Reconsidering the Prophet Puzzle

I am somewhat surprised by the decision to publish the "Prophet Puzzle Revisited" in the Fall 1998 issue of *Dialogue*. Though it refers to early LDS historical documents with which the author is well acquainted, it does so strictly on a "proof-text" basis in making an argument that rests primarily on conjecture. If the author were forced to eliminate all the sentences in which the operative terms were "could have," "might have," "would have," and the like, there would not be many of his assertions left. Surely such speculative work does not belong in a journal of scholarship. Are we really that anxious to "explain" (or explain away) Joseph Smith's complex mind? Influenced both by Brodie and by Hullinger (but not taking us very far beyond either), the author seems unaware of the hazards of psychobiography or of the telling criticisms of that genre found in the professional literature.

While cautioning us against considering Joseph's "apparent" treasure-seeking fraud in "either/or" terms (130), the author himself apparently is still hung up on the "either/or" predicament that he finds in Jan Shipps's 1974 essay, and to which he here proposes a "resolution": There seem to be two Joseph Smiths, we are told–the youthful treasure seeker and the visionary prophet—a kind of "schizophrenia" that continues to find expression throughout Joseph's life in various forms of dissembling and in a gap between his private and public personas. Thus, the author tells us (129, in seeming contradiction of himself on 130) that "apologists" must either believe in the treasure-seeking lore of Joseph's day or "come face to face with a Joseph Smith who consciously or unconsciously deceived." The situation is actually closer to neither/nor, and I thought scholars (whether "apologists" or not) had learned, especially since 1974, that biographical complexities need not be reduced to such simple "puzzles." Biographies of all kinds typically reveal a great many ad hoc and contradictory pronouncements and behaviors across time, as individuals seek to assimilate changing experiences and understandings. This is no "puzzle." It is merely a banal regularity in history. The main difference between prophets like Joseph Smith and the rest of us is that their changes, contradictions, and concealments tend to become public and to confuse their followers.

This essay, therefore, would have had more context and balance if the Prophet Joseph had been compared to certain other prophets of history, ranging from Jesus himself to Mary Baker Eddy, Ellen White, or even Martin Luther King, Jr., all of whom periodically attempted public concealments of their real acts and beliefs (recall Jesus' "see thou tell no man" after having apparently healed a leper—Matt. 8:4), and all of whom presented their followers (and history) with various anomalies and contradictions. Thus to portray Joseph as a "pious deceiver or religious pretender" (132-33) for ostensibly concealing a "private" belief in Universalism is nothing but a straw man. We have long since learned from the likes of Alexander, Quinn, and Prince, about the zigs, zags, and vagaries of doctrinal development in Smith's career, which produced many ambiguities and contradictions before some effort at codification was made early in the present century. Joseph's beliefs and teachings were fluid and ambiguous all along. He would see loopholes or inconsistencies in what he believed at a certain point in time and

then undertake to "correct" or modify his understanding and teaching later on. This is not deception (of self or others); it is merely the intellectual groping of a youthful and inventive mind. In his portrayal of young Joseph as a piously deceptive practitioner of magic, the author is almost dismissive of the plausible explanations of Quinn and Bushman. Yet social scientists have come to understand both the socially constructed nature of magic (rather than its "objective reality") and the typical evolution from magic to religion in successful new movements. It was Durkheim who first recognized that there can be no "church of magic," since the durability of religious movements depends upon unfalsifiable promises of benefits in the next world, not upon the ultimately falsifiable outcomes of magical exercises. Thus, for Joseph to become a prophet instead of a magician, and for his followers to become church members instead of clients, it was necessary for magic to give way to religion (see Stark and Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion*, e.g., 109-13, 275-83).

