

Impressions from Reading:

***One Nation Under Gods:
A History of the Mormon Church***

by Richard Abanes

(Four Walls Eight Windows, New York, 2002)

**with reference to some insights from Quinn, D. Michael,
Early Mormonism and the Magic World View, (Signature
Books, Salt lake City, 1987)**

**and some insights from Jan Shipps' *Sojourner in the
Promised Land: Forty Years Among the Mormons*,
(University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 2000)**

**This was the third "new" book I became aware of last summer.
Like the *Behind the mask of Mormonism Book*, it is an expose,
Like the *An Insider's View of Mormon Origins* book, this one
was very detailed and focused in its historical treatment of
early Mormonism.**

**I read substantial portions of it and then got tired of it. One
part I thought about long and hard was a subpart of the
attempt by Abanes to show that Joseph Smith and his cohorts
were "Vagabond Visionaries." He did that, and like Grant
Palmer he shows that whatever the First Vision (the alleged
appearance of God the Father, and the Son as a separate
entity) was not how, what or when it is described in the official
canonized version.**

But there was one thing that began to occur to me when I was reading: is Abanes not taking these men (and women) out of a context in which they were sincere even if deluded? Abanaes goes to some lengths (pages 12 through 22 essentially) to do what fawn Brodie has done before him (as he acknowledges) to establish the fraud perpetrated by Smith in putting together his First Vision by basically stitching together pieces of theophany accounts current in his time and place (page 20). On pages 19 through 21 Abanes tells the story of "Curious Coincidences", chief of which is the story of Solomon Chamberlain.

Chamberlain was a disaffected Methodist who lived a few tens of miles from the Smiths and who had a vision from God in 1816 in which he was told there was no true church on earth, but it would be restored during his lifetime. A sign would be a book like the Bible. He wrote a tract with the content of his vision, and thirteen years later visited the Smiths when he heard of a Godlen Bible being produced. He was electrified by the news of a restoration of true Christianity being in progress as foretold in his vision, and the Smiths were as impressed with his message as he was with theirs. Three years later Joseph Smith writes his first version of his First Vision and it contains a lot of what Chamberlain's vision contained.

Abanaes goes into similar dis-illusioning accounts of Smith's occult connections, and I can't fault the book in terms of historical material, but I do find it completely lacking in compassion for his subjects.

So, what was it that began to occur to me when I was reading, especially the Chamberlain account? That the reactions described for both Chamberlain and Hyrum Smith, Joseph's

brother, were probably very genuine. As Abanaes put it on page 20, speaking of Chamberlain's carrying out his quest:

Chamberlain, who lived only twenty miles from Palmyra-Manchester, actually tracked Smith down after hearing rumors in 1829 about Joseph finding a Golden Bible (later to become the *Book of Mormon*). According to Chamberlain's autobiography, he felt as if "the time was drawing near," and that God would in some way "bring forth his Church." So he started making inquiries to see if anyone had heard of "any starng work of God, such as had not been on the earth since the days of Christ."

He finally learned of Joseph's book after arriving in Palmyra and feeling "as if some genii or good Spirit" told him to search the town. Chamberlain's "genii" subsequently guided him to a small farmhouse, where he spent the night. In the morning his hosts asked him if he had heard of the Golden Bible. Chamberlain later recalled: "[W]hen they said Gold Bible there was a power like electricity went from the top of my head to the end of my toes, (this was the first time I ever heard of the gold Bible." He immediately set out for the Smith farm in hopes of finding some evidence that God had started . . . his restoration of divine truth in the world.

When Chamberlain finally reached his destination, he found Joseph's brother, Hyrum. He told Hyrum he was a visionary man, and brought out one of his pamphlets. Hyrum was so impressed that he called Joseph, Sr. and several others who happened to be on the property. They all sat down and read through the interesting booklet. Hyrum was so affected he could not even continue

reading. The others were equally impressed. Chamberlain then stood and announced what would eventually become part of Joseph's vision:

Abanes cites these words he had heard from an angel, which are very similar to what Joseph Smith would later claim to have been revealed to him by an angel. Abanes makes the point that when, in turn, he was told about the book that had been found and was being translated, "he was converted on the spot."

Abanes makes this tale seem as if it were entirely concocted, by whom to impress whom he does not say. Various scenarios are possible. Did Joseph hire the man to impress his friends and relatives with the legitimacy of his claims? Did Chamberlain have his vision and then meet the Smiths as told, with Joseph then stealing and using his vision as his own? Or did the common influences causing the religious conditions and expectations of the place and time lead several to have the same desire, which turned into the same vision when a vision became expected?

I vote for the latter. Was there fraud (fiction packaged as fact) in early Mormonism? Sure. But I am coming into the opinion that the expectations and desires of a people believing in visions leads to visions that reflect those expectations and desires. The psychic (fraud in the eyes of most) Madame Blavatsky, in her opus *Isis Unveiled* said as much when she observed that since in the Russia of her time religiously based miracles were forbidden, they did not occur. You have to believe in miracles, such as visions and lost books coming forth, for them to occur.

