



George Edward Anderson
Sacred Grove
1907, photograph
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WHY THE PROPHET IS A PUZZLE: THE CHALLENGES OF USING PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES TO UNDERSTAND THE CHARACTER AND MOTIVATION OF JOSEPH SMITH, JR.

Lawrence Foster

In 1945 Fawn McKay Brodie, a niece of David O. McKay, a Mormon General Authority and later president of the LDS Church, published a thoroughly researched, brilliantly written, and highly controversial biography of Joseph Smith Jr., entitled *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet*. Although Brodie was eventually excommunicated from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints because of the disturbing questions her book raised for believing Mormons, her biography went on to become arguably the single most influential work of Mormon historical scholarship in the twentieth century—and certainly the best-known. Astonishingly, *No Man Knows My History* remained in print in a hardbound edition (with a final “Supplement” added in 1971) for a full fifty years until 1995, when its hardbound sales had decreased sufficiently that Knopf finally brought out the book in a paperbound edition. As Fawn Brodie flamboyantly portrayed the Mormon prophet, he was an enigma flinging down a challenge to his future biographers when he declared, in a funeral address before thousands of followers in Mormon Nauvoo several months before his murder in 1844, “You don’t know me; you never knew my heart. No man knows my history. I cannot tell it; I shall

never understand it. . . . If I had not experienced what I have, I could not have believed it myself.”¹

In 1973 the non-Mormon historian Jan Shipps took up the Mormon prophet’s challenge in “The Prophet Puzzle: Suggestions Leading Toward a More Comprehensive Interpretation of Joseph Smith,” a paper presented at the first conference of the John Whitmer Historical Association that subsequently appeared as the lead article in the first issue of the new *Journal of Mormon History* in 1974.² Shipps urged Mormon historians to begin to move beyond the two highly polarized and seemingly incompatible perspectives that had previously dominated almost all treatments of the Mormon prophet. On the one hand, believing Mormons typically portrayed Joseph Smith as God’s chosen prophet who could do no wrong. On the other hand, non-Mormon writers typically described him as a highly manipulative and psychologically disturbed

1. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet*, 2nd ed., rev. and enl. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), vii. Brodie’s efforts to use psychological theory to help explain Joseph Smith’s personality and motivation are found in the 1971 “Supplement” to her original 1945 biography (405–25). Weaknesses in Brodie’s use of psychological theory are discussed in Charles L. Cohen, “No Man Knows My Psychology: Fawn Brodie, Joseph Smith, and Psychoanalysis,” *BYU Studies* 44, no. 1 (2005): 55–78. Newell G. Bringhurst, *Fawn McKay Brodie: A Biographer’s Life* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999) provides her biography, while the continuing impact that *No Man Knows My History* has had on Mormon historical studies is explored in the essays in Newell G. Bringhurst, ed., *Reconsidering No Man Knows My History: Fawn M. Brodie and Joseph Smith in Retrospect* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1996). Brodie’s later biographies of Thaddeus Stevens, Sir Richard Burton, and Thomas Jefferson also highlight her continuing fascination with larger-than-life public figures, as well as her flair for ferreting out controversial details about their private lives.

2. Jan Shipps, “The Prophet Puzzle: Suggestions Leading Toward a More Comprehensive Interpretation of Joseph Smith,” *Journal of Mormon History* 1 (1974): 3–20, reprinted with fourteen other essays about Joseph Smith’s psychological dynamics and prophetic motivation in Bryan Waterman, ed., *The Prophet Puzzle: Interpretive Essays on Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999).

scoundrel. Shipps suggested, instead, that any credible historical treatment of the Mormon prophet must take him as a whole human being and see him in all his complexity as a “harmonious human multitude,” as Carl Van Doren famously characterized Benjamin Franklin.³

Although Shipps did not elaborate on precisely *how* such a holistic effort to understand Joseph Smith might best proceed, this article will explore how one of the most open-ended psychological interpretations of Smith’s prophetic leadership and motivation might contribute to better understanding the trajectory of this extraordinarily talented and conflicted individual whose life has so deeply impacted the religious movement he founded and, increasingly, the larger world.⁴

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Understanding the personality, psychological dynamics, and motivation of any human being is a daunting task, but to comprehend the nature of genius—especially the elusive and controversial nature of religious genius—is even more challenging. The basis for great creativity in fields such as art, science, or politics has been a subject of extensive investigation

3. Shipps, “The Prophet Puzzle,” 19.

4. The literature by and about Joseph Smith Jr. is vast and often highly polemical because both Mormons and non-Mormons view him as the most important figure for understanding the early development and significance of the Mormon movement. For treatments before 1997, see James B. Allen, Ronald W. Walker, and David J. Whittaker, eds., *Studies in Mormon History, 1830–1997: An Indexed Bibliography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 927–44. The ambitious Joseph Smith Papers editorial and publication project—currently underway under the auspices of the Office of the Historian of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—is anticipated to include two dozen or more volumes. In the meantime, B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1930) remains an important source despite its limitations. Richard L. Bushman’s *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005) supplements, updates, qualifies, and in certain respects supersedes Brodie’s pioneering study, *No Man Knows My History*.

that has not led to any clear and generally agreed-upon criteria for assessing and explaining such creativity. Religious genius—especially the prophetic leadership of founders of new religious movements—has been even more difficult to evaluate with openness and objectivity. A major reason is that those who revere their founding religious prophets often unrealistically assume that the credibility of the entire belief system their prophet-founder promulgated depends upon the prophet's personal character having been exemplary and beyond reproach.

William James and other scholars have argued that great religious creativity typically begins with a problem or complex set of problems that the future prophet finds deeply disturbing. To use psychological jargon, “cognitive dissonance” is present. Individuals who eventually become prophets tend to find such dissonance more disturbing than their more normal contemporaries do. Prophets thus seek with unusual intensity to try to make sense of both their personal lives and their world. The dissonance experienced by religious geniuses—as opposed to geniuses in other fields such as art, science, or politics—also focuses with special intensity on value conflicts and inconsistencies. And once religious geniuses find a way to resolve their own inner conflicts, they come to view the approach that works for them as being universally valid for others as well. William James aptly comments: “[W]hen a superior intellect and a psychopathic temperament coalesce . . . 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 worse, upon their companions or their age.”⁵ In his essay “The Prophet,” the anthropologist Kenelm Burridge further suggests: “It is not appropriate to think of

5. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: New American Library, 1958 [1902]), 36. The first chapter, “Religion and Neurology” (21–38), is especially insightful. It brilliantly explores the complexities of religious experiences and debunks popular reductionist treatments of religious genius. Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion*

a prophet as reduced in size to a schizophrenic or a paranoid, someone mentally sick. In relation to those to whom he speaks, a prophet is necessarily corrupted by his larger experience. He is an 'outsider', an odd one, extraordinary. Nevertheless, he specifically attempts to initiate, both in himself as well as in others, a process of moral regeneration."⁶

The line between health and illness, between normal mood swings and those that might be viewed as extreme, is a very fine one indeed. It is often difficult for a contemporary psychiatrist who has worked closely with a patient to make an accurate diagnosis. To develop a nuanced psychological understanding of those who are long dead, even if their lives are extensively documented, is a far more difficult and speculative endeavor. Nonetheless, the judicious use of psychological perspectives may significantly enhance our understanding of influential individuals and their contributions. For example, Joshua Wolf Shenk's study *Lincoln's Melancholy: How Depression Challenged a President and Fueled His Greatness* draws upon both nineteenth-century and modern understandings of depression to show how Lincoln, gradually and with great effort, learned to harness his profound "melancholy" in ways that allowed him to address, creatively and effectively, the most severe threat the United States has ever faced to its survival as a unified nation. Perhaps Shenk's greatest contribution has been to demonstrate how the skillful use of psychological insights can increase rather than decrease our appreciation of prominent historical figures and their achievements.⁷ Similarly, although Joseph Smith's complex and at times problematic personality could prove challenging, both to

Today: William James Revisited (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002) assesses the book's continuing influence and importance.

