

# THE JOSEPH SMITH LECTURE SERIES

## *Lecture 2: Joseph's Personality and Character*

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Let us now do a close-up of the personality and character of the Prophet Joseph Smith.

May I begin with the comment of the late Sidney B. Sperry, who was perhaps the Church's most knowledgeable Hebraist. He studied years ago with some of the world's renowned scholars at the University of Chicago and then came to Brigham Young University, where he remained for his entire career. One reason he studied ancient languages was to gain the advantage of reading in the earlier source materials. Because of his scholarly achievements, some of his colleagues spoke of him as "the accomplished SBS."<sup>1</sup> Early in his life, he said, he had aspired to know more about the scriptures than any man living. He told me, and this is the point, that he had become aware that no man in this generation could possibly know as much about the scriptures as did the Prophet Joseph Smith.

I begin with that because a feeling constantly recurs as one studies the life of Joseph Smith. You never quite get to the bottom. There is always more. You can be so impressed and overcome with glimpses that you say, "Nothing good that I could learn of him would be surprising." And then you become surprised. There is always more. It takes deep to comprehend deep, and I often wonder if any of us have the depth to fully comprehend this man.<sup>2</sup>

I want to focus not so much on his prophetic character and gifts as on the characteristics observed by those who surrounded him—on Joseph Smith the man.

Consider for a moment his appearance. We know from the record that he was, in his prime, a little over six feet in height. He weighed over two hundred pounds.<sup>3</sup> One of his advantages all through life was an extremely vigorous and dynamic physical constitution. Without that, he might not have survived the first major crisis of his life—at seven or eight years of age a bone infection, which in most instances required amputation. The doctor, under the pleading of Mother Smith, finally consented to perform less drastic surgery, of course without anesthetic. If you can imagine a section of your leg bone being bored into then broken off in pieces with forceps while you are fully conscious, you will understand what the boy endured. Doctor Wirthlin, in our generation, has shown that one physician from Dartmouth Medical College in New Hampshire was the only man in the United States who

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understood how to perform that operation and who had the compassion and the skill to do so.<sup>4</sup> That's only one glimpse of Joseph's hardy, enduring physical constitution. Even at that, he bore all he could bear and was prematurely old at age thirty-eight.<sup>5</sup>

The death mask applied by George Cannon, a convert from England, to the face of Joseph (as also one to Hyrum) after the Carthage assassination gives us the exact lineaments of the Prophet's forehead, his hairline, which was in 1844 receding some, partly as a result of poisoning.<sup>6</sup> His nose was, as the statue on Salt Lake City's Temple Square depicts, unusually large. And yet it is the comment of those visiting from the East and of his own convert friends that he was a magnificent man. The word *handsome* recurs, and there are references, at least in the earlier years, to the color and abundance of his hair. It was an auburn cast.<sup>7</sup> There was something of a transparency about his countenance. He was beardless: he shaved, but he did not have a heavy or thick beard. Of the shape of his body, one writer says that there was "no breakage" about it. He had a strong and robust pair of shoulders and from there tapered down.<sup>8</sup> He had become a little portly in the late years at Nauvoo.

There were few manly sports that he didn't have a try at, and many in which he excelled. For example, he wrestled, and wrestled effectively.<sup>9</sup> He jumped at the mark. In this activity you simply drew a mark on the ground, then jumped and marked where you landed, then challenged someone else to match or exceed the jump.<sup>10</sup> He pulled up stakes: Here two men faced each other, placing feet against feet, and then pulled; the stronger one remained on the ground, the other came up. There's another version of that in which, face to face, you hold a pole, like a broomstick, and then pull down. The stronger of the two holds, and his hands don't slip. The weaker's hands slip.<sup>11</sup>

With the boys Joseph often played baseball and variations on quoits. He was known to create games with prizes, including booby prizes. On occasion, especially when he had beaten a challenger, he would say something like, "You must

not mind this. When I am with the boys I make all the fun I can for them."<sup>12</sup>

So much for the athletic side.