In an either/or argument, the present essay claims instead that, since we know magic isn't "real," Joseph Smith should have known it; and if he did, then he was deliberately deceiving people (though in a sincere belief that it was for a good cause). If he didn't know, then he was himself a dupe. Yet that isn't the way "magic" is understood by those who believe in it. We can see remnants of magical thinking even in the modern church: What happens when the elders administer to the sick and the sick fail to recover (or even die)? There is always an "escape clause." Perhaps the sick person lacked faith (or the elders did), or perhaps it was God's will that the sick person be "taken" despite the desires of church friends and family. Yet if, after administration, the sick actually recover, even occasionally, it is that occasional healing that is remembered and recounted, and which provides intermittent reinforcement for a continuing belief in the efficacy in priesthood administrations. There is no need here to postulate any kind of "pious deception" on the part of priesthood practitioners, but if the LDS church had depended mainly on its win/loss record in healings, it probably would not have lasted this long. Fortunately its promises are redeemed in the next world, far beyond the reach of either pious deceivers or dubious scholarly speculations.

Armand Mauss
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Afterthoughts on the LDS Webpage

The LDS church has just opened a website that achieved 500 hits a second on its first day. My LDS friends at work gloated at how this again proved the church was true.

LDS leaders have not always been so upbeat about the internet. I went to a "study your family's history" class at BYU last year. The teacher from the genealogical department was repeatedly asked about on-line resources. Showing a mild frustration, he explained, "The Brethren have told us not to do much of anything on the internet for the time being."

An awkward silence descended on the room. After a few seconds, the teacher hurried to fill it. "Now I don't need to know WHY they've taken this position. I just need to abide by it."

This is the very essence of being a

Mormon: when the Brethren take a stand, don't ask why, and, if it causes problems or missed opportunities—if it screws up your life in one or a hundred ways—just trust in God to magically make up the difference. I did that for 25 years and got really tired of the results.

My son is a loyal Mormon "teacher" who at age 14 patched together his own website. When I told him about the policy, he burst out, "That' s stupid!"

"But *why* do you think they've said this?" I pressed.

"Probably because they just don't 'get' computers. They're old, like Grandpa and Grandma, who are so scared of their computer that I have to help them turn it on every time." It would be interesting to know: how many of the 100 or so highest LDS leaders could visit the new website without a nerd to assist them? Perhaps 20?

I have my own theory on why they boycotted the net until now: In the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth, the Saints called many sharp minds and unique fellows to high position (O. & P. Pratt, Talmage, Roberts, Widtsoe, J. G. Kimball). Even J. Smith and B. Young had some claim to such gifts. Though part of an all-male, all-white phalanx, these gents allowed one another leeway to openly disagree about important things like politics and doctrine. But in recent decades, on the more rare occasions when such minds are called (e.g., Hugh Brown, Duff Hanks, Dallin Oaks), they are hemmed in by policies of lockstep uniformity. Little surprise that, the older the twentieth century has grown, the less LDS leaders seem to understand it.

But it's good to see that the Lord Jesus Christ has liberalled up about the net, even though the last year has probably seen a tenfold increase in porno and "how to build a bomb " websites.

Alan Rasmussen
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Some Thoughts on Faith and Science

re: Glen J. Hettinger's essay, "Hard Day for Professor Midgely. . . ." (Spring, 1999).

BYU Professor Midgely's argument was that Fawn Brodie's bad history of Jefferson suggested that she might also have written a bad history of the prophet Joseph Smith. Hettinger says that this argument is now muted because DNA tests indicate that Jefferson *did* have children by slave Sally Hemmings.

Years ago, of course, there was a rejoinder to Brodie by Hugh Nibley (*No Ma'am, That's Not History*), which didn't do any more to trash Brodie's book than did his article in *Dialogue* (Summer, 1968) to counter the Book of Abraham exposés.

As a result of such defenses of the faith, the church now advises Mormon scholars not to defend the church, as the defenses only call more attention to meritorious criticism.

The publication *Doubletake* recently reviewed the futile efforts of BYU archeologists to verify the Book of Mormon site locations (I think that article went unanswered, thank the Lord).

The trouble with the BYU professors is that they don't understand "faith." Anybody who believes in a god who has a "faith" program should also believe in the corollary—that the god leaves no evidence around (other-

wise the "faith" becomes unnecessary, since proof is available).

