

The Lost Piece of Silver

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Two months before Joseph and Hyrum were murdered, in Joseph Smith's final address to a general conference of his church, he said:

“You don't know me; you never knew my heart. No man knows my history. I cannot tell it: I shall never undertake it. I don't blame any one for not believing my history. If I had not experienced what I have, I would not have believed it myself. I never did harm any man since I was born in the world. My voice is always for peace.” (April 7, 1844)

Almost every history and biography of Joseph Smith has been written based on what those present that day have provided to us. We also rely on the same people for the transcripts of Joseph Smith's journals and talks.

Although Joseph Smith did draft a replacement history for the one John Whitmer took with him when he was excommunicated, Joseph's statement on April 7th included even that account. He said, “I shall never undertake” providing for us his life's story.

Some of you present today are descended from or related to Joseph Smith or his brother Hyrum. You may have family reasons for thinking you understand Joseph. I began a serious examination of Joseph Smith's life when 19 years old. If God called that man as a prophet to restore a lost religion, his life merits every effort to try to uncover his lost history.

Although Joseph told us we do not know him, we still need to know that man. Our effort should spare no limit in examining every history, biography, journal, diary and record involving him. In four-and-a-half decades I've been diligent in trying to know him, to know his heart.

Christ told a parable that included this:

“[W]hat woman having ten pieces of silver, if she lose one piece, does not light a candle, and sweep the house, and seek diligently until she find it?”

And when she has found it, she calls friends and neighbors together saying, Rejoice with me, for I have found the piece which I had lost.”¹

We have lost something more valuable than a silver coin. We need to search: A candle needs to be lit. The house needs to be swept. Diligent searching is needed. Joseph’s history is worth the effort required to attempt understanding.

The despicable adulterer, self-proclaimed liar and disgraced former Nauvoo City mayor, John C. Bennett, told this fabulous (and to me amusing) yarn about Joseph:

“Few can doubt the profanity of many of the citizens of Nauvoo, and the Prophet Joe, in particular. Mr. Benjamin Avise, of Carthage, said that the first time he ever saw Joe and heard him speak, *he swore an oath!* Joe is notoriously profane, but he says God will not notice him in cursing the Damned Gentiles!

“All who are acquainted with the Prophet know that he gets most gloriously drunk, occasionally; but he says he only does this to try the faith of the Saints, and show them that he is fallible, like other men.”²

I must confess, I read Bennett when I’m looking for a good laugh.

Contradicting Bennett was John D. Lee, the sacrificial man executed for the Mountain Meadows Massacre. Lee described Joseph Smith in these words:

“on the whole there was something in his manner and appearance that was bewitching and winning; his countenance was that of a plain, honest man, full of benevolence and philanthropy and void of deceit or hypocrisy. He was resolute and firm of purpose, strong as most men in physical power, and all who saw were forced to admire him, as he then looked and existed.”³

Fawn Brodie explained what she thought of him, writing:

“The source of [Joseph’s] power lay not in his doctrine but in his person, and the rare quality of his genius was not due to his reason but to his imagination. He was a mythmaker of prodigious talent. And after a hundred years the myths he created are still an energizing force in the lives of a million followers. The moving power of Mormonism was a fable – one that few

¹ NC Luke 9:12. In this paper I cite to the new scriptures, the Old Covenants (“OC”) containing the

² John C. Bennett, *The History of the Saints, or, An Expose’ of Joe Smith and Mormonism*, p.94.

³ John D. Lee, *Mormonism Unveiled, or, Life and Confessions of John D. Lee*, p. 81.

converts stopped to question, for its meaning seemed profound and its inspiration was contagious.”⁴

That cynical assessment does not set right with me. Millions of people are more likely moved by the content of doctrine than by a personality. I think Fawn Brodie is completely mistaken, and for me it IS his doctrine.

Yale professor of humanities, Harold Bloom, held a broader view of Joseph Smith. He wrote:

“The God of Joseph Smith is a daring revival of the God of some of the Kabbalists and Gnostics, prophetic sages who, like Smith himself, asserted that they had returned to the true religion. ...Mormonism is a purely American Gnosis, for which Joseph Smith was and is a far more crucial figure than Jesus could be. Smith is not just ‘a’ prophet, another prophet, but he is the essential prophet of these latter days, leading into the end time, whenever it comes.”⁵

This seems to me to strike much closer to the truth.

BH Roberts made this attempt to explain Joseph:

“But though a man of like passions with other men, yet to Joseph Smith was given access to the mind of Deity, through the revelations of God to him; and likewise to him was given a divine authority to declare that mind of God to the world. *Is that true?* And does what he announced, *ex cathedra*, as word of God, stand such tests of truth as men and time may apply to it? These are questions which most concern men in reference to this Prophet of our age; and that brings us to the consideration of this Prophet’s work. ...