Abanes suggests the parallels in the Chamberlain and Smith visions were not parallels at all, they were sequential and one

was stolen and amplified into the other. This reminds me of a discussion of parallels in Quinn's book *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*. Quinn suggests there may be instances where parallels should be used as evidence even though there is no evidence for causality (page xvii). He cites Carl Jung's idea of a collective unconscious as being at least a plausible explanation (page xviii-xix):

Psychologist C. G. Jung proposed one means to interpret parallels that lack causative links. He wrote that "the connection of events may in certain circumstances be other than causal, and requires another principle of explanation," which he defined as the "archetype," a pattern of thought (and its resulting act) within the "collective unconscious." *Archetypal parallels* do not require environmental, literary, historical, or causal connection. Rather, seemingly unconnected developments of thought and action may appear strikingly similar, leading to the almost metaphysical conclusion that they are replicating patterns or archetypes. . . . Intriguing and possibly significant in themselves, such parallels do not necessarily represent a natural dependence between events or conscious borrowings of thought.

In his Introduction, Quinn lets the reader know he is a Mormon believer and that this has not changed even though he now knows (as Grant Palmer knows) that Joseph Smith pursued magic and was steeped in a magical world view he felt to be compatible with being Christian. Modern sensibilities militate against this. Many of Smith's own time were offended by the very idea that magic and true religion mixed. But anyone reading the Bible knows its background is that of a magical world view, in my opinion. Hence my reluctance to see

much merit in books that expose that world view in Mormonism without also exposing it in the very marrow of the Biblical bones of Christianity at large. Quinn does some of this when he analyzes parallels between the Bible's and early Mormonism's evidences for magical beliefs and practices. A lot of the body of his book is devoted to this topic.

Quinn ends his book with an "After Word" (starting on page 225) I was tempted to cite at length. Suffice it to say that he establishes from what went before that there were two camps in Joseph Smith's time concerning the nature of magic and its practices. One camp felt they were "irrational and anti-religious," the other that they were "both rational and religious." Joseph Smith and the bulk of early Mormons were in the latter camp. That the modern church based on Joseph Smith's work does not share much of Smith's view of the magical world should not call either its, or Joseph Smith's, genuineness into question, is in essence what Quinn says a few pages later. But there is the nagging question he asks on page 227:

One question, however, seems necessary to discuss at this time. While I have tried to sympathetically present the issue of magic from the perspective of those who believe in it, the thorny question arises as to the objective reality of magic itself, and whether it does (or should) have present application to twentieth-century religious practice.

How does Quinn answer this question? Read his book, but just for now let me cite his, correct in my view, amalgamation of this question to give an answer that addresses not just Mormon magic, but also Hebrew- and Christian-Bible magic (pages 227-228):

In other words, should modern believers try to duplicate the use of Aaron's rod, Joseph of Egypt's silver cup of divination, Christ's use of spittle for healings, apostolic divination through the casting of lots, Oliver Cowdery's and Heber C. Kimball's revelatory "rod of nature," Joseph Smith's seer stones and Jupiter talisman, the Smith family's magic parchments for communicating with divine messengers, Brigham Young's amulet, Wilford Woodruff's healing handkerchiefs, or give the kind of attention to astrology once endorsed in Jewish synagogues, in Catholic prayer books, and in Protestant and Mormon almanacs?

For me, sympathetic and empathetic analysis of the past does not require endorsement and certainly not emulation of such practices. These and other magic techniques facilitated the religious quest of persons who *already* perceived reality from the magic world view, at the same time that other church leaders and believers without that view or those techniques enjoyed an equally rich experience of divine communication, charismatic gifts, and personal spirituality without using folk magic. The record of the past indicates that culture and personal perspectives help to shape the expression of the interactions between the individual and God. What was natural, good, and effective for some individuals' religious quest in the 1820s and 1830s would be artificial and undoubtedly ineffective for equally ardent believers today who have a different perspective of reality.

My intent has simply been to sketch in broad strokes the outline of a topic that I believe merits the careful, cautious scrutiny of Mormons and non-Mormons alike. For if we hope to begin to understand fully the origins of

Mormonism, we cannot ignore the environment and world view of its first adherents or of the place and meaning of magic as one of the components of a complex mix that also included the common American's emphasis on pragmatism and common sense, together with devotion to the Bible, an intensely personal relationship with God, the belief in the reality of divine and diabolic intervention in daily life, expectations that God's true church should be like apostolic Christianity, and a conviction that the glorious return of Christ to the earth was imminent.

To me what this means is that the magic world view is alive and well in Christianity. It is my considered, yet perverse, opinion that modern criticism of Mormonism as found in some of the books reviewed here is made possible by the relatively modern development that Mormonism actually is. If somehow the modern version of Mormon history had been around for 2,000 years, it would not be brought into question as successfully as it is now. Am I suggesting the official version of Mormon history ought to be let alone for a few millennia? Not at all. I am suggesting that a century and a half after the death of Paul there was likely as much fodder for the cannons of critical scholarship as there is now in the case of Mormonism..