6. Kenelm Burridge, *New Heaven, New Earth: A Study of Millenarian Activities* (New York: Schocken, 1969), 162.

7. Joshua Wolf Shenk in *Lincoln's Melancholy: How Depression Challenged a President and Fueled His Greatness* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 211–45 also discusses how his methodology relates to previous scholarly efforts to understand the significance of Lincoln's continuing struggles with depression.

himself and to his followers, his internal contradictions and struggles to overcome them may have helped fuel his dynamism and success as a religious prophet.

I need to make three additional points before discussing one of the most compelling psychological approaches for understanding how Joseph Smith's personality impacted his life and prophetic career. First, I believe that no single psychological framework, especially if rigidly applied, can fully explain Joseph Smith's dynamic mental processes or why he did what he did throughout his larger-than-life career. For example, in *The Sword of Laban: Joseph Smith, Jr. and the Dissociated Mind*, the surgeon William D. Morain has argued, in a brilliant but to my mind ultimately unconvincingly Freudian analysis, that the severe trauma young Joseph experienced when he went through major leg surgery without anesthesia at about the age of seven and then suffered a prolonged and difficult recovery period lasting several years somehow can explain *all* of his psychological characteristics and later prophetic activities as an adult.⁸

8. William D. Morain in *The Sword of Laban: Joseph Smith, Jr. and the Dissociated Mind* (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press, 2005) attributes too much importance to this one traumatic event. Although Robert D. Anderson shares Morain's view that young Joseph's traumatic leg surgery significantly impacted his psychological development and subsequent career, Anderson nevertheless opines that "a single event, even an overwhelming one, does not make a prophet." *Inside the Mind of Joseph Smith: Psychobiography and the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999), xiii. Anderson's study emphasizes the conflicted internal dynamics within the Smith family and young Joseph's narcissism. Yet Anderson's argument that the earliest sections of the Book of Mormon provide "a disguised version of Smith's life" also could be criticized for being speculative and reductionist. *Mind of Joseph Smith*, 65. For a thought-provoking assessment of the tensions within the Smith family, see Dan Vogel, "Joseph Smith's Family Dynamics," *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 22 (2002): 51–74. Also see the documentary account by Lavina Fielding Anderson, ed., *Lucy's Book: A Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith's Family Memoir* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2001). I am grateful to Dan Vogel for his thorough and insightful critique of an earlier draft of this article.

Equally unconvincing, in my opinion, is the other extreme position: that Joseph Smith can be credibly analyzed using *any* of a variety of different psychological approaches (just take your pick). This any-approach-will-work argument is illustrated by Terry Brink's pretentious 1976 *Journal of Mormon History* article entitled, "Joseph Smith: The Verdict of Depth Psychology."⁹ In the article, Brink purports to show how Joseph Smith's psychological dynamics might be analyzed using the approaches of Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Alfred Adler, and Erik Erikson. Brink naively concludes: "All of these schools of depth psychology reinforce the picture of Joseph Smith as a mentally healthy individual and recognize the important and positive role which religion played in his personality development."¹⁰ I believe that Brink's superficial genuflection toward an eclectic mishmash of psychological approaches does little to help us understand anything about Joseph Smith that we don't already know, or think we know.¹¹

Finally, I must emphasize that many Mormons see any psychological interpretation of Joseph Smith's actions and motives as unnecessary and inherently reductionistic. Most Latter-day Saints are convinced they can explain everything about Joseph Smith that needs explaining by acknowledging that his mission and revelations were divinely inspired.

9. T. L. Brink, "Joseph Smith: The Verdict of Depth Psychology," *Journal of Mormon History* 3 (1976): 73–83.

10. Brink, "Verdict of Depth Psychology," 83.

11. My criticism of Brink's article is not intended to deny the value of nuanced use of multiple analytical perspectives to try to understand an individual. In *Makers of Psychology: The Personal Factor* (New York: Insight Books, 1988), clinical psychologist Harvey Mindess critically yet sympathetically analyzes the lives and work of seven pioneering figures in psychology—Wilhelm Wundt, William James, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, B. F. Skinner, Carl Rogers, and Milton H. Erickson—arguing that each man's distinctive personality influenced the type of personality theory and therapeutic approach he developed. In his tour-de-force conclusion on pages 147–68, Mindess suggests how one of his clients might have been analyzed and treated differently by Freud, Jung, a behaviorist, Rogers, or Erickson—and then how he treated her himself.

While sophisticated Mormon scholars may accept that naturalistic factors may have influenced a particular action Joseph Smith took or might provide valuable insight into his personality or actions, most committed Latter-day Saints are convinced that all they really need to know is that, however strange or puzzling Smith's behavior may appear, he was simply following God's will for his prophet and his Church. Ironically, this view that believing Mormons hold as a matter of faith is at least as reductionist as the extreme counterarguments made by non-Mormons who casually dismiss Smith as a fraud. I believe that both Joseph Smith's supporters and detractors trivialize him by portraying him as either a stick-figure saint or a stick-figure villain instead of the complex, talented, and conflicted individual he actually was.

Just as Isaac Newton's many well-documented psychological quirks and eccentricities neither prove nor disprove the validity of his brilliant discoveries about celestial mechanics, so Joseph Smith's unusual personality characteristics neither prove nor disprove the validity of his religious insights, which ultimately remain beyond purely human proof or disproof. As William James noted in his classic study *The Varieties of Religious Experience*: "If there were such a thing as inspiration from a higher realm, it might well be that the neurotic temperament would furnish the chief condition of the requisite receptivity."¹²

The remainder of this article will discuss how one psychological approach might help us better understand the dynamics of Joseph Smith's often puzzling personality and actions in a way that could be seen as credible by both secular scholars and by sophisticated Latter-day Saints who accept the divine nature of his religious mission.

II

The most useful psychological framework I have found to try to understand Joseph Smith's prophetic motivation and dynamism is one that has been characteristic of many other leaders who have significantly

12. James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 37.

impacted the world for good or ill. Stated most simply, the types of individuals we are talking about have a highly self-centered perspective. They see everything that happens in terms of how it impacts themselves; they believe that the way they see the world is the way others can and should see the world; and they manipulate others to achieve their own ends rather than viewing other individuals and their divergent goals empathically. Scholars use the term “narcissism” to describe this self-centered orientation. Initially all babies are highly narcissistic. They necessarily relate to the external world almost exclusively in terms of how the world impacts them personally. Yet as infants mature and become increasingly aware of the larger world and able to function more independently within it, they gradually realize that however much they may *want* or *expect* the world to revolve exclusively around them, in fact it does not. Mature adults thus eventually develop the ability to relate to others’ wants and needs empathically instead of simply relating to others in terms of their own needs and desires.¹³

13. I alluded to this approach in my first book, *Religion and Sexuality: Three American Communal Experiments of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), reprinted as *Religion and Sexuality: The Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 227–28. While seeking to take the measure of the founding prophets of the three millennial religious groups I studied—Ann Lee of the Shakers, John Humphrey Noyes of the Oneida Community, and Joseph Smith of the Mormons—I realized that all three individuals appeared to view the entire world as revolving around themselves. After they eventually managed to work out a satisfying way of resolving their own religious and sexual problems, they became convinced that the same approach that worked for each of them could provide a universally valid way of resolving everyone else’s problems too.

A *Calvin and Hobbes* cartoon humorously characterizes narcissism. Calvin says to Hobbes: “I’m at peace with the world. I’m completely serene.” “Why is that?” Hobbes asks. Calvin answers: “I’ve discovered my purpose in life. I know why I was put here and why everything exists.” “Oh really?” Hobbes replies skeptically. “Yes, I am here so everybody can do what I want.” “It’s nice to have that cleared up,” Hobbes responds dryly. Calvin concludes, “Once everybody accepts it, they’ll be serene too.”