Turn for a moment to his mind. It was a remarkable mind. Mother Smith records that he was "much less inclined to perusal of books than any of the rest of our children, but far more given to meditation and deep study."<sup>13</sup> Yet as he matured and as the weight of his calling came upon him he became an assiduous, hard-reading student, poring over the scriptures, even being appointed to go over them word by word, line by line, and make inspired changes. In addition to that he aspired to the ancient languages.<sup>14</sup> At Kirtland he set up a school in Hebrew with Joshua Seixas as the teacher. Six of the students had not even mastered English in its rudiments. The minutes say that the two outstanding students in that school were Joseph Smith and Orson Pratt, in that order.<sup>15</sup> The worst was Heber C. Kimball.<sup>16</sup>

Intellectual gifts fall into many categories. For convenience, let us consider four. First of all there is imagination, the ability to picture the concrete pictorially, vividly, in its possibilities and variations. This is the fund of creativity. Joseph Smith had a vivid ability to picture and, some would add, a dramatic propensity. He counseled that we should avoid, as he put it, "a fanciful and flowery and heated imagination."<sup>17</sup> He had the gift. But he did not abuse it.

Next is the ability to conceptualize; to understand principles, information, truth, and then (which isn't quite the same) to express them accurately, clearly, and, as need be, briefly. Joseph Smith, whatever his early tendencies and however he may or may not have shown up in school, had a brilliant conceptual ability both to see and to understand, to go to the heart of an issue and then to express it so that others would understand. Related to that is the admonition he wrote while he was for many months in isolation in Liberty. He wrote a letter, parts of which are in our Doctrine and Covenants (but the part that is not included is equally profound).<sup>18</sup> He says: "The things of God are of deep import; and time, and experience, and careful and ponderous and solemn thoughts can

only find them out. Thy mind, O man! if thou wilt lead a soul unto salvation, must stretch as high as the utmost heavens, and search into and contemplate the darkest abyss, and the broad expanse of eternity—thou must commune with God.”<sup>19</sup>

That remarkable passage is in the context of his saying that often in our most important council meetings, classes, and gatherings we have been light-minded, “vain and trifling,” and too often unconcentrated in our direction.<sup>20</sup>

Third is memory, the ability to retain what one learns and summon it at will for further use, implication, or application. Apparently Joseph had to learn by repetition, just as the rest of us do, for in 1823 Moroni came and repeated the same message four times, including quotations from scripture. Thus the Prophet heard them often enough and clearly enough to recognize differences from the King James version of the Bible.<sup>21</sup> Four times he had to hear the message. Many might suppose that one visit from such a heavenly visitor would be sufficient. On the contrary. Joseph listened. He remembered.<sup>22</sup>

We find evidence of his remarkable memory near the other end of his life, when he sat down with William Clayton and his brother Hyrum and dictated the revelation we now call section 132 of the Doctrine and Covenants. It is a long revelation—sixty-six verses, many of which are themselves long. Verse 19, for example, is over two hundred words. Some of the verses describe the conditions of the everlasting covenant in such terms as an attorney might use who had spent days thinking up every possible synonym, nuance, and contingency so that no loophole would remain. For example: “All covenants, contracts, bonds, obligations, oaths, vows, performances, connections, associations, or expectations, that are not made and entered into and . . .” That’s the subject of the sentence. Then there’s the verb. Then a very long predicate.<sup>23</sup> To have written that after patient winnowing of the dictionary would be an achievement. Joseph Smith dictated it straight and, apparently, without a change. That is amazing enough. But then we learn from William Clayton that the Prophet declared that “he knew

the revelation perfectly, and could rewrite it at any time if necessary.”<sup>24</sup> Now, that is staggering! He had the essential core of that involved revelation so clearly in mind that he had full confidence he could restate it. He may have meant that he could dictate it in the exact words, and if this is so he was indeed gifted in that respect beyond normal mortal ability. But I think he meant only that the content was clear to him and it would not be lost if the written version were lost. That shows a remarkable memory.

