

THOUGHTS FROM READING

An Insider's View of Mormon Origins

Grant H. Palmer, (Signature Books, Salt Lake City, Utah, 2002)

Just finished *An Insider's View of Mormon Origins*, by Grant Palmer, and found it quite devastating. I have read other exposes of Mormon origin stories, but never one by an insider: a career Church Education System employee. It is hardhitting, no-nonsense, and quite merciless. But its content is not refutable, he deals honestly with his sources. In a nutshell, Palmer suggests that virtually all the foundational claims of the church are lacking veracity in the way they are currently taught and portrayed.

Allow me to have Palmer make these types of statements himself:

On pages 260 and 261 palmer decimates the traditional foundational stories of Mormonism as being largely fictional:

The . . . foundational experiences are the first vision, the angel Moroni, and priesthood restoration. These appear to have developed from relatively simple

experiences into more impressive spiritual manifestations, from metaphysical to physical events. Joseph added new elements to his later narratives that are not hinted at in his earlier ones. His first vision evolved from a forgiveness epiphany to a call from God the Father and Jesus Christ to restore the true order of things. His original golden plates story was largely borrowed from his environment and then altered, becoming more religious and Christianized. His form-changing archivist became a resurrected angel named Moroni who dispensed heavenly wisdom and quoted liberally from the Bible. Likewise, Joseph's accounts of priesthood restoration developed from spiritual promptings into multiple, physical ordinations by resurrected angels. The witnesses to the Book of Mormon reportedly saw both secular and spiritual treasure guardians by "second sight" or through "the eyes of our understanding." Their testimony of the Book of Mormon was not of a secular event. Their emphasis was on seeing an angel and handling plates of gold, which was impressive for its metaphysical aspects. Today we see the witnesses as empirical, rational, twenty-first-century men instead of the nineteenth-century men they were. We have ignored the peculiarities of their world view, and by so doing, we misunderstand their experiences. Over time, we have reinterpreted their testimony so that, like with the other foundation stones, it appears to be a rational, impressive, and unique story in the history of religion.

The foundation events were rewritten by Joseph and Oliver and other early church officials so the church could survive and grow. This reworking made the stories

more useful for missionary work and for fellowshiping purposes. But is this acceptable? Should we continue to tell these historically inaccurate versions today? It seems that, among the many implications that could be considered, we should ask ourselves what results have accrued from teaching an unequivocal, materialistic, and idealized narrative of our church's founding. The first question would be whether it has brought us closer to Christ. Has it made us more humble and teachable or more secure in our exclusivity and condescending toward others? Has it made us reliant on the expectation of infallible guidance and therefore, to a degree, gullible? It is appropriate to tell simplified, faith-inspiring stories to children, but is it right to tell religious allegories to adults as if they were literal history?

Palmer discussed the magnification of the simple into the complex several times. It is the heart of his book. On page 254 he reiterates that:

It seems clear that the first vision narratives between 1832 and 1838 were expanded and became more miraculous, thus following the pattern discussed in the previous chapter with regard to priesthood restoration. Over time, spiritual events were retold in a way that was more literal, more physical, as if they occurred in the material rather than in a metaphysical realm. This may have been a function of selective memory on the one hand and, more particularly in Joseph Smith's case, a life lived as much in the invisible as in the temporal world. Like the priesthood restoration, Joseph's 1838 first vision account served an immediate, institutional purpose in

consolidating his authority and quashing dissent. It happened during another time of crisis in the church. A controversy sometimes arises among church historians about whether an early or later account is the most reliable and valuable. Is it conceivably most accurate and perceptive if told immediately after an event or after a participant has had time to process what he or she experienced? In this case, where there are three evolving versions of the first vision, the earliest is the most accurate whether or not it is the most valuable.