Geniuses, however, often are highly intelligent *and* narcissistic individuals who become convinced that their unique insights or the particular ways they have resolved their personal problems can provide a universally valid way for others to solve their problems and understand the world. Narcissistic individuals may become convinced that the framework they have developed to explain the world is sufficient to account for *everything*—or at least everything of importance. This conviction can infuse their ideas with great emotional and analytical power. Yet because the insights of even the most brilliant individuals necessarily can only be a partial and incomplete representation of a more complex reality, when such insights are applied to the larger world, doing so may produce harmful or even disastrous results, especially if narcissistic individuals become powerful political or religious leaders.¹⁴

14. One example is Mao Zedong, who became one of the most creative—and destructive—leaders of the twentieth century. After leading a decades-long struggle that finally brought the communists to power over mainland China in 1949, Mao went on to preside over two of the worst man-made disasters in human history before his death in 1976. Mao's most destructive campaign was the misnamed "Great Leap Forward" between 1958 and 1962. It led to the largest man-made famine in human history, with famine-related deaths variously estimated at thirty, thirty-six, or forty-five million people. Mao's second disastrous campaign between 1965 and 1969, his Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, caused more than a million deaths and set the Chinese economy and educational system back at least a generation. See Jasper Becker, *Hungry Ghosts: Mao's Secret Famine* (New York: Free Press, 1977); Yang Jisheng, *Tombstone: The Great Chinese Famine, 1958–1962* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2008); Frank Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958–1962* (New York: Walker & Company, 2010); and Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006).

The detailed memoir by Mao's personal physician, Dr. Li Zhisui, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao*, translated by Tai Hung-Chao (New York: Random House, 1994), describes Mao's narcissistic and bipolar personality characteristics. In addition to Mao's narcissistic unwillingness to trust even his closest advisers, his work and sleep schedules, which were not known beyond his

The concept of narcissism is more flexible and open-ended than many other psychological frameworks because narcissism refers to a certain personality type and does not necessarily imply that a person so diagnosed suffers from a mental illness or disorder, which can seem stigmatizing, dismissive, and reductionist. In addition, behavior that might initially suggest potential bipolar or manic-depressive tendencies—such as grandiosity, hypomania, or depression—may also occur in narcissistic individuals. Although my initial attempt to understand Joseph Smith's psychology in my 1993 article "The Psychology of Religious Genius" explored the possibility that his behavior could have been influenced by manic depression, I have subsequently concluded that the behavior I initially viewed as bipolar can better be understood, instead, as associated with Smith's narcissism.¹⁵

closest inner circle of advisers, were extremely erratic. Periods of manic activity could last up to thirty-six hours at a stretch without sleep, followed by as much as ten to twelve hours of such deep sleep that nothing could wake him. Mao also suffered lengthy bouts of depression, during which he remained largely in bed for months at a time.

15. In "The Psychology of Religious Genius: Joseph Smith and the Origins of New Religious Movements," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 26, no. 4 (Winter 1993): 1–22, I explored the suggestion of Mormon psychiatrist C. Jess Groesbeck that Joseph Smith might have exhibited manic-depressive tendencies. Robert D. Anderson, another Mormon psychiatrist, took sharp exceptions to this hypothesis, however, in the addendum to his "Toward an Introduction to a Psychobiography of Joseph Smith," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 27, no. 3 (Fall 1994): 268–72. Anderson wrote: "Here are some of the issues that the diagnosis of Bipolar Affective Disorder does not address: the results of an unstable and deprived childhood with many moves and periods of near-starvation; the results of a traumatic childhood surgery; the effects of being raised in a family with an alcoholic father, a mother predisposed to depression, and repeated failures and minimal esteem in the community; and the effect of being raised in a subculture of magical delusion, requiring deceit of self and others. I agree that Smith demonstrated grandiosity, but I see it as a progressive development going out of control toward the end of his life." Anderson continued: "Five years ago, paying attention to the recurrent depressive episodes in Joseph's mother and the life-long mental illness of his

In order to assess whether or not Joseph Smith displayed narcissistic tendencies, it is helpful first to understand some of the personality characteristics associated with narcissism. A starting point is the description in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*, the so-called bible of modern psychiatry, about what it labels “narcissistic personality disorder.” Note that the *DSM* has been justly criticized because of its tendency to label behaviors it views as problematic as “disorders” or “illnesses,” even though milder forms of such behavior might fall well within the normal range of acceptable personality characteristics.¹⁶ Qualifying its use of the term “narcissistic personality disorder,” the *DSM-5* notes: “Many highly successful individuals display personality traits that might be considered narcissistic. Only when those traits are inflexible, maladaptive, and persisting, and cause significant functional impairment or subjective distress do they constitute narcissistic personality disorder.”¹⁷ In this regard, I can’t help thinking of the Peanuts cartoon in which the hypercritical Lucy (of “Psychiatric-Care-Five-Cents” fame) hands Linus a scroll with a long list of his “faults,” to which he responds in exasperation, “These aren’t faults; these are character traits.”¹⁸

son [David Hyrum Smith], I seriously considered Bipolar II but abandoned it for the reasons given. Frankly I was sorry, for I would have liked to find an explanation for Smith’s later excesses that was out of his control. Other intellectuals in the Mormon world would understand this wish” (270–71).

16. For example, editions of the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* before 1987 characterized homosexuality as a “psychiatric disorder,” although more recent editions no longer do so. In *The Book of Woe: The DSM and the Unmaking of Psychiatry* (New York: Penguin, 2013), Gary Greenberg sharply criticizes the *DSM* and the psychiatric profession’s tendency to “medicalize” disruptive behaviors at the extreme limits of the spectrum of normal human variability.

17. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th ed. (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013), 672, hereafter cited as *DSM-5*.

18. *DSM-5*, 646, states that its diagnostic approach “represents the categorical perspective that personality disorders are qualitatively different clinical

According to the description of “narcissistic personality disorder” in the most recent edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*:

Individuals with this disorder have a grandiose sense of self-importance. They routinely overestimate their abilities and inflate their accomplishments, often appearing boastful and pretentious. They may blithely assume that others attribute the same value to their efforts and may be surprised when the praise they expect and feel they deserve is not forthcoming. Often implicit in the inflated judgment of their own accomplishments is an underestimation (devaluation) of the contributions of others. Individuals with narcissistic personality disorder are often preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love. They may ruminate about “long overdue” admiration and privilege and compare themselves favorably with famous or privileged people.

Individuals with this disorder generally require excessive admiration. Their self-esteem is almost invariably very fragile. . . . They expect to be catered to and are puzzled or furious when this does not happen. . . . This sense of entitlement, combined with a lack of sensitivity to the wants and needs of others, may result in the conscious or unconscious exploitation of others. They expect to be given whatever they may want or feel they need, no matter what it might mean to others. For example, these individuals may expect great dedication from others and may overwork them without regard to the impact on their lives.

