

# An Old Mormon Writes to Harold Bloom

Henry L. Miles

In the fall of 1990, I was retired and we were back in academia fulltime at BYU: Carol was studying anthropology and I was studying English. We went to the University of Utah to listen to Harold Bloom preview his forthcoming book, *The American Religion*. Bloom said Joseph Smith's "religious genius" enabled him to cut through Christianity and on back to the purest form of Judaism, the form Enoch had taught. I had never heard Mormon scholars dwell on the quality of Joseph Smith's intellect, and the revelation they had talked about seemed a passive process to me. Bloom captivated me for two hours; I read his book as soon as it was published; then Bloom sank into memory.

In the fall of 1993, I found five copies of *Dialogue* in my mailbox and ripped the cellophane from one. I had submitted a poem, but had received a rejection letter, and was wondering if the five copies meant my poem was inside. The poem was inside, on page 186. I had it all: a rejection letter *and* a published poem.<sup>1</sup> Reading my poem, I noticed the article on the facing page, "Intellectuals in Mormon History: An Update."<sup>2</sup> The introduction said the article was a repeat of a survey conducted twenty-four years earlier and reported in *Dialogue* in the spring of 1969.<sup>3</sup> I recalled the article, had read it in Quito, Ecuador, where *Dialogue* was my quarterly ambrosia for four years. Both surveys asked respondents to identify "the five most eminent intellectuals in Mormon History" and they had responded with these results:

1969

1. B. H. Roberts
2. Orson Pratt
3. Joseph Smith

1993

1. B. H. Roberts
2. Orson Pratt
3. Sterling M. McMurrin

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|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| 4. Sterling M. McMurrin | 4. Leonard J. Arrington |
| 5. James E. Talmage     | 5. Joseph Smith         |

In 1969, I had read about the first survey in *Dialogue* and paged on. I had viewed Joseph Smith as a receptor for revelation and not an intellectual; but for the report of this second survey, Bloom was on my mind. His words about Joseph Smith in *The American Religion* had remained with me: "There is no other figure remotely like him in our entire national history."<sup>4</sup> I turned back to Bloom's book after reading about the surveys. I was pretty sure he would rank Joseph Smith first, not fifth, or even third, but I wanted to know. My interest in seeking his opinion oscillated for eighteen months before I talked with Steven Sondrup, a professor in the Humanities, Classics, and Comparative Literature Department at Brigham Young University. Sondrup had read the articles and had contacts at Yale who might be willing to bring my letter to Bloom's attention if he did not respond. He gave me Bloom's address and I mailed this letter:

13 May 1995

Dear Dr. Bloom:

Rereading "Intellectuals in Mormon History: An Update" in the Fall 1993 issue of *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* bothered me as much as when I first read it eighteen months ago. This three-page article reviews the results of two surveys of Mormon Ph.D.'s regarding the most eminent intellectual in Mormon history. Joseph Smith ranked third in the 1969 survey and fifth in the 1993 survey while B. H. Roberts ranked first in both surveys. Ranked between Smith and Roberts in these two surveys were Orson Pratt, Sterling McMurrin, and Leonard Arrington.

During both readings of this article, I wondered where you would have ranked Joseph Smith, but I have procrastinated asking you until now.

I appreciate your effort to become so well acquainted with our religion before writing about it. Recently I read pages 126 to 128 of your book to one of the leaders of my high priest quorum; he said, "That man really knows what Joseph Smith taught, and he says it better than any of us can." From what you wrote on these pages, especially the sentence, "There is no other figure remotely like him [Smith] in our entire national history, and it is unlikely that anyone like him ever can come again," I assume you would rank Joseph Smith as the most eminent intellectual in Mormon history. Is that correct? I believe you are the best mind ever to analyze Mormonism and write about it, and I would appreciate knowing your opinion.

I enjoyed your presentation at the U of U on Mormonism before you published your book. Because of the effort of Steve Sondrup, most of the

students in his literary theory class at BYU attended your lecture. Again my thanks for your fine discourse on Mormonism.