He had already hinted at these statements earlier, like on page 36 where he discards the claim that Joseph Smith "translated" ancient documents:

My conclusion is that a large body of evidence demonstrates that Joseph mistranslated a number of documents. I know of no substantial evidence to support his claim to have ever literally translated any document, leaving me to appreciate his writings at face value rather than because of their antiquity. With this perspective, when I read the Book of Mormon or Pearl of Great Price, I harbor the suspicion that they represent a nineteenth-century encounter with God rather than an ancient epic. This is enlightening on a spiritual level but of no value in trying to learn more about ancient America or the Middle East. In the subsequent three chapters, I will explore what influences may have been at work as Joseph dictated the Book of Mormon.

In a more personal statement Palmer says on his pages 262 to 263 that the church should become more Christ-centered, and

that book like his have the power to change faiths:

As a fourth-generation Latter-day Saint, with children and grandchildren in the fifth and sixth generations, I am proud of my heritage and have a mixture of confidence in, and anxiety for, the future. Recently the church has reemphasized the importance of centering our worship in Christ. This is apparent at the upper levels of the church, but little has yet changed at the local level. In many sacrament meetings, the tendency remains to simply mention Jesus' name and then talk about other matters rather than to discuss him and his ministry. In our Sunday classes, the Gospels are taught for several months once every four years; the lives and teachings of modern prophets are studied each year. As the apostle Paul, who was capable of speaking on a variety of religious subjects, said of the early church: "I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (I Cor. 2:2). I would hope for a greater focus on Jesus Christ in our Sunday meetings.

There are many people, both in our church and in other traditions, who write and comment about religion in ways that differ from the official canon. These people can and do persuade belief. In the early 1980s, Seventh-day Adventist scholars discovered that over 80 percent of church founder Ellen U. White's revelations in her "keystone" book, *The Great Controversy*, came directly from existing nineteenth-century sources. Other revelatory writings and teachings, including some of her visions, also show unacknowledged literary borrowings. The Adventist leadership has responded by making the church more Christ centered. More recently, the

Community of Christ (RLDS) went through a similar process. Today, anyone willing to covenant with Christ is invited to join either church and partake of the sacrament with them, regardless of their belief in the claims of their founding prophet.

As Latter-day Saints, our religious faith should be based and evaluated by how our spiritual and moral lives are centered in Jesus Christ, rather than in Joseph Smith's largely rewritten, materialistic, idealized, and controversial accounts of the church's founding. I hope that this study contributes in some way toward that end.

But there is inspiration, he says. I believe that too: it flows through the membership of the church just as it flows through anyone that seeks it. That inspiration is not of the variety described in the Book of Mormon, however. According to Palmer's pages 132 and 133:

American psychologist William James in his classic work, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, studied hundreds of people, including religious founders, who claimed to receive inspiration from the Spirit, from revelation, visions of angels, and from face-to-face appearances of God. He included Joseph Smith with Augustine, Bernard de Clairvaux, the Buddha, Fox, Huss, Loyola, Luther, Mohammed, and Wesley. He concluded that while their experiences and feelings were real to them, they could not be a valid source for determining truth because their claims were doctrinally incompatible. The many Christian denominations that claim God's spirit have not succeeded in winning universal consent for even one theological insight about

God beyond his existence and his love for humanity. Doctrinal contradictions appear not only between and within Christian denominations but also within the LDS church itself. Despite the church's claim to exclusive receipt of the Holy Ghost as a gift, a 1985 Gallop Poll reveals that over 40 percent of adults in America claim the same variety of spiritual feelings and experiences enjoyed by Latter-day Saints. Their most common denominator is not religious affiliation but the conviction that "religion is very important in their lives."

The evangelical position of identifying and verifying truth by emotional feelings, which the Book of Mormon advocates, is therefore not always dependable. Such a conclusion may lead some people to believe that these feelings are self-manufactured and that there is no objective existence of something called the Holy Ghost. I assert that the Holy Ghost does exist, that it does speak to human beings. This Spirit of love gives peace, comfort, prompts, and enhances belief in God, but abundant evidence also demonstrates that it is an unreliable means of proving truth. Those who advocate the witness of the Holy Spirit as the foundation for determining the truthfulness of a given religious text need to honestly deal with these epistemological contradictions.

