Quorum of the Twelve, Quorums of the Seventies, and Church Patriarch. Priesthood authority was also a major focus in Smith's scriptural writings during this period, including his "Inspired Version" of the Bible and the Books of Moses and Abraham.

The linking of priesthood authority to exaltation set the stage for the development of temple rituals, first washings and anointings in Kirtland, then baptism for the dead, endowments, and sealings "for time and eternity" in Nauvoo. As Marquardt notes, Joseph Smith, during the Nauvoo period, "gave new emphasis to salvation theology" in developing "additional concepts relating to God, Priesthood, and temple," all of which focused "special emphasis on obedience to authority" (532).

The most controversial of these practices was, of course, plural marriage, which Marquardt examines in much greater detail than Bushman—devoting eighty pages to this topic. Marquardt lists twenty-seven women whom he accepts as plural wives, five fewer than Bushman, supplemented

by the age of each woman at the time of marriage, the sealing date, and (when known) the officiator. He also devotes an entire chapter to Sarah Ann Whitney and Emily Dow Partridge. Yet despite this extensive discussion, Marquardt, like Bushman, is inexplicably reluctant to critically analyze or even suggest reasons for Joseph Smith's fateful embrace of polygamy.

In general, *The Rise of Mormonism: 1816–1844* is a solid work based on the author's careful use of primary sources. Marquardt painstakingly outlines the evolution of Joseph Smith's religious thought—albeit from a naturalistic perspective. Thus, Marquardt goes further than Bushman in detailing controversy and inconsistencies—specifically, for the First Vision and plural marriage. Marquardt also considers a number of topics omitted or ignored by Bushman: Smith's establishment of a "War Department" in the early 1830s, the Quorum of the Anointed established in 1842, the practice "of re-baptism for the remission of sins and baptism for health," and Smith's esoteric teaching "that performing animal sacrifice was still a duty of the priesthood" (541–42).

Unfortunately, Marquardt fails to suggest possible reasons for the introduction of such practices. This omission underscores a more fundamental problem: his failure to thoroughly and critically analyze Joseph Smith's decision-making process in bringing forth new doctrines and related practices. More seriously, Marquardt's study lacks a clear central thesis, a contrast to Bushman's basic thesis that Joseph Smith was what he purported to be—a prophet of God, albeit one with significant flaws. Complicating Marquardt's lack of a clear central thesis is his failure to indicate how his work differs from the numerous other studies dealing with Joseph Smith and early Mormonism. Reflective of such problems is the book's "Conclusion: Progress of Mormonism," which comes across as rambling and disjointed and itself lacking a clear focus.

Marquardt also fails to address two fundamental questions that Bushman considers carefully. First, what qualities of Joseph Smith's life and career made him a successful leader? Second, what aspects of his leadership enabled the LDS Church, not only to survive, but also to evolve into a major American denomination manifesting a world-wide presence?

While Marquardt's narrative is more straightforward than Bushman's complex, nuanced presentation, it is less carefully written. The text is frequently cluttered with long, undigested quotations from primary sources, commendably reflecting Marquardt's conscientious effort