Sincerely,  
Henry L. Miles

Working up the letter to Bloom brought to mind my cousin's encounter with scholars regarding Joseph Smith. Larry Elison had been doing a doctorate of juridical science at the University of Michigan; and in my senior year at Idaho State College, he informed me of his conversations with the divinity faculty. In their opinion, Mormonism had yet to produce a theologian. At his first teaching position, Larry had learned that the divinity faculty at Emory University held the same opinion. I recalled the let-down feelings from such responses and contrasted them with the feelings Bloom's book had excited. Two weeks after mailing my letter, Bloom surprised me with an answer on Yale letterhead handwritten in black ink. With anticipation, I read:

24 May 1995  
Dear Mr. Miles:

I can understand the two surveys you cite only if the Mormon Ph.D.'s employed an absurdly narrow definition of an "intellectual." Joseph Smith, even to a Jewish non-Mormon like myself, is the only American creative enough to be called a prophet, seer, and revelator, that is, a religious genius. There was Emerson, of course, but ultimately his was more a literary mind than a religious one. I greatly admire McMurrin, and Roberts also, but if "intellectual" means what it should mean, then Smith clearly is the most eminent intellectual in Mormon history. He was an authentic visionary, and totally original in mind and spirit—really a kind of mortal god. I cannot understand why he is not honored by more Americans.

Sincerely,  
Harold Bloom

"A kind of mortal god" satisfied me like my class in postmodern theory, where I had met Hayden White and metahistory. White says events do not tell their own stories; historians must invent them. He says the historian prepares the chronicle of events and in the process must determine what the events add up to. They add up to what White calls a "paradigm." Developing the paradigm is a creative act; it comes from the historian's mind and not from the chaos of events being examined. The paradigm guides the historian in deciding which facts are relevant, in

other words, which events are to be included in the history to be constructed.<sup>5</sup>

Forty years before reading White, I had encountered my first scholarly work on Joseph Smith, Fawn Brodie's *No Man Knows My History*. For 400-plus pages, I read Brodie's idea on how Joseph was able to deceive people into believing God had assisted him in creating the Book of Mormon and his new religion. And in the context, the stories seemed plausible to me. I was not prepared to argue with Brodie's book and its overwhelming footnotes, and I thought anyone who researched the facts would find in them the same story Brodie had found. Nibley's response to Brodie failed to overcome the power of those footnotes. A few years earlier, my mission president had told me he ended up putting Brodie's book on his shelf of unresolved issues of faith, which he revisited from time to time. As a student at Ricks College in 1957 or '58, I followed President R. Scott Zimmerman's example, created my own issues shelf, and stored away this book. After four decades, I decided to take *No Man Knows My History* from my shelf and apply White to Brodie for my term paper.

After publishing her book, Brodie told a *New York Times* correspondent<sup>6</sup> she had completed two-thirds of her research before she discovered that the events of Joseph Smith's life added up to his being an imposter ("a mythmaker of prodigious talent") and his religion "a fable—one that few converts stop to question."<sup>7</sup> Another researcher, Robert Hullinger, reviewed the same chronicle of events and discovered they added up to a man who "tried to defend faith in the personal God of Christian belief in [the] face of current denominational strife and popular skepticism."<sup>8</sup> Two researchers added up the same facts and one found a religious fraud while the other found a true believer. White was right; facts don't tell their own stories. Writing thirteen single-spaced pages analyzing how Brodie and Hullinger had used the same facts to construct two disparate Joseph Smiths, I came to view history as a constructed artifact.