A possible solution may be found in Moroni 7:13: "Wherefore, every thing which inviteth and enticeth to do good, and to love God, and to serve him, is inspired of God," To me, this suggests that the Holy Spirit will witness to that which brings a person to Christ (John 14:6). This does not presume that these promptings will

describe objective reality. When a person experiences the Spirit at a Protestant revival meeting or when reading the Book of Mormon, it is not my belief that this feeling proves the truthfulness of the doctrines heard, taught, or read. Nor does the Spirit, which testifies of the Book of Mormon, confirm the historical reality of the book. This sustaining and uplifting religious feeling, in my view, is a God-felt urging to repent and come unto Christ. It does not prove the truthfulness of a doctrine, book, or belief, nor does it need to, to be a valid religious experience to any person.

I find his basic call to leave the historical controversies behind and move into the Christian mainstream discomfiting to say the least. It is like declaring the entire 200-plus year Mormon experiment a failure. Though it failed spectacularly in some aspects, overall there is something unique about the culture that has been created through belief in this set of founders and their messages.

The fact that the founders' messages have been spun a certain way to create the modern church is a historical matter, not a faith matter. Is it historically dishonest? Sure. But is it any different from the mythmaking that supports other religious traditions? Not really.

The founder isn't as important to the current success of the organization as is the spiritual empowerment it offers. That empowerment is especially effective where men are concerned, since believing you have priesthood and are entitled to inspiration opens the gates of inspiration. In present society, where anything spiritual is suspect and frowned at, a great

natural hunger has been created just as in Joseph Smith's place and time. (Palmer hints at this for Joseph Smith's time, showing the remarkable increase in church affiliations following camp revivals). Palmer's call to turn the organizational back on the type of inspiration that has guided and created Mormonism's cohesive society bothers me.

Palmer suggests that because contradictions come through this type of inspiration, it is not a trustworthy source. In my view Palmer is missing an important point here in making this argument, however. He is focusing on the "facts" obtained through this type of inspiration, which are unique to each person and contradictory between persons, with the spiritual empowerment it brings. It is that spiritual empowerment that glues together Mormon society.

Perhaps this Mormon cultural uniqueness is a gift the world needs now. It was made possible by, 200 years ago, having a person of unquestioned gifts and understanding grow up in a part of the land that sought religious revival with all its passion but couldn't come to agreement. This young man created an answer from within himself with some of the same inspiration we all (can) have. The result steams forward like a large ship, even now, taking on passengers floating without compass or rudder or sail, spiritually speaking.

Of course Joseph threw in some stuff we would all have been better off without, but hey, even Joan of Arc had committed grievous errors.

Palmer's point is very good when he says that inspiration that comes through a book or sermon or place or event does not

necessarily need to be tied to those triggering locales or events. I like that. It explains how I can feel that Joan of Arc was inspired, in answer to a cry from the collective unconscious of her people, just as Joseph Smith was. Both took actions that divided the world against them and in the end killed them. Both inspired numerous followers to see them as saintly persons, persons of unique holiness, even during their own lifetimes.

So, here we are. We have the ability to see all who are inspired founders of religions as examples of the reality of the nearness of God, the God within. But does that make them infallible? Does that make all their claims true? No! Just as when we have had our moments of inspiration, and we all have, we didn't of a sudden become omniscient.

I think Palmer is right. Smith did have a metaphysical encounter with God and felt moved upon in mysterious ways to do some or much of what he did. But he was not above embellishing these spiritual realities into imagined physical realities and happenings. And he was way too literal in his Bible readings, hence the travesty of the restoration of the polygynous society of Abraham in 1830s America just as among the Muensterite Anabaptists in the 1530s.

I have suspected for some time that the LDS leadership was as aware of these historical things just as Palmer was, and were steering the ship gently into the Christian mainstream so the members would have a soft landing, spiritually speaking, when the ship finally ran aground in terms of certain specific aspects of belief.

I have also always suspected that the call from a prophet (Harold B. Lee) during a conference a few decades ago, when the Office of the Church-Historian's Camelot was put in place, was a preview to this day. He said we needed to be honest about our historical past and realize that it is today's church to which converts flock, not yesterday's. It is today's church that brings us to Christ, not the church of the past. I found that very disturbing at the time, apparently so did the regime that took over after H.B. Lee. He died soon after putting in place what is now reaching fruition, historically speaking.