“It is this work of Joseph Smith’s, this promulgation of a New Dispensation of the Christian religion; the development of a priesthood; the organization of the wonderful system of ecclesiastical government—the church he founded; the announcement of physical and metaphysical principles dealing with the profoundest subjects of intellectual investigation and thought; and which, when they are finally arranged in proper order, will constitute a system of philosophy worthy of the enlightened age in which it was brought forth—it is this work, and the whole volume of it, that constitutes Joseph Smith’s vindication before the world, and justifies his followers in believing that his life’s work was a superhuman achievement; and hence there was in him a divine inspiration that wrought the work of his

⁴ Fawn Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, p. ix

⁵ Harold Bloom, *The American Religion* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), pp. 99, 123.

great though brief career; *the inspiration of the Almighty gave him understanding—
He was a Prophet of God.*”⁶

Indiana University professor Jan Shipps, author of *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition*, and *Sojourner in the Promised Land: Forty Years Among the Mormons*, said of Joseph:

“This is the key to understanding Joseph Smith and to understanding Mormonism, I am convinced: It is the literalness, the experiencing the same things that are described in the scriptures. Mormonism takes the scriptures and brings them into life. Literally recapitulates the scriptures. Now, if you get that understanding of Joseph Smith’s understanding of what was going on, then you begin to see that this could not have been just somebody making it up as he went along.”

In concluding his biography of Joseph, Richard L. Bushman explained this of Joseph:

“Joseph’s work was not about democracy but about knowledge, power, visions, and blessings. ...Joseph Smith himself did not take credit for his achievements. All he could speak of were his ‘marvelous experiences.’ Perhaps his signal trait was trust in his own inspiration. He knew he was no more than a rough stone cut from a Vermont hillside. He told one audience, ‘he was but a man, ..a plain, untutored man; seeking what he should do to be saved.’ But his revelations enabled him, as one scholar has said of the prophet, ‘to do unaccustomed things.’ It was his calling, as Joseph himself put it, to ‘lay a foundation that will revolutionize the whole world.’”⁷

If you haven’t gathered already, I’ll make it plain. Biographies of Joseph Smith are a cacophony of discordant voices advocating one, then another, contradictory explanation for that man. Joseph was an enigma, mischaracterized by followers and opponents alike. Searching through biographies and journals has not permitted me, and will not permit you, to uncover or adequately explain Joseph. In the short biography I wrote of him, I used Joseph’s words alone to explain him. I believe that he alone provides the best explanation of what was in his heart. In that book I explained the events that led to him composing his *Lectures on Faith*, replacement History, and *Letter from Liberty Jail*. Then Joseph’s own voice

⁶ B. H. Roberts, in *A Comprehensive History of the Church*, 2:360-361; 411-412, emphasis in original.

⁷ Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, Alfred A. Knoff (New York; 2005), pp. 560-561.

was allowed to speak in those three documents. I chose those three documents because they are his longest personal compositions, other than the Book of Mormon.⁸ But I accept Joseph's explanation that the Book of Mormon was not his, but the composition of others he only translated.

As we approach two centuries separating us from his death on June 27, 1844, it seems less likely each passing year that biographers will be able to understand the authentic Joseph, because they are looking in the wrong place. Joseph's voice can tell us more than all the biographers' fanciful reconstructions. Biographies are almost always projections by the writer of themselves upon their subject.⁹

I suggest we back into knowing Joseph, by looking at what Joseph thought of YOU. Then you can decide for yourself what was in the heart of a man who thought of you in these terms:

What follows are excerpts from the King Follett Discourse, what can be regarded as Joseph's Valedictory Address, given two months prior to his murder:

First, God himself, who sits enthroned in yonder heaven, is a man like one of you. That is the great secret. If the veil were rent today and you were to see the great God who holds this world in its orbit and upholds all things by his power, you would see him in the image and very form of a man; for Adam was created in the very fashion and image of God.

⁸ In all three others contributed to the documents. However, Joseph supervised and controlled the content, and therefore are a reliable way to understand his mind.