Fourth is the ability to be simplicity-minded, and that’s a gift. Not “simpleminded,” but “simplicity-minded,” having the ability to reduce elaborate ideas to a core center or essence. At the same time it is a gift to be able to see what other minds do not; to recognize implications, nuances, extensions of ideas that go beyond ordinary perception. Here again Joseph Smith was an original, for on the one hand in administrative and decision-making enterprises he went quickly to the heart of the matter with ingenuity and skill. But on the other hand, if required and asked to elaborate on a given doctrine or teaching he could do so and then would stretch the minds of all present.<sup>25</sup>

As to the overall quality of the written work of Joseph Smith, Arthur Henry King, a convert to the Church and a renowned English professor, has said that in his judgment the Prophet’s account in Joseph Smith—History (see the Pearl of Great Price), which includes his account of the First Vision and the visits of Moroni, is among the sublime prose in world literature. The same scholar has also said that one may contrast that writing favorably with the more ornate but in many respects more shallow writing of Oliver Cowdery, whose description of his feelings during the translation process and during John the Baptist’s appearance is given at the end of Joseph’s account in the Pearl of Great Price. Compare the two prose styles. In every way, Arthur Henry King observes, Joseph Smith’s is superior.<sup>26</sup>

We need not apologize at all for the language or structure or form of the Book of Mormon. It is among the great books of the world. It is to

be placed side by side with those books which are called canonical. There is a transparency, a brilliance, a white light about its most spiritual elements that I do not find anywhere else. It is a masterwork. Joseph Smith did not produce it and could not have produced it.

For years it has been said that anybody who had lived in Western New York or anybody who would take the time could grind out such “imitation scripture” himself. Hugh Nibley, becoming a little impatient with that sort of nonsense, once had a class of Middle East students, all of them from the Palestine area or farther East. At the opening of his class he said: “I am making a term paper assignment. By the end of the semester I would like each of you to write 522 pages having the following characteristics.” And then he outlined what the Book of Mormon has and is. So far he has not received the assignment back. No man and no combination of men could have written that book except under divine inspiration.

I offer one other point, this from my own perspective. Take section 93 of the Doctrine and Covenants—I leave out many other sections of which the same could be said. In my considered judgment (and I have read a little in the philosophers of the world) this section is superior in content to Plato’s *Timaeus*. Plato may or may not deserve the reputation of being the greatest philosopher of the western world, which has been reiterated through many generations, but I say that Joseph Smith, as an instrument for receiving and transmitting God’s word, was more profound than Plato.<sup>27</sup> He had the added advantage of the Holy Ghost.

Now let’s turn to his temperament, to his emotional makeup, to his dispositions. Early in his own account of his life he said he had a “native cheery temperament.”<sup>28</sup> Thank the Lord he did. It stood him in good stead. Many joined the Church, some from foreign lands and some from the United States, many out of New England with its conservative and sometimes rigid Puritanical traditions, others from movements such as the Quakers and the Baptists. They compared Joseph Smith with his brother Hyrum and remarked that

Hyrum seemed more in the image of what they thought a prophet should look like and behave like. He was, they meant to say, more sedate, sober, serious.<sup>29</sup> The Prophet, for all his sobriety under proper circumstance, was a hail-fellow-well-met, easily inclined to laughter, sociable, animated, the life of the party, and colorful in his use of language. That was disquieting enough for some that they left the Church. For instance, a family visited the Prophet when he was upstairs for a time translating—serious and tedious work. Then he came downstairs and began to roll on the floor and frolic with his little children. This family was indignant and left the Church.<sup>30</sup>

Not only did Joseph Smith have that temperament, but he found it difficult to abide opposite attitudes, especially when they arose from false traditions. On one occasion ministers came to him intent on tying him up in scriptural analysis, as they had bragged they would do. They kept trying to push him into a corner, but each time he not only had answers but also questions for them that they couldn’t handle. Finally they became convinced it would be better if they left. As they went to the door, the Prophet preceded them. He went out, made a mark on the ground, and jumped. “Now gentlemen,” he said, “you haven’t bested me at the scriptures. See if you can best me at that.” They went away much incensed.<sup>31</sup>