Vulnerability in self-esteem makes individuals with narcissistic personality disorder very sensitive to “injury” from criticism or defeat. . . . They may react with disdain, rage, or defiant counterattack. Though overweening ambition and confidence may lead to high achievement, performance may be disrupted because of intolerance of criticism or defeat. . . . Sustained feelings of shame or humiliation may be associated

syndromes [than the personality characteristics of normal individuals]”; however, it also acknowledges: “An alternative to the categorical approach is the dimensional perspective that personality disorders represent maladaptive variants of personality traits that merge imperceptibly into normality and into one another.” This latter approach is the one adopted in this article and suggested by Linus’s comment to Lucy in the Peanuts cartoon.

with social withdrawal, depressed mood, and persistent depressive disorder (dysthymia) or major depressive disorder. In contrast, sustained periods of grandiosity may be associated with a hypomanic mood.¹⁹

I believe that Joseph Smith's narcissism was his most obvious psychological characteristic; he ultimately viewed everything in terms of how it affected himself. For most non-Mormons, Smith's conviction that he had a unique mission from God to create a synthesis of all previously valid human truth that would allow him to restore true Christianity in preparation for the coming of a literal kingdom of heaven on earth would qualify as "a grandiose sense of self-importance." This is even more evident when one juxtaposes Smith's claims of greatness with his unpromising background growing up as a poor, struggling farm boy in central New York State during the early nineteenth century. Similarly, Smith's belief during the last three years of his life in Nauvoo that he was entitled to take large numbers of women as his plural wives may bespeak a "conscious or unconscious exploitation of others," and the expectation that he should be given whatever he might want or feel he needed, "no matter what it might mean to others."²⁰

In my 2001 article, "The Psychology of Prophetic Charisma,"²¹ I discussed some ways in which the concept of narcissism might help us better understand Joseph Smith's personality and motivation. My article drew heavily upon arguments developed by the New Zealand psychologist Len Oakes in his pathbreaking study *Prophetic Charisma*:

19. *DSM-5*, 670–71. For readability I have removed parenthetical references to the nine diagnostic criteria for narcissistic personality disorder in the original statement.

20. *DSM-5*, 670.

21. Lawrence Foster, "The Psychology of Prophetic Charisma: New Approaches to Understanding Joseph Smith and the Development of Charismatic Leadership," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 36, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 1–14, with a comment by Len Oakes, "The Prophet's Fall: A Note in Response to Lawrence Foster's 'The Psychology of Prophetic Charisma,'" *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 36, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 15–16.

*The Psychology of Revolutionary Religious Personalities.*²² Oakes based his research on his intensive qualitative and quantitative studies of the leaders and members of twenty contemporary New Zealand communal/religious groups and on his wide reading and his personal experience as the historian of one such group, the Centrepoint Community.²³ His study skillfully analyzed how narcissism could influence the sense of religious mission and drive of charismatic figures. Oakes was concerned to understand why prophetic figures become convinced that their personal perception of the world provides a universally valid way of understanding the nature of reality,²⁴ and he created a typology of five stages through which he believes charismatic leaders progress as they develop their distinctive sense of mission and prophetic careers. Only a few of Oakes's arguments that are most relevant to this analysis will be mentioned here.

22. In *Prophetic Charisma: The Psychology of Revolutionary Religious Personalities* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1997), Oakes conducted in-depth interviews with the leader of each group, as well as with two or three important lower-level leaders. He also administered a standard psychological inventory known as the Adjective Checklist to both leaders and followers in order to secure quantitative data about how both leaders and followers in the groups compared to "normal" populations.

23. Len Oakes, *Inside Centrepoint: The Story of a New Zealand Community* (Auckland, N.Z.: Benton Ross, 1986) sympathetically describes this controversial therapeutic community's development, way of life, and spiritual beliefs.

24. Oakes, *Prophetic Charisma*, 44–73. The core of Oakes's argument is that the highly narcissistic figures who eventually take on prophetic leadership roles are individuals who, as young children, were protected for an unusually long time by their mother or other primary caregiver from the inevitable adjustments necessary to adapt to a larger world in which they were not omnipotent, not the primary center of attention. When a crisis inevitably shatters the idyllic mindset of the future charismatic leaders, they seek to make the larger world conform to their own needs and desires rather than adapt themselves to the realities of the environment around them. In this article, however, I will not focus on the psychological roots of narcissism but on how narcissism may influence religious leadership.

Oakes argues that a narcissistic orientation may cause leaders to behave in paradoxical, contradictory, and often unpredictable ways, since “every leader in the study appears to have split off part of his or her self in order to pursue their vision.”²⁵ Prophetic leaders focus so intensely on their personal goals and sense of mission that they downplay, ignore, or entirely repress other aspects of their lives and awareness. Consequently, these leaders display blind spots about their own weaknesses and behavior that are obvious to all who know them but that they cannot see or admit.²⁶

Oakes further argues that the prophet ultimately needs his followers more than they need him. He notes that prophets often display an infantile, magical view of the world “wherein one need only wish to make it so.” As a result, prophets may be willing to distort reality in ways that outsiders or critics view as wishful thinking or lying. The prophet also displays a peculiar experience and transcendence of time that can be associated with memory distortions.²⁷ Oakes argues 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, . . . God and humankind.”²⁸

III

The remainder of this article will consider whether using the psychological concept of narcissism might help us bridge the “great divide” in Mormon historical writing between devout Latter-day Saints, who are

25. Oakes, *Prophetic Charisma*, 80–84, 165.

26. Oakes, *Prophetic Charisma*, 170. Regarding Scientology founder L. Ron Hubbard’s prevarications, Oakes caustically comments, “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).

27. *Prophetic Charisma*, 171–75.

28. *Prophetic Charisma*, 175.

firmly convinced that Joseph Smith was *nothing but* a sincere prophet of God, and most non-Mormons, who are equally convinced that Smith was *nothing but* a scheming and self-serving charlatan. Could a more nuanced use of the concept of narcissism help us move beyond such simplistic prophet-versus-fraud dichotomies to better appreciate Joseph Smith in all his human complexity? And might a better understanding of Joseph Smith's psychological dynamics also help us comprehend why tensions in Nauvoo began spiraling out of control by the mid-1840s, leading to Joseph Smith's tragic murder in June 1844?

That so many Mormons and non-Mormons for the better part of the past two centuries have firmly believed that Joseph Smith's motivation could be explained by either the "sincere prophet" or the "manipulative fraud" narratives alone suggests to me that neither contradictory approach by itself can be adequate. Instead, both approaches must be partly true and partly false. In order to understand why believing Mormons have shown such intense adulation for their prophet while non-Mormons have typically denounced him as a self-serving fraud and con man, I believe that we must hold these two antithetical ways of understanding Joseph Smith in creative tension with each other. In short, to comprehend the intense positive and negative reactions Joseph Smith aroused among his followers and the larger public, I am convinced that the Mormon prophet must be understood, paradoxically, as both sincere *and* as a charlatan at the same time.

I first developed this concept in my 1981 *Church History* article "James J. Strang: The Prophet Who Failed" as I sought to understand Strang, the greatest of the many unsuccessful would-be claimants to Joseph Smith's mantle immediately after his death, although I did not attempt to apply the concept to Smith then.²⁹ Dan Vogel has similarly

29. In "James J. Strang: The Prophet Who Failed," *Church History* 50, no. 2 (June 1981): 185, I stated: "The meticulous research of the non-Mormon historian Dale Morgan has established beyond any reasonable doubt that Strang's letter of appointment from Joseph Smith was forged, and almost surely forged

described Joseph Smith as a “pious deceiver” or a “sincere fraud,” while Robert N. Hullinger has suggested that Smith may have engaged in some fraudulent activities in order to try to convey his religious message most effectively.³⁰ The point this concept seeks to convey is that Joseph Smith may have been the type of person who genuinely believed in his prophetic role and message but who also may have been prepared, if necessary, to dissimulate in order to achieve his personal and group objectives, which he saw as inextricably intertwined.

The Mormon psychiatrist Robert D. Anderson has astutely noted that people do not appeal to any objective measure of Smith’s

by Strang himself.” Yet I further argued that: “One cannot account plausibly for the sustained dedication that [Strang] showed in the face of all the hardships, poverty, and opposition he experienced, or the generally well-thought-out and humane quality of his ideals as due to simple fraud or psychopathology.” For scholarly studies of Strang, see Vickie Cleverley Speek, *God Has Made Us a Kingdom: James Strang and the Midwest Mormons* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2006), the most thoroughly researched and insightful recent study of Strang, his family life, and followers, as well as Milo M. Quaife’s classic account, *The Kingdom of Saint James: A Narrative of the Mormons* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1930). Strang’s polygamy appears to have been based more on pragmatic considerations than on religious principle. For example, he said simply that his wives were women “whom I would marry if the law permitted me.” *Northern Islander*, Oct. 11, 1855, as quoted in Quaife, *Kingdom of Saint James*, 101.