⁹ *Mark Twain's Autobiography* correctly observes: "What a wee little part of a person's life are his acts and his words! His real life is led in his head and is known to none but himself. All day long, and every day, the mill of his brain is grinding, and his thoughts, not those other things, are his history. His acts and his words are merely the visible, thin crust of his world, with its scattered snow summits and its vacant wastes of water—and they are so trifling a part of his bulk! A mere skin enveloping it. The mass of him is hidden—it and its volcanic fires that toss and boil, and never rest, night nor day. These are his life, and they are not written, and cannot be written. Every day would make a whole book of eighty thousand words—three hundred and sixty-five books a year. Biographies are but the clothes and buttons of the man—the biography of the man himself cannot be written." (*Mark Twain's Autobiography*, with an introduction by Albert Bigelow Paine, 2 vols. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1924), 1:[xviii].)

This concept remains revolutionary still. Unlike the theologians and divines of other religions, Joseph made you God's literal child. This exalted view of you does nothing to lower God, as critics have complained. Joseph did nothing to demean the Almighty with this teaching. Instead he raised mankind to have exalted parentage. This was the real value of Joseph's teaching.

...Here, then, is eternal life--to know the only wise and true God. And you have got to learn how to be Gods yourselves--to be kings and priests to God, the same as all Gods have done--by going from a small degree to another, from grace to grace, from exaltation to exaltation, until you are able to sit in glory as do those who sit enthroned in everlasting power.

This mirrors the language of the May 6, 1833 revelation (D&C 93) describing Christ's ascent from grace to grace until He received the fullness.¹⁰ Joseph believed that you are not dissimilar from Christ, only presently behind Him in progression. But Joseph believed that you are destined to continue that progression and eventually arrive at that same Divine destiny.

Here, too, Joseph suggests there are multiple stages of "exaltation" and that we are required to progress from "exaltation to exaltation" until we, like the Father and Son, are able to sit in "everlasting power."

There is no mere "heaven" and "hell." There are stages of development. There is a pathway that grows from a small degree to something more. It is incremental and is how all the Gods have done.

¹⁰ T&C 93:3-4: "He was full of grace and truth, even the Spirit of Truth which came and dwelt in the flesh, and dwelt among us. And I, John, saw that he received not of the fullness at the first, but received grace for grace. And he received not of the fullness, at first, but continued from grace to grace, until he received a fullness. And thus he was called the Son of God, because he received not of the fullness at the first."

In this talk Joseph more fully explained theology of ascending up Jacob's Ladder to occupy the Throne of God.¹¹ Cycles of creation, probation, and development have been, are, and will be underway across the universe, worlds without end.¹²

This means there are indeed Gods many, and Lords many, as Paul wrote to the Corinthians.¹³ And that Christ will be a "King of kings" because of the possibility of others advancing to become kings also.¹⁴ Joseph saw the whole of humanity as part of a great family, the head of which was God the Father.

The greatness of the plan and the vastness of the eons involved were explained:

... When you climb a ladder, you must begin at the bottom and go on until you learn the last principle; it will be a great while before you have learned the last. It is not all to be comprehended in this world; it is a great thing to learn salvation beyond the grave.

This changes and enlarges our understanding of God's plan for us. Mortality is just one stop along a very long pathway. Eternity is right here and now, and death will not interrupt the process of developing God's children into something far greater than we now see. It is "a great thing to learn salvation beyond the grave." We will all go on to labor elsewhere. We do not retire when we lay down our mortal bodies. Worlds without end will be required to

¹¹ This theological teaching had been around since 1832: D&C 69:13: "They are they who are priests and kings, who, having received of his fullness and of his Glory, are priests of the Most High after the order of Melchizedek, which was after the order of Enoch, which was after the order of the Only Begotten Son. Wherefore, as it is written, they are Gods, even the sons of God. Wherefore, all things are theirs, whether life or death, or things present or things to come, all are theirs and they are Christ's, and Christ is God's. And they shall overcome all things. Wherefore, let no man glory in man, but rather let them glory in God who shall subdue all enemies under his feet."

¹² See, e.g., T&C 69:28: "...every man shall receive according to his own works and his own dominion, in the mansions which are prepared, and they shall be servants of the Most High, but where God and Christ dwell they cannot come, worlds without end."

¹³ NC 1 Cor. 1:32.

¹⁴ See, NC Rev. 6:12; 8:1.

develop us. We are not expected to, and cannot bridge the gulf between what we are at present and what Christ and the Father have attained, merely in this life.

But God's work and glory is to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man. Therefore as one earth passes away, another has been organized for man to occupy.¹⁵ This is God's work. This is our opportunity. We are somewhere on that Ladder, and each of us is being added upon by what we experience in our present lives.