Am I like Quinn, a believer (even though he has been excommunicated)? No. But I am beginning to respect the religion as a force for good (generally speaking) that enables, enriches, and encourages the living of productive lives.

Is my view thus wholly secular? Do I see it as just another social club with benefits for members? My view is a bit more complex than that, and ever changing. Over the years I went from strong belief in Joseph Smith's divine calling and mission

into a reactionary, angry rejection of the man and his message. Then I came around some, and see, as Grant Palmer does, that he has made serious and useful additions to the religious sensibilities of his followers even though he was full of himself at times and erred at times.

But just as I turn around and come to see Joseph Smith as pious-story-teller and as a genuine mystic, even though I reject the literiness of his claim to be a prophet, I find that the historian Jan Shippo has come to the opposite conclusion. Since she is not a Mormon, I am intrigued with her now seeing him as a prophet.

Shippo started out thinking of Joseph Smith as a mystic but then deleted that thought and re-cast him as a classic prophet, meaning one who speaks for God. This is discussed in her latest book *Sojourner in the Promised Land: Forty Years Among the Mormons*.

On her pages 330 and 331 she explains:

As I said in my dissertation, any effort to explain the Mormon prophet as a conjurer of tall tales and Mormonsim in terms of a "gigantic hoax" is bound to result in distortion:

Official church literature proclaims Joseph Smith as translator, prophet, and martyr, and is forced thereupon into an endless justification of the many events in his life which fail to fit that pattern. Even so, the religious movement he started is probably more understandable in these terms than it will ever be in terms of unmitigated villainy or mental derangement.

Fopr if Joseph Smith were a knave, then those who joined him were dupes; if he were a madman, those who joined him were fools. In either case all subsequent Mormon history must be explained with reference to Smith's personal magnetism, the exploitation of his martyr-like death, and the use of the various psychological devices which are associated with persecution and peculiarity.

Consequently, in spite of my lack of training in and adequate knowledge of the phenomenology of religious experience, I embarked on a two-pronged reading project, with one prong focused on Joseph Smith and the other on religious experience. Since my mentor in the University of Colorado history department at that point was Hal Bridges, a profesor preparing a book about Americam mysticism, it is not surprising that I read a great deal about mysticism. Nor should it be surprising, I suppose, that when I wrote the first chapter of my dissertation in 1964, I would describe the Mormon prophet as a mystic.

A decade later, when I revised that chapter, making numerous additions and deletions to turn it into: "The Prophet Puzzle: Suggestions leading toward a More Comprehensive Interpretation of Joseph Smith," my description of Joseph Smith as a mystic was a part of the material that I deleted. I had changed my mind or, more accurately, I had gained enough additional knowledge to recognize the distinction between a mystic, whose encounter with the divine can be comunicated only indirectly and metaphorically, and a prophet, whose encounter with the divine is communicated directly and

forcefully. Those who heard Joseph Smith's utterances were convinced that God spoke *through* him. He therefore fits precisely the classic definition of a prophet as "one who speaks for God." His authority was not the amorphous charismatic aura that is so often said to surround mystics. The prophet's charisma was more compelling because it was more focused. Each time he made a "thus saith the Lord" statement that his followers accepted as having come from God, Smith's authority was enhanced. So augmented, his authority led from peak to peak, leading his followers ever further away from the evangelical ground on which their fellow Americans stood.

This deepened appreciation of Joseph Smith's role as prophet was crucial to my realization that Mormonism, instead of fitting into one of the standard sociological categories, is a religious tradition; it departed from existing Christian tradition as Christianity departed from Judaism. A key deviation from what existed in 1830 was this new movement's prophetic leadership and the principle of continuing revelation that accompanies prophetic leadership. In clarifying this different approach to defining Mormonism, I developed many parallels between Mormonism and other new traditions, especially early Christianity. . . .

I fully agree with the parallel being drawn by Shipps between Mormonism's birth out of Christianity and Christianity's birth out of Judaism. And reviewing literature about early Christianity a year ago reinforces that parallel for me now. In both cases there were claims to revelation as the foundation for the new religion. In both cases those claims are questionable at best.

But I disagree with her throwing the mystic baby out of the bath to put in the prophet baby. I believe that Joseph Smith was a mystic, and received soem remarkable insights from his intuitive-revelation side. Yet he chose to cast his insights, and much more than that, into the language and mode expected by students of the Bible's prophets and their messages and modes of operation. It was a choice wherewith he met the expectations of others. It was a role he grew into over time and played expertly. But that doesn't mean that at his core he was not a mystic with genuine insights into the other dimensions of being.

I bring in these ideas from Quinn and from Shipps to show what a difference attitude makes. A respectful scholar with a willingness to give his or her subject many benefits of many doubts paints a very different picture than one who seems to be conducting a trial of personality.