30. Dan Vogel characterizes Joseph Smith as a “pious deceiver” or a “sincere fraud,” in “‘The Prophet Puzzle’ Revisited,” reprinted in Waterman, ed., *The Prophet Puzzle*, 50, after carefully analyzing several cases in which he believes there is solid evidence of conscious deception on Smith’s part. Vogel asks: “[W]hat were the rationalizations, or more precisely the inner moral conflicts of an individual who deceives in God’s name while also holding sincere religious beliefs?” (54). He concludes: “I suggest that Smith really believed he was called by God to preach repentance to a sinful world but that he felt justified in using deception to accomplish his mission more fully” (61). Vogel’s analysis draws upon ideas from Robert N. Hullinger’s *Mormon Answer to Skepticism: Why Joseph Smith Wrote the Book of Mormon* (St. Louis: Clayton, 1980), reprinted as *Joseph Smith’s Response to Skepticism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992).

truthfulness when they characterize him as either a sincere prophet or a self-serving fraud. Rather, both characterizations result from different ways of interpreting what the available evidence *means*. Anderson notes that while “a number of [Smith’s] dealings with others give marked evidence of expediency, deceit, coercion, and manipulation,” such behavior might also be seen as justifiable “if one believes that God commanded Smith to engage in them, or as purely manipulative and narcissistic if one does not.”³¹ The psychologist Len Oakes insightfully 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*.”³²

Prophetic leaders are rarely driven either by purely self-aggrandizing or purely altruistic motives. Instead, in more intense ways than most individuals, prophetic figures typically display a combination of *both* self-interest *and* altruism. Smith’s close associate Oliver Huntington recalled: “Joseph Smith said that some people entirely denounce the principle of self-aggrandizement as wrong. ‘It is a correct principle,’ he said, ‘and may be indulged upon only one rule or plan—and that is to elevate, benefit and bless others first. If you will elevate others, the very work itself will exalt you. Upon no other plan can a man justly and permanently aggrandize himself.’”³³ Effective leaders must weigh competing interests and make hard decisions, sometimes choosing the lesser of several evils in order to attempt to move toward what they see as a higher good. Such an approach can also lead prophetic individuals

31. *Mind of Joseph Smith*, xxiv–xxv.

32. *Prophetic Charisma*, 174; emphasis in the original.

33. Hyrum L. Andrus and Helen Mae Andrus, comps., *They Knew the Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1974), 61, as quoted in Vogel, “‘The Prophet Puzzle’ Revisited,” 63.

to exploit or mistreat others because of what they take to be the cosmic significance of the goals they feel called upon to achieve.

An important point to keep in mind is that Joseph Smith was anything but the straitlaced prophetic stick figure so many modern Mormons have been taught to believe in. Instead, he could also be an outgoing, fun-loving, earthy, quick-thinking, and at times even outrageous man, unafraid to break with convention, who once declared, “a prophet is a prophet only when he is acting as such.”³⁴

One of the most revealing descriptions of Joseph Smith comes from the pen of Josiah Quincy (1802–1882), a prominent New England intellectual who served as the mayor of Boston from 1823 to 1828 and as president of Harvard from 1842 to 1845.³⁵ Little more than a month before Smith was murdered in June 1844, Quincy spent several days in Nauvoo. There he was given the red-carpet treatment by Smith, whom he described as a man of remarkable personal presence, authority, and “rugged power,” even though Quincy said that his readers might “find so much that is puerile and even shocking in my report of the prophet’s conversation.”³⁶

Quincy was particularly struck by the degree of adulation Smith received from his followers, who raptly hung on his every word and enthusiastically affirmed whatever Smith said as true. In a revealing aside that suggests Smith’s narcissism, Quincy commented:

I should not say quite all that struck me about Smith if I did not mention that he seemed to have a keen sense of the humorous aspects of his position. “It seems to me, General,” I said, as he was driving us to

34. *History of the Church*, 5:265. Statement from Feb. 8, 1843.

35. Quincy’s account has been reprinted as “Two Boston Brahmins Call on the Prophet,” in William Mulder and A. Russell Mortensen, eds., *Among the Mormons: Historic Accounts by Contemporary Observers* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1973), 131–42. Richard Bushman summarizes Quincy’s report as the prologue to his biography, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, 3–7.

36. Quincy, “Two Boston Brahmins,” 134.

the river, about sunset, “that you have too much power to be safely trusted to one man.” “In your hands or that of any other person,” was the reply, “so much power would no doubt be dangerous. I am the only man in the world whom it would be safe to trust with it. Remember, I am a prophet!” The last five words were spoken in a rich comical aside, as if in hearty recognition of the ridiculous sound they might have in the ears of a Gentile.³⁷

The Mormon historian Danel Bachman summarizes another story recounted by the loyal Mormon Edwin Rushton. Rushton described how Smith disguised himself as a sort of “trickster” figure and “put on” a group of Mormon converts who had just arrived in Nauvoo. Bachman writes:

On another occasion, when some new emigrants were arriving at Nauvoo, the Prophet disguised himself as a ruffian and met them at the wharf. Edwin Rushton’s father told him that the Prophet questioned them about their conviction that Joseph Smith was a prophet. When the elder Rushton affirmed his faith, Smith asked, “What would you think if I told you I was Joseph Smith?” Rushton again said that would make no difference to his belief. Smith then explained that he dressed and spoke in the manner he did to “see if their faith is strong enough to stand the things they must meet. If not they should turn back right now.”³⁸

Another curious but revealing story about Joseph Smith is one that may or may not have ever happened. The initial recorded version of the story comes from William Huntington’s journal in early 1881, as published in a Mormon magazine in 1892—nearly half a century after Smith’s death. According to the story, someone once asked Smith whether any people lived on the moon. Yes, he confidently replied. People who live on the moon typically are about six feet tall, dress

37. Quincy, “Two Boston Brahmins,” 140.

38. Edwin Rushton, *Journal*, 2, as cited in Danel W. Bachman, “A Study of the Mormon Practice of Plural Marriage Before the Death of Joseph Smith” (master’s thesis, Purdue University, 1975), 169. Note that “Danel” is the correct spelling of Bachman’s first name.

in Quaker style, and live nearly a thousand years!³⁹ Modern readers, knowing what we now have discovered about the moon, can't help finding such a story laughable or just plain ignorant. Yet according to Erich Robert Paul's scholarly study *Science, Religion, and Mormon Cosmology*,⁴⁰ the belief that people lived on the moon was widely held in nineteenth-century America and it might well have sounded plausible at the time, as it apparently still did to William Huntington when he recorded the story in his journal decades later.

One thought-provoking take on the story is provided in Samuel W. Taylor's insightful novel *Nightfall at Nauvoo*. Taylor imagines Smith responding to the question about whether people lived on the moon but afterwards talking with Eliza R. Snow, who was puzzled and privately turned to him to ask "how he knew so much about the inhabitants of the moon. He replied with a shrug that she should realize that a prophet always had to have an answer to every silly question. Why would people suppose that he should know anything about the moon, anyway?"⁴¹ Of course, Smith might equally plausibly have believed that what he said was true, just as he apparently believed his own ad hoc pronouncements on many other topics about which he was in no position to know the correct answer.