Now, each time I reread Brodie's page 7, I have to ask myself why she said that "a relative of Woodward took a neat revenge by insinuating that Smith had himself been guilty of making bogus money, and his account was widely believed." Then, in the footnote, she cites *Historical Magazine* (November 1870, pp. 315-16): "Daniel Woodward stated that Smith had been 'implicated with one Jack Downing in counterfeiting

money, but turned state's evidence and escaped the penalty." She then adds, "The trial of George Downer, the only name corresponding with Downing, makes no mention of Joseph Smith [Sr.] and the other trials at which Smith was a witness make it clear that he was a victim, not an accomplice."<sup>9</sup> How did inserting an accusation in the text and pulling it out in a footnote impact readers?

"A kind of mortal god" exceeded my expectations. I didn't think such a statement was possible from a non-Mormon scholar. I knew other scholars besides Brodie and Hullinger had added up Joseph's teachings and gotten different totals. I knew more scholars would do so in the future. I believed White's idea applied to any research project: facts in any field do not speak; scholars give them a voice. In spite of this knowledge, Bloom's comments energized me and I wanted to share his letter. I asked permission to publish it and his response was almost immediate.

29 July 1997

Dear Mr. Miles:

This note constitutes blanket permission for publishing and republishing my letter to you of 24 May 1995. I think I would prefer your letter always to appear first, for context.

With good wishes,  
Sincerely,  
Harold Bloom  
Sterling Professor of the Humanities  
Yale University

As time passed, my excitement cooled, and I was satisfied just to show Bloom's letter to a few friends. A couple of years later, on November 29, 1999, PBS ran a documentary, *Joseph Smith: The American Prophet*, narrated by Gregory Peck. I watched the program, expecting Bloom to appear and comment, but his face never crossed the screen. I wrote him:

22 December 1999

Dear Dr. Bloom:

Watching *The American Prophet* on our PBS Channel 7, I saw scholars render their opinions on Joseph Smith and waited for you to express yours. The program ended and I was still waiting. Thinking I had missed you somehow, I watched the program when it aired the next week on Channel 11, but again I did not see you. Were you there? If not, did you decline?

I expected to see you on the program, because you introduced Joseph

Smith to the scholarly community, and your analysis of his revelations and accomplishments made him a person for scholars to know. As each of the non-Mormon historians from eastern schools appeared on the program, I wondered if they would have even studied Joseph Smith without being influenced by your writing. And my pondering since the program has led me to the question, "What influenced you to study Joseph Smith?"

Just as President Hinckley is being credited for bringing the Mormon Church out of obscurity, you will surely be credited for bringing Joseph Smith out of obscurity. I am intrigued that you selected him for study and curious to learn how you came to that decision.

Best wishes for the holiday season.  
Sincerely, Henry Miles

Bloom responded with another handwritten note on Yale letterhead:

3 Jan 2000  
Dear Mr Miles-

Thank you for your note. I declined to participate in The American Prophet, because I wanted to say something about the gap between Hinckley and the Nauvoo Smith, and the producer said I couldn't.

As for my interest in Smith, it goes back to childhood & I am going on 70.

Best Wishes,  
Harold Bloom

About this time I discovered "The Religion-Making Imagination of Joseph Smith," a 1992 essay by Bloom in the *Yale Review*, setting his ideas in a scholarly context.<sup>10</sup> In addition, this essay focused on Joseph Smith's imagination, which moved the analysis from religion to the literary arena, where Bloom reigned as king—some said, the American literary critic of a century. Nice tactic. I wondered about the essay's impact on scholars' attitudes and wrote another letter.

20 February 2000  
Dear Dr. Bloom:

I gave a short talk at church this morning regarding your assessment of Joseph Smith in your essay, "The Religion-Making Imagination of Joseph Smith." Many in the congregation were fascinated and a few asked to borrow your essay. They will probably have the same questions I have regarding what imagination means within your view of the universe. As I misread

your essay, I think you use revelation, visions, insight of genius, to refer to processes that take place solely within one's mind. These words do not refer to the presence or influence of superhumans or other beings, who communicate ideas to one's mind. I believe you consider Enoch, Isaiah, Jesus, and Joseph Smith as equals, people with great minds or imaginations. Or do you think some of them received influences from beyond the mind? I am fascinated by the phrase, "Enoch chose Joseph Smith . . ." in the sentence: "Enoch chose Joseph Smith because esoteric traditions always had exalted Enoch as the archetype of man-become-angel and even man-become-God."