Joseph's teaching puts eternity right here. We are in one of the Father's mansions. We have obtained what we experience here and now by the past heed and diligence we gave to the truth while in an earlier cycle of creation. We will move along into yet another estate inheriting what we obtain from the heed and diligence we give now. "Whatever principle of intelligence we attain unto in this life, it will rise with us in the resurrection. And if a person gains more knowledge and intelligence in this life through his diligence and obedience than another, he will have so much the advantage in the world to come. There is a law, irrevocably decreed in Heaven before the foundations of the world, upon which all blessings are predicated, and when we obtain any blessing from God, it is by obedience to that law upon which it is predicated."¹⁶

God has laid this opportunity before us. And all are invited to receive:

... When we know how to come to him, he begins to unfold the heavens to us and tell us all about it. When we are ready to come to him, he is ready to come to us.

This is Joseph's God: A being who is as eager to embrace us as we ought to be eager to embrace Him. He has been and is now ready. WE are the ones who hold Him at a distance.

¹⁵ OC Gen. 1:7: "And as one earth shall pass away and the heavens thereof, even so shall another come. And there is no end to my works, neither my words. For behold, this is my work and my glory: to bring to pass the immortality and Eternal life of man."

¹⁶ D&C 130:18-19.

The greatness of Joseph's perspective of God and the plan of salvation is hard to find words adequate to proclaim it in plain simplicity. It is glorious!

And again, Joseph declared:

... The mind of man is as immortal as God himself.

... Intelligence exists upon a self-existent principle; it is a spirit from age to age, and there is no creation about it. Moreover, all the spirits that God ever sent into the world are susceptible to enlargement. The first principles of man are self-existent with God. God found himself in the midst of spirits and glory, and because he was greater, he saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest could have the privilege of advancing like himself--that they might have one glory upon another and all the knowledge, power, and glory necessary to save the world of spirits.

You and I are indeed "gods-in-embryo" because that sentient part of us that learns, understands and develops is akin to God Himself. Physical impairment does not limit our minds. Every spirit is capable of growth and development. Even the weakest soul to live in this world can be and is "added upon" by the mortal experience here.¹⁷

Joseph echoed the words in the Book of Mormon about God's judgment. It turns out that God does not actually judge us, we judge ourselves. God only establishes the standard against which we measure ourselves:

... A man is his own tormenter and his own condemner. Hence the saying, "They shall go into the lake that burns with fire and brimstone." The torment of the mind of man is as exquisite as a lake burning with fire and brimstone. So is the torment of man.

This repeats the Book of Mormon's description of that judgment all of us will face when this cycle of experience concludes:

¹⁷ See T&C 149: Abr. 6:2: "We will go down for there is space there, and we will take of these materials and we will make an earth whereon these may dwell. And we will prove them herewith to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them. And they who keep their first estate shall be added upon[.]"

“Yea, in that great day when ye shall be brought to stand before the Lamb of God, then will ye say that there is no God? Then will ye longer deny the Christ, or can ye behold the Lamb of God? Do ye suppose that ye shall dwell with him under a consciousness of your guilt? Do ye suppose that ye could be happy to dwell with that holy being when your souls are racked with a consciousness of guilt that ye have ever abused his laws? Behold, I say unto you that ye would be more miserable to dwell with a holy and a just God under a consciousness of your filthiness before him than ye would to dwell with the damned souls in hell. For behold, when ye shall be brought to see your nakedness before God, and also the glory of God, and the holiness of Jesus Christ, it will kindle a flame of unquenchable fire upon you. O then ye unbelieving, turn ye unto the Lord.”¹⁸

In this description God is not judging man. Man is reacting to the presence of God. It is mankind’s own recognition of the standard of glory, holiness and purity embodied by Jesus Christ that causes our pain. We can, through the contrast, see clearly our own failure. We will be racked with guilt, not because God punishes us, but because we feel disappointment in what we failed to do. Think again about the opportunity you have in front of you. It is in your power to change all eternity: You can gain more knowledge and intelligence in this life through your diligence and obedience and in turn have so much the advantage in the world to come. That is up to you.

Joseph’s unwavering voice spoke with the certainty befitting a prophet of God. As Hugh Nibley explained: “whereas every other major religious founder went through a mandatory period of uncertainty and self-doubt, there is in Joseph Smith’s behavior never a moment of doubt or hesitation as to what is what.”¹⁹

¹⁸ NC Mormon 4:6.

¹⁹ Hugh Nibley, *Temple and Cosmos*, p. 422.

Joseph Smith was a great prophet, and a powerful teacher. We should not be distracted by all the rumors, innuendos and inconclusive speculation about him. Nor should we be discouraged by the contradictory accounts written of his life. He can be understood by studying the material that came from him. His teachings lead to happiness in this life and glory in the world to come. They will bring anyone who will consider them closer to God.

I declare these things in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.