Viewing Joseph Smith as a "sincere charlatan" influenced by narcissistic tendencies might help explain why he secretly introduced polygamous belief and practice among a small group of his closest

39. The original version of the story is a third-hand account found in *Oliver Huntington's Journal*, Book 14, 166, and in *The History of Oliver B. Huntington*, p. 10, typed copy, Marriott Library, University of Utah. Huntington claimed he had received the information from Philo Dibble. Huntington's story is retold in "Our Sunday Chapter: The Inhabitants of the Moon," *The Young Woman's Journal* 3, no. 6 (1892): 263–64.

40. Erich Robert Paul, *Science, Religion, and Mormon Cosmology* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 109.

41. Samuel W. Taylor, *Nightfall at Nauvoo* (New York: Avon, 1973), 163.

followers in Nauvoo during the early 1840s. Ever since I began investigating this controversial topic more than four decades ago, my working hypothesis has been that Joseph Smith probably believed that it was desirable for a man to have more than one wife at a time, under certain circumstances. I further assumed that Smith may have held such beliefs because he personally wanted to have more than one wife (or sexual outlet) himself and because he may have become convinced that God had (conveniently) commanded him to take more than one wife.

The double-speak and double-think that necessarily occurred when Smith privately attempted to introduce polygamous belief and practice among a small group of his most loyal followers in Nauvoo, while most Mormons there were unaware that the practice was sanctioned by him, provides a well-documented illustration of the challenges Smith faced and the difficulty of deciding whether to consider him either a sincere prophet or a self-conscious fraud. If we again assume as our working hypothesis that Smith may have sincerely believed that introducing the practice of polygamy was a good idea—and even a divine command—he was nevertheless well aware that polygamy was illegal in Illinois and that his Mormon followers, who had been repeatedly admonished that strict monogamy was God’s will, would reject or even kill him if they realized that he was advocating what they considered to be a heinously sinful practice.

To address this dilemma, Smith skillfully adopted a two-pronged approach. In the theological realm, he began to introduce the belief that if marriage and family relationships were properly “sealed” for eternity under the authority of the Mormon priesthood on earth, those relationships would continue throughout the afterlife as well. The idea of being reunited with loved ones after death was very comforting to many Mormons in Nauvoo because of the high death rates there. Extending the belief to its logical patriarchal conclusion, however, also opened the way for a man to be successively sealed to a first wife who died and then to a second wife, with both of them continuing to be his wives

in the afterlife in an “eternal marriage.” Extrapolating that heavenly model back into this life meant that a form of patriarchal polygamy could also be practiced in this life. Smith’s own polygamous behavior, and the polygamous practice that he introduced to at least thirty of his closest male followers before his death,⁴² thus became the ideal heavenly model and the basis for all growth and progression, both in this life and in the afterlife, since the largest patriarchal families would have the most power and influence in both realms.⁴³

The other part of Joseph Smith’s two-pronged approach was to issue *apparent* denials about polygamy to the vast majority of Nauvoo Mormons who didn’t realize that Smith and other Mormon leaders were advocating the practice of plural marriage using a code language to let individuals who were in on the practice understand that the denials were simply for public consumption.⁴⁴ For example, plural wives

42. Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy*, 241–354, provides a detailed reconstruction of the circumstances under which Joseph Smith’s male followers entered into polygamous marriages prior to his death.

43. Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 142–46, summarizes the new “sealing” ceremonies introduced into the LDS Church in the early 1840s. William Victor Smith, *Textual Studies of the Doctrine and Covenants: The Plural Marriage Revelation* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2018) is a thorough and sophisticated analysis that contextualizes many issues associated with the revelation on plural and celestial marriage. The book also includes an addendum with the full text of the earliest manuscript version of the revelation, as recorded by Smith’s scribe Joseph C. Kingsbury (227–39).

44. In *The True Origin of Mormon Polygamy* (Cincinnati: Standard, 1914), Charles A. Shook analyzes, with lawyer-like precision, the reasons why the many Mormon statements in Nauvoo that appear to be denials of polygamy actually were *not* understood as denials by Latter-day Saints who had been initiated into polygamous belief and practice. *The Peace Maker, or The Doctrines of the Millennium*, a pamphlet defense of polygamy by Udney Hay Jacob published in late 1842, provides one example of such doublespeak. Although the pamphlet identified “J. Smith” as its “printer,” when Smith’s followers expressed outrage at the pamphlet’s argument, he backtracked and claimed he hadn’t been aware of the pamphlet’s contents before publishing it. Speaking out of

were often referred to as “spiritual wives” rather than temporal ones, yet they also were temporal wives.⁴⁵ When Joseph Smith was accused of practicing polygamy, he would typically issue statements along the lines of “this is too ridiculous to be believed,” although he carefully avoided saying that the allegations weren’t *true*.⁴⁶ In the meantime, Smith’s proxy surrogates would make the air blue by accusing individuals who made allegations about Smith’s improper sexual behavior of having engaged in the same actions for which they were criticizing Smith. As Fawn Brodie summarizes: “The denials of polygamy uttered by the Mormon leaders between 1835 and 1852, when it was finally admitted, are a remarkable series of evasions and circumlocutions involving all sorts of verbal gymnastics.”⁴⁷ Whether such behavior constituted a misrepresentation necessary to introduce a divine principle or was simply self-serving narcissism depends, as always, on whether one is viewing the events from inside or outside the group.

Like other narcissistic individuals, Smith felt he always had to be *right* on matters he considered important. He was upset when others did not give him the praise he expected and felt he deserved. Thus, his

both sides of his mouth, he added: “*not that I am opposed to any man enjoying his privileges [a code word for polygamy]; but I do not wish to have my name associated with the authors [sic] in such an unmeaning rigmarole of non-sense, folly and trash*” (emphasis added). *Times and Seasons* 4, Dec. 1, 1842, 32, as quoted in Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 319. For a more detailed discussion of the controversy, see *Religion and Sexuality*, 174–77.

45. In her 1882 defense of plural marriage, Helen Mar Kimball Whitney, a former plural wife of Joseph Smith, stated that during the early development of Mormon polygamy in Nauvoo, “spiritual wife was the title by which every woman who entered into this order was called, for it was taught and practiced as a spiritual order and not a temporal one though it was always spoken of sneeringly by those who did not believe in it.” *Plural Marriage as Taught by the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1882), 15, as quoted in Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 318.

46. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, 322.

47. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, 321.

self-esteem was very fragile if he was criticized. He tended to see any challenge to his authority as unwarranted “persecution,” and he lashed out in fury against those he deemed his opponents, which caused even some of his closest followers to break with him. For anyone who supported Smith wholeheartedly, nothing was too good, yet those who criticized him risked being consigned to the outer darkness unless they repented and submitted themselves to his full authority again.

Portraying in-group/out-group tensions as simply the result of unjust “persecution” of one group by another can be an effective way to rationalize or explain away an individual’s or a group’s misbehavior toward those outside the group. For example, the Mormons in Nauvoo understandably believed they had been mistreated when they were harshly driven out of Missouri in 1838–39. The experience may, in turn, have led some Mormons to feel justified in retaliating against Missourians or others by “despoiling the Gentiles” in various ways. Engaging in such retaliatory actions, however, risks setting off a vicious cycle of ever-increasing conflict between opposing groups that can eventually cause both sides to feel threatened and victimized, as happened so tragically in both Missouri and in Nauvoo.⁴⁸

Latter-day Saints in Nauvoo and throughout their history have been quite successful in creating compelling persecution narratives that portray any external criticism as caused by religious “persecution.”

48. The mutual tensions between Mormons and non-Mormons in Missouri are discussed in Stephen C. LeSueur, *The 1838 Mormon War in Missouri* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1987). For the tensions in Nauvoo, see 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). The 1838 Mormon War in Missouri highlights the excesses on both sides. For example, on July 4, 1838, the Mormon leader Sidney Rigdon, in his controversial “salt sermon,” declared “it must be as a war of extermination of us against them,” while three months later, on October 27, 1838, Missouri Governor Lilburn Boggs officially issued his infamous order that the Mormons “must be driven from the state or exterminated if necessary.” LeSueur, *Mormon War in Missouri*, 50, 152.