Paul Tillich once said that the popular definition of "faith" (i.e.—that it is the same as "belief") is well suited to an uncheckable claim having a low probability. Therefore I think the BYU professors should spend their time coming up with new uncheckable claims to suggest to the Brethren, who can issue them as revelatory. It's a lot easier (and more fun) to come up with such claims than to look for evidence to combat persuasive criticism. Moreover, the new claims can be used to fill voids occasioned by old claims having been shot down (such as the claims not having proved to be "uncheckable").*

The problem with the church's current "mainstreaming" program is that it throws us in league with Christian churches generally, which are growing short on claims. *All* the mainstream churches are being out-gunned on imaginative hypotheses by the physicists and their popularizers, the sci-fi writers.

I am in sympathy with the church leaders who combat the academic freedom sought by the current cadre of BYU professors, mainly because such professors are so short on new ideas. The professors should either be made to conform or to think.

*An example of this revelatory suggestion process occurred in 1981, when a professor at BYU recommended that Book of Mormon verses be changed from "White and delightsome" to "Pure and delightsome."

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A "Happy Balance" for Dialogue

I read with interest the excerpt from Henry Eyring's "Reflections of a Scientist" in the March-April 1999 issue of *Sunstone* in which he recounts a meeting with four members of the Quorum of the Twelve and the editors of the church magazines. I remember hearing at the time about Brother Eyring's comments in that meeting. As it was reported to me (by Eugene England or Leonard Arrington? I am not sure after all this time), Brother Eyring said something to the effect that if the church was serious about doing something to enhance the image of its magazines and expand its readership, then they should take a close look at *Dialogue*. As the newly appointed editor of that journal, I remember feeling grateful that someone of Brother Eyring's stature knew about the journal and that he found things in it to recommend. The fact that we were in our own journal committed to, in Brother Eyring's words, getting "some people with independence in there who had real ideas and would come out and express themselves," gave us hope that some of that same spirit would influence church publications. The "happy balance" that Brother Eyring speaks of—"Letting the truth flow forth without either hiding or digging for problems"—was the ideal I strove for as editor, and which I hope will characterize the work of the new editors of *Dialogue*.

Robert A. Rees
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A Farewell to Arrington

As I pondered the meaning of a rooster on the back of my funeral program, Gordon B. Hinckley made an amusing observation about the front. "This picture really captures Leonard," he ventured. "A hearty laugh—with his hands in his pockets holding on to his money."

I sat with Michael Quinn in the back row on folding chairs, squinting at the podium in Parley's First Ward where LDS church president Hinckley eulogized Leonard Arrington—dead at age 81 on February 11 [1999]. "Leonard is the only man I know who can claim Brigham Young as his posterity," quipped Hinckley. Everyone laughed, visualizing Arrington's son James, a well-known Brigham impersonator. But I thought of Leonard's biography, *Brigham Young: American Moses*.

Subtle ironies haunted me. Hinckley was giving genuine praise to the only credentialed scholar who ever served as LDS Church Historian. It was an ideal that couldn't survive. Leonard Arrington was an anomaly, a scholar who didn't spark ire in the hierarchy; yet he sought a standard for Mormon history that was impossible—tell the truth without incurring censorship.

Installed as Church Historian in 1972, Dr. Arrington launched unprecedented use of historical documents in the LDS archives, inaugurating a golden age of Mormon research known as "Camelot." Arrington trained scholars and students to use church collections, hired a staff of professional historians, and set up fellowships that evolved into books.

Ten years later Camelot ended because historians were publishing new findings, changing sanctioned views. Non-traditional Mormon history was emerging under the auspices of the church. Thus, access to archives was restricted and the office of church historian closed. In 1982, Arrington was formally replaced, as recalled in his 1998 memoir, *Adventures of a Church Historian*.

With Hinckley's voice echoing, I remembered front page headlines in the *Seventh East Press*, 1982. "Church Archives Restrict Access," "Arrington Released," and "Historian Responds to Apostle." We BYU students had urgently printed the news, along with Boyd Packer's call for faithful history and Mike Quinn's challenge of such as "bordering on idolatry." National press descended and the story ran in *Newsweek*.

