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REVIEW – JOSEPH SMITH, JR.: REAPPRAISALS AFTER TWO CENTURIES

Reviewed by Chrystal Vanel

Reid L. Neilson and Terryl L. Givens, eds., *Joseph Smith, Jr.: Reappraisals after Two Centuries*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. Paperback: \$24.95.

The year 2005 was the bicentennial of the birth of Mormonism's founder Joseph Smith Jr. (1805–1844), and this anniversary volume addresses Smith's legacy. This volume is a collection of 14 essays on the first Mormon, edited by Reid L. Neilson, an Assistant Professor of Church History and Doctrine at Brigham Young University and Terryl L. Givens, a Professor of Literature and Religion at the University of Richmond, Virginia, both of whom have published extensively on Mormonism. Neilson and Givens stated they decided to organize this collection of articles because "the day has come when the founder of Mormonism and his prominent role in American history and religious thought cannot be denied" (7).

Essays are divided into three sections: American Prophet, Sacred Encounters, and Prophetic Legacy. Articles come from a variety of authors, scholars in different fields, such as US history, sociology, philosophy, literature, and theology. It would be impossible to summarize all the articles in only one book review, as each article deserves a careful and critical reading, since they are all well constructed, sometimes very well documented, and almost all raise important questions. With this said, this review will present the overall assessment of each section and then present briefly on some specific articles that stood out to me.

The volume's first section, American Prophet, addresses and attempts to answer one core question: Are Mormonism and its founder products of their historical context? Richard H. Brodhead (Duke University) offers a very interesting study on "Prophets in America" around 1830, studying Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nat Turner and Joseph Smith. Brodhead examines Joseph Smith in the broader context of American prophets, studying the different texts of those prophets. In "Joseph

Smith vs. John C. Calhoun: The States Rights Dilemma and Early Mormon History,” James B. Allen (Brigham Young University) offers a very clear and well documented study of the “issue of [states’ rights] from the differing perspective of [politician] John C. Calhoun and Joseph Smith” (73).

The only article in this section that I found fault with is the one authored by Professor of English Richard Dilworth Rust (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill). The way Rust compares Joseph Smith with Herman Melville is surprising and perhaps goes a little too far in praise of the Book of Mormon, such as saying “these two contemporaries have given to the world enduring works in the Book of Mormon (1830) and *Moby-Dick*” (48). While it’s arguable that the Book of Mormon has impacted a few million people over the last one-hundred and forty years since its creation, its impact or recognition as a text, however, has not received the attention of the world like *Moby-Dick*. Universities around the world offers classes on American literature which generally include *Moby Dick* in the curriculum, but scholars of American literature rarely teach about the Book of Mormon. Another interesting point, Rust calls the Strangites—led by James J. Strang after Smith’s death—an “apostate colony” (50). However, Strangites would surely say that the “apostates” were actually the “Brighamites.” We then read about “the opening of the Book of Mormon, which Joseph Smith translated” (50). I side with serious scholarship which has shown that the Book of Mormon is a nineteenth century document, not an ancient one translated from ancient languages. Here again, it seems that Rust is expressing a scientifically truth as a religious dogma. In short, Rust’s hagiography of Joseph Smith may be used as a good illustration of what is apologetic LDS history.

In Section II the volume contains an essay entitled “Sacred Encounters” which “addresses more directly the religion-making imagination of Joseph Smith” (9). Renowned historian Richard Bushman in “Joseph Smith and Creation of the Sacred” asks “why, of all the visionaries and reformers in his generation, was [the Joseph Smith] movement the one to survive and flourish”? (93) His answer is that “Joseph Smith met a human need for the sacred” (94). Joseph Smith presented his contemporaries with concrete experiences with the divine and not mere wordy theology; a God one could meet through “Sacred Words” (95–102) and “Sacred Places” (102–106).

Terryl L. Givens’ essay “Joseph Smith: Prophecy, Process, and Plenitude” and Douglas J. Davies’ “Vision, Revelations and Courage in

Joseph Smith” are so deep in questioning and informing that each would need a entire book review. Terryl Givens effectively shows how Joseph Smith used the past in an innovative way. Smith viewed the past as a complete whole, which he had to completely restore. Smith also considered the process of religious formation more than the final product. Perhaps one could complete Givens’ observation by looking at Joseph Smith’s legacy today: whereas the LDS Church today seems to emphasize that the restoration of the primitive church is a final product through “the Prophet” Joseph Smith, the Community of Christ views itself as a prophetic community, always open to new revelations, having 163 sections in its *Doctrine & Covenants* (the last section dating from 2007) and having one of its theologian, C. Robert Mesle, as a leading Process Theologian.

In a complex study of the concept of Courage in Joseph Smith’s Mormonism, Douglas Davies (Durham University) makes an “LDS application” (120) of two books, one from theologian Paul Tillich (*Courage to Be*), the other from sociologist William Whyte (*The Organization Man*). Davies argues that Courage is an important part of Joseph Smith’s life, following the example of the “proactive Christ” (128) of Mormon theology who actively suffered in the Garden of Gethsemane. A theologian and an anthropologist, Davies is very good at interdisciplinary approaches and his work is as usual praiseworthy.