But Mormon writers have typically failed to consider whether *specific* non-Mormon criticisms might have actually had some validity and identified real problems or excesses the Latter-day Saints needed to address.⁴⁹

In *Glorious in Persecution: Joseph Smith, American Prophet, 1839–1844*, the Mormon historian Martha Bradley-Evans skillfully and sympathetically frames her narrative around the ways in which Joseph Smith and the Latter-day Saints in Nauvoo created and utilized complex persecution narratives in order to cement Mormon in-group loyalty. From this perspective, she is able to present some details about highly questionable polygamous behavior in which the Mormon prophet engaged without judging whether his actions were right or wrong. I believe that most present-day Mormon and non-Mormon historians would find her narrative factually and analytically credible and that many scholars from both camps would probably feel that Smith's actions in his polygamous relationships would be suggestive of exploitative or psychologically disturbed behavior if the events in question had occurred in the present day.

In his essay “Joseph Smith and the Hazards of Charismatic Leadership,”⁵⁰ Mormon historian Gary James Bergera has provided

49. Those seeking to develop a balanced understanding of controversial events in Mormon history would do well to compare the divergent approaches in such books as the sympathetic but generally candid Mormon study by James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard, *The Story of the Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976); the relentlessly hostile and one-sided, albeit factually accurate anti-Mormon exposé by Richard Abanes, *One Nation Under Gods: A History of the Mormon Church* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2002); and the wide-ranging, candid, and insightful non-Mormon study by Richard N. Ostling and Joan K. Ostling, *Mormon America: The Power and the Promise* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999).

50. Citations from Bergera's article are from the reprint in Waterman, *The Prophet Puzzle*, 239–57. The original article was printed as Gary James Bergera, “Joseph Smith and the Hazards of Charismatic Leadership,” *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 6 (1986): 33–42. The concept of charismatic

arguably the most convincing brief analysis of how Joseph Smith's increasing narcissism and grandiosity eventually led to his tragic death. Bergera's thesis is that:

When a charismatic person assumes a position of leadership and fails to recognize the limitations of his power, convinced he can "transform his . . . fantasies into reality for his followers," he may develop what psychologists refer to as megalomaniacal fantasies, including paranoid delusions. . . . The group may willingly surrender its ego to the leader "in order to preserve [its] love of the leader, and whatever esteem [it] experience[s] comes from the sense of devotion to the ideals and causes established in the leader's image." Yet the leader may experience little resistance in influencing his followers to do things they would not do otherwise, reconfirming the breadth of his own power and the ease with which his followers are able to achieve the realization of their own dreams as defined by the leader. "Attachment and omnipotence [can] mutually reinforce one another, omnipotence turning into a 'self-fulfilling prophecy' in which 'everything is allowed and nothing is off limits.'"⁵¹

Bergera continues:

Embodying both the strengths and weaknesses of charismatic leadership, Joseph, during the final two years of his life, from 1842 to 1844, tested more than once the boundaries separating fantasy from reality, succumbing to those hazards problematic to charismatic leaders.

leadership that the great German sociologist Max Weber developed was influenced by his knowledge about Joseph Smith and the Mormons. Although Weber said that the Book of Mormon was possibly a "hoax" and he opined that Joseph Smith might have been "a very sophisticated type of deliberate swindler," he nevertheless concluded: "Sociological analysis, which must abstain from value judgments, will treat all these [individuals] on the same level as the men who, according to conventional judgments are the 'greatest' heroes, prophets, and saviours." S. N. Eisenstadt, ed., *Max Weber on Charisma and Institution Building: Selected Papers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 19, 49. I am grateful to Dan Vogel for calling these citations to my attention.

51. Bergera, "Charismatic Leadership," 239–40.

In significant and, I believe, revealing ways, Joseph's leadership is a case study of the hazards confronting charismatic leadership in crisis situations.⁵²

According to Bergera, Joseph Smith's conviction that he possessed a divinely based prophetic power led him to believe he had "power that transcended civil law" and that this belief suggests "the tenuousness of the grasp he may have held, at times, on reality."⁵³

But the discussion of Joseph's occasional difficulty to distinguish fantasy from reality should not be construed as an attempt to address the validity of his prophetic calling. Rather, it presents an admittedly speculative attempt to better understand the mental state—the strains, pressures, conflicts, and contradictions—we all experience when expectations clash with reality. With Joseph, the effects of such struggles were perhaps more dramatic, affecting the lives of more people than would have been the case with a lesser individual.⁵⁴

Bergera identifies twelve "examples of the extent to which Joseph may have sought to interpose his will over that normally imposed upon human behavior by external reality," and he argues that each example "reflects what may be either maladaptive responses to Joseph's environment or possible evidence of a growing sense of self-importance and personal omnipotence."⁵⁵

Here I shall only summarize Bergera's analysis of one of the most important of those twelve examples of Smith's overreach, namely, his efforts to introduce plural marriage belief and practice to some of his most loyal followers.⁵⁶ After Smith's twelve apostles returned from their

52. Bergera, 240.

53. Bergera, 241.

54. Bergera, 241.

55. Bergera, 242.

56. Bergera's 1986 summary of the development of Mormon polygamy is supported by major recent studies by professional Mormon historians. These include: Todd Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph*

missions to England in 1841, he rapidly moved to introduce the idea of “celestial marriage” to them, along with its corollary, plural marriage. He tested their absolute loyalty to him by asking each of his apostles, at different times, to relinquish their wives to him so they might become his plural wives. “This apparently continued for almost one year before one apostle, Orson Pratt, failed to pass the test in July 1842. Sensitive to the scandal that could erupt from additional failures, Joseph suspended requiring such a show of faith.”⁵⁷

Smith (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997); George D. Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy: “. . . but we called it celestial marriage”* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2008); Martha Bradley-Evans, *Glorious in Persecution: Joseph Smith, American Prophet, 1839–1844* (Salt Lake City, Signature Books, 2016); and D. Michael Quinn. “Evidence for the Sexual Side of Joseph Smith’s Polygamy” (presentation, Mormon History Association annual conference, University of Calgary, Calgary, AB, June 29, 2012), enlarged final document dated December 31, 2012 available online at <https://mormonpolygamydocuments.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Quinns-FINAL-RESPONSE.pdf>. In addition, in *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy*, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2013), Brian Hales, who is not a professional historian, has compiled almost all known documents from Mormon and non-Mormon sources relating to the development of early Mormon polygamy. Professional Mormon historians who have studied early Mormon polygamy most closely, however, have not found Hales’s apologetic interpretation of much of the evidence convincing.

57. Bergera, “Charismatic Leadership,” 248. For Bergera’s reconstruction of the complex issues raised by the Orson and Sarah Pratt case, see his *Conflict in the Quorum: Orson Pratt, Brigham Young, Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 7–51. Orson F. Whitney’s biography of his grandfather, *Life of Heber C. Kimball: An Apostle, the Father and Founder of the British Mission* (Salt Lake City: Kimball Family, 1888), 333–35, states that Joseph Smith asked Heber to give his wife Vilate to him, stating that it was a requirement. After three days of intense mental turmoil, Heber presented Vilate to Smith. Smith then wept, embraced Heber, and said that he had not really wanted Vilate. He had just been determining if Heber’s loyalty to him was absolute. For similar tests of loyalty in which Smith asked Brigham Young and John Taylor to relinquish their wives to him, see Quinn, “Sexual Side of Joseph Smith’s Polygamy,” 42–46. Apostle Orson Hyde’s case was different. During Hyde’s mission to Palestine, Joseph Smith apparently took Hyde’s wife, Marinda Nancy Johnson

Later that same month, according to the Mormon historian Andrew Ehat, Smith began to go to some of his most loyal followers in Nauvoo who had daughters of marriageable age to teach them the principles of plural marriage and request that they teach it to their daughters as well. Evidently “the price some paid for their own sealing for time and eternity was the marriage of their daughter to Joseph.”⁵⁸ “If Joseph’s move away from asking for the wives of married men to asking for the daughters of faithful couples was intended to minimize the risk of public exposure, it shortly, and not unexpectedly, proved unsuccessful. Joseph’s courtship of Nancy Rigdon, daughter of former First Presidency counselor Sidney Rigdon, became as damaging to his reputation as his attempted liaison with Apostle Orson Pratt’s wife.”⁵⁹

According to Bergera, the most important internal challenge Joseph Smith may have faced “resulted from anticipated opposition to his practice from both his brother Hyrum and his wife, Emma.”