A most interesting book, Palmer's, but it errs in its recommendation to re-join Christianity. The very same criticisms of exaggerated miraculous stories and claims of supernatural events and interventions are found in the tales of its founders. In fact Palmer shows that Smith borrowed and embellished on these Bible stories over and over again in telling his own pseudepigraphical tales.

Maybe the thing to do is what is hinted at but never fully stated by Palmer: recognize there is a spiritual reality and dimension to human life, and that it is not picky about whom it favors with inspiration and wisdom. In other words: It is true that there is religion; but there is no true religion.

Anyone can make up a new religion. Let me try: My favorite Christian sect would be a selected mix of the doctrines of some of the Jewish Christians and of the Gnostic Christians. This would mean there would be a belief in and action taken with respect to salvation for dead, and there would be a ceremony symbolizing the personal encounter with and experience of God. That symbolic ceremony would be of a mystical nature

involving a recapitulation of what a human being potentially is, compared to what he or she tends to be. The symbolism of the changes that can be made involve some symbolic acts such as anointings, re-clothings, and a mirrored bridal chamber, just as in the ancient Gnostic belief systems.

From this ritualized mystery play we would remind ourselves of, and thus reinforce, the basic truth that we are from God, going to God, are God already in our very essence, and ought to live in general accord with that realization.

The idea of salvation, coming into the Kingdom of God, is a spiritual one, not a physical one, and the words of Christ about a new world and kingdom already being here need to be taken seriously. Those words describe what this world is like to a person having undergone the inner awakening that is the introduction to ones' own God nature.

That church or religion I would favor is a restoration of things extant in Christianity before Paul's crew took over the whole ball of wax and created it in a new image that became very literal and later even materialistic. Now I sound just like Grant Palmer talking about the present state of Mormonism! But Palmer's idea that we jump from what has become a much too materialistic religion into the equally materialistic Pauline version of Christianity dismays me.

Scrub away a lot of stuff from the claims made for and by Joseph Smith, especially scrub hard to wipe out that polygamy stain, and you still have a remarkable re-creation of what were some of the key beliefs in the first century of the post-Jesus movements that were to become consolidated, aided by a war,

into the Christianity we seem to now want to be part of too. A Christianity that would be, I bet, a total surprise to Christ.

Palmer says that we can revere the prophet Joseph and cherish him for the insights he added to the normative Christianity of his day, things like eternal marriage and family etc. Maybe so, but my view of what makes the saints a cohesive force, a force that grows out of itself a dynamic and very good society, is (1) the pluralism of the larger society which controls excesses, (2) the temple and its rituals, and (3) the encouragement, even expectation, of personal revelation. It is the last two that make for a cohesive brother- and sisterhood between the believers. It is the first one that keeps it all together, not just because potential excesses are in check, but also because a pluralistic society will have within it the confusion and uncertainty that makes a for a good contrast with a more focused, more certain faith.

The unification aspect of Mormon culture should be maintained. Without that aspect what would become lost is the ability for the religion to bind its people to it, and to each other. But it can be maintained with a more open, loving, and less quantitative (materialistic) approach ("doing an endowment to meet a ward goal"). The motivation should instead be based on refreshing the participant's state of spiritual awareness.

But the exclusiveness of the Mormon faith, as Palmer notes, is unwarranted. It can be both unique and inclusive, I believe. Having some sacraments open and some closed -- meaning open only to members of a certain level of development. That is OK.

So in my opinion (and apparently Palmer's too), Mormonism doesn't need to die. Palmer would have it crawl toward a more normative Christian mode of being. I disagree. I think it needs to be loosed from its Bible-soaked, Victorian-stamped moorings and should be allowed to flow to where the Spirit wills it to flow. To survive, it should empower all its members by inverting the hierarchical pyramid of spiritual insight and revelation. The body of believers should be seen as the antenna dish, with the leaders focusing what seems to be communicated through the collective consciousness of all members. The leader should be the servant of all. What a concept!