Section III, Prophetic Legacy, puts Joseph Smith in a more global context, and these contributions are very original and important for scholars of Smith. Richard J. Mouw’s essay “The Possibility of Joseph Smith: Some Evangelical Probings” is *prima facie* very intriguing since Mouw is an Evangelical theologian, and his background and findings provide an original view of the “reappraisal” of the Mormon prophet. As President and Professor of Christian Philosophy at Fuller Theological Seminary (Pasadena, California), Mouw intends to offer “several considerations that can serve to create for evangelicals some space between the liar-or-lunatic options. Such an exercise might allow us [evangelicals] to diminish ... our longstanding unqualified hostility toward Joseph Smith, without in any way sacrificing the strong theological convictions that have fed hostility in the past” (191). One example illustrating such an innovative approach occurs when Mouw argues that an aspect of Joseph Smith’s theology functioned to “reduce the distance between God and human beings.” Mouw asserts this action was a response to “the high Calvinism of New England Puritanism” which was, in the 1830s and 1840s, grappling to find a “legitimate *metaphysical* distance between God

and his human creatures ... [which had previously] fostered an unhealthy *spiritual* distance between the Calvinist Deity and his human subjects.” Mouw continues that “it should not surprise us that movements arose to shrink the spiritual distance” and today “It is not enough for traditional Christians to condemn those movements without also acknowledging the spiritual realities that the dissenting groups were addressing” (95). Overall, Mouw’s effort to place Mormon theology within the American religious landscape deserves praise.

Another must read essay is “Joseph Smith and Nineteenth-Century Mormon Mappings of Asian Religions,” authored by editor of this volume and Brigham Young University professor Reid L. Neilson. The author examines how Joseph Smith and his followers viewed Asiatic religions, in the context of their particular theologies and of other Christian theologies. Neilson’s article is my favorite as it breaks ground as a never previously studied topic, which yields new and important findings. Additionally, the article is very well constructed, methodologically sound (using primary sources, putting Joseph Smith’s religion in the broader religious context) and is very clear. Neilson also demonstrates that Mormonism didn’t stop at Joseph Smith’s death, but that his followers reinterpreted Joseph’s legacy because of new experiences (such as at the 1893 Parliament of Religions). The last, but not least in Section III is David J. Wittaker’s (Brigham Young University) contribution, “Studying Joseph Smith: A Guide to the Sources,” which is a very useful bibliography for those who study Mormonism. Wittaker’s bibliography is very complete, ranging from primary sources (such as journals and correspondences) to the most recent studies on the subject. As the book ended with this very well done bibliography, the reader may have wished that it began with a short chronological biography of the Mormon prophet.

Also in Section III is the essay “The Prophethood of Joseph Smith” authored by Professor Wayne Hudson (Griffith University, Australia), but I read this essay with some scrutiny and it left me unsatisfied. In the essay’s introduction, Hudson argues that a “comparative typology of prophethood needs to be developed” in order to understand “what kind of prophet Joseph was” (201). To accomplish this I expected a historical and sociological study of prophetic figures using authors such as Max Weber, but such is not the case. In this essay as Hudson simply and quickly mentions the German sociologist by saying that Joseph Smith “resists reduction to Max Weber’s famous account of prophecy” (204). But what exactly does Hudson mean by “Max Weber’s famous account

of prophecy”? This, and other statements in the essay, seem to skim the surface of complex topics deserving a deeper analysis. Since Hudson touches only slightly on lots of interesting points, I was left craving more detail. To demonstrate this again, at one point Hudson writes that if “we attend to esotericism as a worldwide phenomenon, however, as Antoine Faivre in France is attempting to do, then some features of Joseph’s prophethood may become more intelligible” (206). Even though I am very glad that the author mentions accomplished scholar Antoine Faivre, I wanted to know more about these “features of Joseph’s prophethood” and how they could “become more intelligible” by using Faivre’s work. But in the author’s defense, Hudson does give the disclaimer that “in this essay I have prepared the ground for another reading of the prophethood of Joseph Smith. Obviously this reading needs to be pursued elsewhere at greater length” (207).

All this said, *Joseph Smith, Jr.: Reappraisals after Two Centuries* is a book anyone studying Mormonism should read. The value of the book comes from its pluralism and richness, offering essays from various authors with diverse backgrounds studying Joseph Smith from various social sciences. Ironically however, to me as a scholar of movements that sprang from Smith, such as the Community of Christ and the Strangites, the book seemed to depart from part of its original assumption that “the day has come when the founder of Mormonism and his prominent role in American history and religious thought cannot be denied.” While I agree that Smith indeed played a prominent role in American history and religious thought, such a statement seems to overstep certain boundaries depending upon a person’s point of view. It is sometimes troubling to see scholars equating Smith and Mormonism, often at the expense of the latter. I of course realize that Smith is considered the founder of Mormonism by many, and that his work and influences are very much a part of the various Mormon communities in the world, but the various Mormon movements today are surely not wholly Smith’s. Mormonism is much more complex, pluralistic and dynamic than Smith alone, and studying only Smith and then, whether intentionally or unintentionally, equating his life to the totality of the various Mormonisms seems to misguide the roles of individuals like Sidney Rigdon, Brigham Young, Joseph Smith III, Orson Pratt, Emma Smith, Spencer W. Kimball and others. Even though the book is a “reappraisal of Joseph Smith” one might also wonder if Joseph Smith’s movement survived his death and even flourished because the “entrepreneur” LDS Church President Brigham Young or a “pragmatic prophet” such as RLDS Church Presi-

dent Joseph Smith III. Christian theologians have long debated the question of whether Christianity is the product of the Jesus or of Paul, Clement of Rome, Saint Augustine and others. But then again, this book is a product of its time, celebrating the bicentennial of Joseph Smith. And it's a good celebration.

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