



Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism

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Focuses on the first twenty-five years of Smith's life, describes his visions, and recounts how he established the Church of the Latter-day Saints.

Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism Details


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Joseph D. Walch says

One of the more inclusive scholarly works exploring the place of Joseph Smith and the founding of the 'Mormon' religion. I am indebted to the author who shed light into such touchy subjects such as the accusation of treasure seeking and the interesting fact that clergy may have responded so negatively to the First Vision not from pure anti-Christian motive, but from the experience dealing with universal spiritualists who were making regular and wild claims of heavenly manifestations.

The subject matter deals with many of the common accusations levied against the modern Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints by its enemies such as the circumstances and details surrounding the translation of the Book of Mormon, First Vision, etc., and gives a fair hearing to these accusations sourced in such books as "Mormonism Unveiled", and "No Man Knows My History". It notes the primary importance of narrative in the foundation of the Church rather than on historical creeds--making the development of doctrine more fluid and adaptable at the same time as allowing the Church to avoid many of the Theophilosophical wars of the time (e.g., Calvinist salvation by grace vs. the Methodist salvation through faith and repentance). An interesting look into the life and times of upper-state New York and the spiritualist fervor of the time. This is an important book for anybody who wants to understand the foundation of one of the worlds most influential religious traditions.

Kevin Bradshaw says

It goes without saying that Bushman is an excellent historian whose expertise concerned the region and period from which the Mormon religion arose. That being said, this book doesn't always read well, even for a history book. More importantly, it is a work of apologetics- not in the pejorative sense, but in the scholarly sense. It often seeks to undermine, though not explicitly, much of the historical case put together by Fawn Broadie, whose No Man Knows My History has stood the test of time. For example, Bushman tries to shift some of the moral blame for Smith's divining activities- i.e. his treasure seeking for hire- to his father, and he seems too want to wish away the trial record concerning Smith's criminal trial. Worse still, Bushman assumes that the accounts provided by members of Smith's family are true. But must not their basic familiarity with those facts be first established? In other words, assuming that witnesses to miraculous events can be relied on to establish the veracity of miracle reports, shouldn't the witnesses' basic familiarity with the events be first established? Can Lucy Smith be a reliable witness to events she herself had no first hand knowledge of? Is this not just boot strapping Joseph Smith's own story?

For my own part, I have no interest in polemics that seek to attack or undermine faith in any particular religion, or religion in general. I think those who devote their lives to attacking the Mormon religion are in desperate need of a life, not to mention a sense of decency. However, I don't see the point of apologetic accounts either. One does not become faithful by way of historical research or archaeological exploration. You might even say, with some justification, I think, that one does not become unfaithful because of such research, unless one is first predisposed to lose the sense of that which allows one to believe- that ill-defined and more or less ineffable sense described by some philosophers and scholars as the experience of the numinous.

Janelle says

This is a well written historical take on early LDS church history. I really enjoyed reading it partly because of the good straight forward writing and partly because it presented more detail into a history I was already familiar with. Although Bushman is a Mormon, he presents a rounded view from both critics and believers. In the preface, he openly states his beliefs on the subject, but then proceeds with the approach of a historian. A great read for both members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints and those who are interested in religious history regardless of his/her faith.

Levi says

This was a great scholarly work about the early Mormon church. Bushman did a good job examining Joseph Smith from all angles. He was not afraid to explore the idiosyncrasies of Joseph Smith the man and showed how even as an imperfect man, he was a great prophet and he performed a great work. It helped strengthen my testimony of the prophet Joseph Smith.

Karla says

I bought this book several years ago and did not make it past the first two pages. However, when I opened it just recently I became riveted. I appreciated the inclusion of various perspectives and the depth that was provided to historical events. This book helped me to understand a bit more of the general history of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in light of its contemporary history. The author clearly holds one view, but is willing to share other views and provides ample references.

Rae says

Bushman does a fine job of tackling the early formation of the Church, including touchy things like multiple versions of the First Vision account, the trials for disorderly conduct, and the Smith family's penchant for magic and treasure-seeking. This is a well-rounded book which is largely favorable to the Church. I would recommend it to those already secure in their faith.

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Amy says

The first few chapters are painful...a lot of back history on the Smith and Mack families, but once into Joseph's family it is a great book. For one who often struggles with faith (me), this was a fantastic read. This story only goes through Joseph's early years and up to the start of the church, but I really liked all of the history, especially the "touchy" subjects including Joseph's much criticized "gold digging days". It made me realize that Joseph was a human, just like the rest of us--he was young and poor and hadn't quite comprehended the life God had chosen for him just yet, not that anything he did was too terrible--just blown out of proportion. Despite all of the threats, abuse and hard times, Joseph never once backed down from his story though he did not gain too many worldly glories during his day to make it worth it (from the world's view). It's just hard NOT to believe in him compared with the alternative. The Book of Mormon is just too complex and incredible of a story for him to have written. I would definitely recommend this book.

Cindy says

Started this one today and I'm not really enjoying it. The part about Joseph Smith's ancestors is interesting, but the overall tone of the book or something is too dry, and I'm not really that motivated to keep going. I will read a few more chapters and see if my opinion changes.

Robert says

This is the first of what I consider a series of books. Rough Stone Rolling. This book is fantastic, but ends rather abruptly during the Ohio years. I happened to bump into the author in Manhattan and over small talk (we were both ushers at the temple dedication) I queried as to why. Bushman's response was wait for the sequel. Fantastic historian and scholar.

Joel Stucki says

I fell in love with book before Rough Stone Rolling was published. This was the beginning of the research done for that book and much of it is recovered in that later book's early chapters. I was taken a bit by surprise with the way the book abruptly ends when many of us know the story was just getting started and it definitely leaves you feeling a want for the rest of the story which Bushman would deliver many years later after much more research. Still this remains a even more detailed look at these early years before the church was organized. Bushman writes in a very comfortable style that really draws you in. He is also great for placing into a sentence or two profound conclusions based on the evidence. This book thoroughly confronts Joseph's use of folk magic and his influences from his New England heritage in a way that is truthful, complete, scholarly, and deeply respectful. This is not an apologetic work or glossed history meant to teach specific lessons. It is rigorous and unflinching in its review of a religious leader that is sacred to so many and is recommended to anyone interested in the history of Mormonism. Yet there is something so satisfying about reading such an account and coming away with the feeling that you have now heard all the facts in context and you are still deeply impressed with the story. Joseph was an amazing man and too often his story is reduced to either a mocking caricature or a saintly fable. Here and in Bushman's later work Rough Stone Rolling that completes this story, you will find the real man Joseph, or at least as close as we can get to him

from across the span of years.

Elisabeth says

An interesting, fair and thought provoking look at Joseph Smith's life up until the Kirkland, Ohio era. Dr. Bushman does a thorough job of looking at Joseph Smith's maternal and patriarchal extended family legacy and does not shy away from the more gritty and sensational aspects of his life. Next up (also by Bushman) Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling. I have heard that the beginnings of that book is nearly identical to this one so perhaps I will be able to skip ahead.