Apparently never once during the first twenty-four months Joseph secretly promoted and practiced the “celestial law of marriage” did either Emma consent to her husband’s taking another wife or Hyrum offer to perform or teach the sacred ordinance. Joseph’s tests, it may be argued, evince the possible expression of what can be termed a paranoid delusion in which not even his most faithful friends could be completely trusted without their being first required to demonstrate unconditional

Hyde, as one of his plural wives without informing Hyde. When Hyde returned from his mission, he was reportedly very upset, but Smith apparently placated him by giving him two other women as plural wives. The details of this and other similar cases have understandably remained in contention. Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 228–53; Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy*, 327–29; and Hales, *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy*, 452–55.

58. Bergera, “Charismatic Leadership,” 248.

59. Bergera, 248–49. The Nancy Rigdon controversy is detailed in Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Sidney Rigdon: A Portrait of Religious Excess* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 290–310.

allegiance to his leadership. . . . If Joseph could endure the rejection of others, he could not suffer rejection from either Hyrum or Emma, and initially refused to court their hostile responses.⁶⁰

Although Emma eventually acceded to her husband's wishes temporarily, "her support was short-lived, and she soon became an active opponent of her husband's secret teachings."⁶¹ Hyrum, by contrast, preached publicly against polygamy in May 1843, but he eventually came to believe it was divine after Brigham Young explained the doctrine to him, and he then became its staunch supporter.⁶² Bergera argues that "the greatest factor contributing to [Joseph's] image of virtual omnipotence was . . . the acceptance of polygamy by his brother, wife, and closest associates. More than any other expression of allegiance, their willingness to obey Joseph's commands in an area so at odds with conventional Victorian morality may have contributed to what appears to be the slowly eroding barriers separating reality from fantasy."⁶³ This

60. Bergera, 249. The best-documented case in which Joseph Smith was married to a daughter of a close associate is that of Heber C. Kimball's fourteen-year-old daughter Helen Mar Kimball. She described the experience retrospectively as extremely traumatic. In a detailed reminiscence to her children in 1881, she wrote: "Having a great desire to be connected with the Prophet, Joseph, he [her father] offered me to him; this I afterwards learned from the Prophet's own mouth. My father had but one Ewe Lamb, but willingly laid her upon the alter [sic]: how cruel this seemed [sic] to the mother [Vilate] whose heartstrings were already stretched untill [sic] they were ready to snap asunder." Before Helen reluctantly agreed to become Smith's plural wife, he told her: "If you will take this step, it will ensure your eternal salvation & exaltation and that of your father's household & all of your kindred." She continues: "This promise was so great that I willingly gave myself to purchase so glorious a reward." Quoted in Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 498, 499.

61. Bergera, "Charismatic Leadership," 252.

62. Bergera, 249–50.

63. Bergera, 252.

eventually contributed to the creation of an opposition movement and a newspaper, *The Nauvoo Expositor*, which in effect put Joseph “on trial before his whole people.”⁶⁴ In response, Joseph destroyed both the newspaper and the printing press. This led to his arrest and incarceration in a jail in nearby Carthage, Illinois, where a mob in collusion with the local militia guarding the jail murdered Joseph and his brother Hyrum on June 23, 1844.

Bergera concludes: “The irony is that the leader who succeeds in pushing his movement toward the realization of their fantasies may well be on the way to his own self-destruction. . . . Perhaps if any benefit is to be derived from Joseph’s death it is that it may have saved his followers from a similar fate.”⁶⁵

In a sermon in 1856, Brigham Young declared that he did not base his belief in the truth of Mormonism on Joseph Smith’s personal probity but on his doctrine. Using typically blunt rhetoric, Young declared:

The doctrine he [Joseph Smith] teaches is all I know about the matter, bring anything against that if you can. As to anything else, I do not care. If he acts like a devil, he has brought forth a doctrine that will save us if we will abide by it. He may get drunk every day of his life, sleep with his neighbor’s wife every night, run horses and gamble, I do not care anything about that, for I never embrace any man in my faith. But the doctrine he has produced will save you and me, and the whole world; and if you can find fault with that, find it.⁶⁶

In conclusion, psychological frameworks are most likely to produce revealing historical insights into complex individuals when they are deployed judiciously and non-judgmentally to analyze behavior that

64. Bergera, 250.

65. Bergera, 252.

66. Brigham Young, Nov. 9, 1856, *Journal of Discourses*, 4:78, as quoted in Quinn, “Sexual Side of Joseph Smith’s Polygamy,” 56–57.

might otherwise appear out of character or not to make sense. Conversely, when psychological theory is simply used as a Procrustean bed into which one tries to force a dynamic human being who transcends simple categories of analysis, it can become reductionist and counter-productive. Although all psychological attempts to understand human behavior are imperfect tools, I believe that the limited, judicious, and nuanced use of psychological perspectives to try to come to terms with Joseph Smith's personality and impact may help bring us closer to resolving "the prophet puzzle," including some parts of the puzzle that even Joseph himself may not have fully understood.

At the end of Josiah Quincy's revealing account of his conversations with Joseph Smith in 1844, he expressed skepticism about Smith and his religious claims while also recognizing this rough-hewn man's native intelligence and leadership ability. Quincy concluded, "I have endeavored to give the details of my visit to the Mormon prophet with absolute accuracy. If the reader does not know just what to make of Joseph Smith, I cannot help him out of the difficulty. I myself stand helpless before the puzzle."⁶⁷

Quincy's words remind me of Immanuel Kant's compelling statement in *The Critique of Practical Reason*, which I have taken the liberty to modify significantly here as: "Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the oftener and more steadily we reflect on them: the starry heavens above and the mind of man below."⁶⁸

67. Quincy, "Two Boston Brahmins," 142.

68. Immanuel Kant's original statement, in the Thomas Kingsmill Abbott translation of *Kant's Critique of Practical Reason and Other Works on the Theory of Ethics* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1927), 260, reads: "Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the oftener and more steadily we reflect on them: the starry heavens above and the moral law within."

The mind of the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith, in all its dynamic complexity, must surely remain a subject of awe, wonder, and concern for anyone who attempts to understand it. Perhaps Joseph Smith most eloquently expressed his own and his biographers' challenge when he declared: "No man knows my history. . . . If I had not experienced what I have, I could not have believed it myself."⁶⁹

69. As quoted in Fawn Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, vii.

LAWRENCE FOSTER {larry.foster137@gmail.com} is an emeritus professor of American history at Georgia Institute of Technology. His first book, *Religion and Sexuality* (1981), which compares the introduction of alternative forms of marriage, family life, and sexual relations in the celibate Shaker, "free love" Oneida Perfectionist, and polygamous Mormon communities, won the Mormon History Association's Best Book Award that year. His other books, *Women, Family, and Utopia* (1991) and *Free Love in Utopia* (2001), and several dozen articles also explore the transformation of women's roles in new religious and communal groups.