In this phrase I see Enoch being used as a metaphor for the process by which Joseph Smith imagined the ideas of Enoch. But I am not sure. Is that what you mean? or do you mean Enoch, as a being from the unseen world, shared his knowledge with Joseph Smith? Enoch in the form of an angel or other divine personage? Or do you mean something else? I think you do not believe in the existence of beings outside this world, do you? If you believe in such, do they communicate with us? Or are we alone? Have you produced a work on your concept of the universe?

I am sorry that the producer's ground rules caused you to decline to participate in *The American Prophet*. I suppose polygamy was the issue and that is especially sensitive here right now. Some are pushing the Utah legislature to decriminalize polygamy while others are calling for funds for shelters for women who leave polygamous relationships. And it gets more complex. Thirty years ago, I considered polygamy essential to godhood. After all, my great-grandfather left London with a fortune in 1878 and sacrificed most of it for polygamy, appealing his conviction to the U.S. Supreme Court. A few years ago, I read the transcript of his trial, began to lose my sympathy for polygamy, and choose for the present to accept The Book of Mormon view of polygamy, a temporary phenomenon. Others, however, believe polygamy is essential to exaltation. This division in attitudes among believing Mormons must concern our leaders, who appear to be keeping the peace by avoiding mention of polygamy at venues under their influence.

Once more I thank you for your keen analysis of Joseph Smith.

Sincerely, Henry Miles

More than a month passed before the following response arrived.

28 March 2000

Dear Mr. Miles:

This is a very belated reply to your moving letter of 20 Feb. It arrived the day before my wife and I departed for two exhausting weeks of lecturing in Italy, and I have been catching up rather slowly since.

As you knew (evidently, but how?) I could not accept the producer's rules for The American Prophet—polygamy was only part of the disagree-

ment—essentially it was my conviction that I see little of the authentic Joseph Smith now in the official LDS Church.

I cannot myself unpack my own metaphor “Enoch chose Joseph.” I am a Jew, fierce for the traditions, but Gnostic, not normative. I’ve written a book (*Omens of Millennium*) in which I acknowledge the alien or Stranger God, but I think he wanders in the outer spaces, in exile—he cannot hear us, and we cannot hear him. But part of the God—call him Enoch, Metatron, Adam, whatever—is locked up deep within us, and broke through to Joseph, the authentic American Prophet. Polygamy was part of that breakthrough.

Sincerely—  
Harold Bloom

Bloom did not recall informing me himself about the producer’s ground rules, which had kept him from appearing in *The American Prophet*. I should have realized he was not keeping copies of his notes to me, not reviewing them as I was. I wondered if he thought I was talking to the producers of *The American Prophet*; maybe he saw us as a small group out here in Utah, all in touch, all part of a Mormon monolith. I hoped not.

I saw that the ground rules went beyond polygamy. They must have included gathering to Zion, common ownership, a theocracy and so on, things scholars talk about but lay people don’t. That some Mormons had boycotted the movie *God’s Army* implied that some of us were afraid of who we were. Not including essential teachings of Joseph Smith in a documentary about him had shown that some of us were afraid of who we had been. It reminded me of what Lloyd, a friend and a Mormon bishop, once said, only half-joking: “The Catholic Church says the Pope is infallible and Catholics don’t believe it. On the other hand, the Mormon Church says their prophet is fallible and the members don’t believe it.” Maybe future movies would engage our history successfully, and we’d get used to seeing ourselves as humans and lose our fear of exposing our humanness.

Bloom’s last paragraph fascinated me; my letter had asked what he meant by “Enoch chose Joseph.” He said he could not unpack his own metaphor. I wondered about the implications, and I still wondered why he had chosen to study Joseph Smith. The previous year I had asked Bloom why and he had just said he got interested in Joseph as a child. So I decided to ask for more details.