Through it all, Leonard Arrington seemed unruffled, calmly weathering controversy and the loss of his office. Arrington, the deposed church historian, was transferred to BYU to oversee the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute. There he and his colleagues continued their research under new restrictions, without seeming church-authorized.

In 1986, Leonard was released as director of the BYU Smith Institute. *Sunstone* magazine asked me to investigate, but I found no scandal. "They did me a favor," Leonard said, relieved. "Ordering supplies, paying the bills—I don't enjoy that at all. I just write books." He was 69 then, so I asked if he was retiring. "I'm not retired!" he yelped. "I'm still working on six projects. Retirement happens to old people—I'm young—I'm only 45 or so. . . ."

I returned to the present as Hinckley described Arrington as a "model historian." I agree. Leonard managed to straddle inquiry and orthodoxy, conformity and critique, honesty and good will. He united Mormons and non-Mormons, sinners and saints, apostles and apostates, removing bar-

riers between secular and sacred, LDS and RLDS. Leonard nurtured a "new Mormon history," urging historians to be professionals and entrepreneurs.

Then Hinckley gently tugged at the underlying conflict, wondering, "I don't know if there's a place for historians in the hereafter; I'm not sure what they'll do there." Privately I wonder if there's a place for historians in the here and now, where scholars are one of "the greatest threats to the church."

"Maybe they'll find a dusty archive where they can gather and talk about the past," Hinckley mused. "But Leonard has gone ahead. Perhaps he'll prepare a place for others. I imagine Brigham Young greeting Leonard, putting his arms around him, and thanking him for his good work."

Hinckley extolled Arrington as a rare historian, an exception to the rule. "One who looked deeply into history and found happiness there," he noted, adding, "Wouldn't that be nice—if historians would find happiness in history?" Yes, it would, I thought. Yet history holds more.

I gazed at the back of the metal chair in front of me, noticing someone had scratched a swastika into the enamel. Likely the handiwork of a bored deacon with nail clippers. On the next chair were the stenciled words "Third Parley's Fifth."

Rather than happiness, I think Leonard's legacy is the search for truth.

I'm grateful to be one recipient of that legacy. Leonard encouraged me and my work, always offering positive comments. He skillfully mentored students and scholars, particularly Michael Quinn. In turn, Quinn has mentored others. Mike gave me invaluable guidance as I sat in archives and libraries over two decades, sifting documents, reading journals and hand-scrawled letters, notebooks, meeting minutes, tax assessments, land deeds, Polk directories, emigration records, descriptions of the pioneer trail, memoirs of pony express riders, details about buildings and women's private feelings.

In the process, I experienced something that Leonard and Michael both understood. Reading the words of the dead makes "dry bones live." Leonard loved those words from Ezekiel.

Leonard, like myself, came from southeastern Idaho, a place he dearly loved. When his two-volume history of Idaho came off the press in 1994, I hosted a book signing for him in Park City, where he entertained us by singing the Idaho state song. He would sometimes lead entire busloads of scholarly historians in singing.

Hinckley ended his eulogy, pronouncing God's blessings on Leonard. I'm glad Leonard is appreciated today, even though the church he loved couldn't match his generosity, or tolerate his vision of open inquiry.

Some people cling to history, while others dismiss anything prior to yesterday because "it's in the past." Yet the past creates the present—without it, we don't take responsibility for past actions, and fail to create a better future. Past, present, and future are inseparably linked, affecting each other. To deny one, favoring another, is to cripple our own progress.

As Mike and I drove home, he described the sadness of losing his mentor; coincidentally on the same day he submitted all his research files to Yale. Michael is leaving Utah behind; for him, Leonard's death marks the end of 37 years' work on Mormon history. Yet death can be a great motivator. When loved ones leave, their absence urges us on.

When one era ends, another begins. The father of scholarly Mormon history is gone. And a vital successor, Michael Quinn, is quitting. What does their absence bode for the future of Mormon history? Mike says it will continue moving forward, another Arrington will arise, though not another Camelot. I think Mormon history could use some new blood. In the meantime, Mike and I have learned something else that Leonard knew: those who publish honest history will pay a price for truth.

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