21 January 2003

Dear Dr. Bloom:

I am thinking ahead to 2005, the 200th birthday of Joseph Smith and know of two projects underway to honor him. One historian is compiling the words attributed to the Prophet, eleven volumes, and another is writing a biography.

I recall the experience of my cousin back in the 1950s, when he did graduate work in law at the U of Michigan and taught at Emory's law school. At each university he talked with scholars of religion about Joseph Smith and they said Mormonism had yet to produce a theologian. As I watched *The American Prophet* and heard scholars applaud the genius of Joseph Smith, I thought of your essay on Joseph Smith in the *Yale Review* of April 1992 and your book, *The American Religion*. I wondered if these scholars had read your essay or book, and I expected to see an interview of you in the production. Later, you informed me of the ground rules you could not accept, which kept you from participating in *The American Prophet*.

I have been thinking about writing a personal essay based on my exchange of letters with you, which could be published in a journal such as *Dialogue* or *Sunstone*. Rereading your letter of 3 January 2000, I noted you have been interested in Joseph Smith since your childhood. I would appreciate your sharing with me how that interest developed. Did Mormon missionaries happen by your home?

Sincerely,  
Henry Miles

I was pleased at Bloom's prompt and personal response.

4 Feb. 2003

Dear Mr Miles—

I have been very ill (bleeding ulcer, open heart 3 way bypass) and am hard pressed.

No—there were no Mormon missionaries in the east Bronx of the 1930's. I was a preternaturally early reader, and encountered Smith in my readings—too far back to identify the books.

With good wishes  
Harold Bloom

I noted the plain stationery, no Yale letterhead, no name of his professorship, no status symbols, just feelings and handwriting. In a letter, not included above, I had mentioned my own high PSA level and enlarged

prostate, the possibility of cancer—and here, Bloom mentioned his bleeding ulcer and heart surgery. We were both old enough to attend our own organ recitals: he was seventy-three and I was sixty-eight and neither of us was in denial about our mortality.

As I close this essay, I can only speculate why Bloom chose to study Joseph Smith and found in him a “mortal god.” I believe the Prophet deserves this assessment, and I appreciate the facet this has added to my faith, a facet nonexistent in my student years, when there was no scholarly support out there from the likes of Bloom. I appreciate his generosity in answering the letters from an old Mormon and his permission to publish them.

I look forward to the time *Dialogue* publishes the results from a third survey to identify “the five most eminent intellectuals in Mormon history.” Will the results suggest that Bloom has influenced the opinion of Mormon scholars regarding Joseph Smith as I believe he has influenced other scholars? I know he has influenced me. Before Bloom I hadn’t considered Joseph to be an intellectual. I had given little thought to the quality of mind required to engage God, angels, and text on gold plates in the process we call revelation.

I suppose, for Bloom and me, the outcome of the third survey will not matter much; just being here to read the results may exceed our present expectations.

### Notes

1. Henry L. Miles, “The Man without Sin,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 26, no. 3 (Fall 1993): 185–86.

2. Stan Larson, “Intellectuals in Mormon History: An Update,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 26, no. 3 (Fall 1993): 187–89.

3. Leonard J. Arrington, “The Intellectual Tradition of the Latter-day Saints,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1969): 13–26.

4. Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 126.

5. Hayden White, *The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

6. John K. Hutchens, “People Who Read and Write,” *New York Times Book Review* 7 (January 20, 1946): 24.

7. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith* (1945; 2d. ed., New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), ix.

8. Robert N. Hullinger, *Answer to Skepticism: Why Joseph Smith Wrote the Book of Mormon* (St. Louis: Clayton Publishing House, 1980), 2.

9. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, 7–8.

10. Harold Bloom, "The Religion-Making Imagination of Joseph Smith," *Yale Review* 80 (April 1992): 26–42.