A man who had developed a certain falsetto came to Joseph. In our generation we are not familiar with this phenomenon, but in preaching without public address systems in those days some Methodists—for example, in the role of exhorter—would pitch their voices high and shout so loudly that it could be heard a mile away. Sometimes they prayed that way. One man with exactly that tone came and said, with a kind of supercilious reverence, “Is it possible that I now flash my optics upon a Prophet?” “Yes,” the Prophet replied, “I don’t know but you do; would not you like to wrestle with me?” The man was shocked.<sup>32</sup>

On one occasion a man of that same stripe, Joshua Holman, a former Methodist exhorter, was out with some other men cutting firewood for

the Prophet when they were all invited to lunch at Joseph's home. When the Prophet called on Joshua to ask a blessing on the food, he set about a lengthy and loud prayer that incorporated inappropriate expressions. The Prophet did not interrupt him, but when the man was through he said simply, "Brother Joshua, don't let me ever hear you ask another such blessing." Then he explained the inconsistencies.<sup>33</sup>

"I do many things to break down superstition," he said.<sup>34</sup> At another time, he said, "Although I do wrong, I do not the wrongs that I am charged with doing."<sup>35</sup>

Joseph had a sense of humor. He sometimes joshed the brethren even in serious circumstances. An example is the time when a report spread that a man had sold his wife and the price was a bull-eye watch. Riding his horse, Joseph Smith came across Daniel McArthur chopping wood. The Prophet greeted him, then said, "You are not the young man who sold his wife for a bull-eye watch the other day, are you?"<sup>36</sup>

On another occasion, with serious intent but humorous overtones, the Prophet dressed up in rough clothes, got on a horse, and rode down to meet a group of converts who had just arrived from England. He stopped one of them who was heading for the town.

"Are you a Mormon?" the Prophet asked.

"Yes sir," said Edwin Rushton.

"What do you know about old Joe Smith?"

"I know that Joseph Smith is a prophet of God."

"I suppose you are looking for an old man with a long, gray beard. What would you think if I told you I was Joseph Smith?"

"If you are Joseph Smith, I know you are a prophet of God."

"I am Joseph Smith," the Prophet said, this time in gentle tones. "I came to meet those people, dressed as I am in rough clothes and speaking in this manner, to see if their faith is strong enough to stand the things they must meet. If not, they should turn back right now."<sup>37</sup>

It would seem that the Prophet spent half his time trying to convince the slow and sludgy people who had a little faith that God was indeed

with him and with them;<sup>38</sup> and that he spent the other half alerting the Saints that a prophet is a prophet only when he is acting as such, which means when he is inspired of God.<sup>39</sup> The rest of the time he is a mere mortal—has opinions, makes mistakes, and in a general way of speaking has to put his pants on one leg at a time as every other man does. It was difficult to strike that balance. Some thought he was too human, some thought he was too prophetic. Both were wrong.

George A. Smith, a cousin of the Prophet Joseph Smith, was in girth, at least, a larger man. He weighed nearly three hundred pounds. One day they were discussing William W. Phelps as an editor. He had a gift as well as a curse for using language in an abrasive way, and in his editorials he managed to offend almost everyone. In his conversation with the Prophet, George A. Smith's evaluation was that Phelps had a certain literary zeal, and that as far as George A. was concerned he would be willing to pay Phelps for editing a paper so long as nobody else but George A. would be allowed to read it. At this, it is recorded, "Joseph laughed heartily—said I had the thing just right." And then he hugged him and said, "George A., I love you as I do my own life." George A. was moved almost to tears and said, "I hope, Brother Joseph, that my whole life and actions will ever prove my feelings, and the depth of my affection towards you."<sup>40</sup> On another occasion he gave George A. this bit of serious counsel: "Never be discouraged. If I were sunk in the lowest pit of Nova Scotia, with the Rocky Mountains piled on me, I would hang on, exercise faith, and keep up good courage, and I would come out on top."<sup>41</sup>

There is next the question of whether in all of his attitudes the Prophet demonstrated appropriate humility and the very thing he taught in word, namely, compassion and forbearance and forgiveness. He is reported as saying that he had "a subtle devil to deal with, and could only curb him by being humble."<sup>42</sup> No braggadocio, no threats, no vainglorying. We do not have power over the adversary and his hosts except through the power of Christ, and we do not have such power save we are humble and receptive. What is humility? There

are a thousand definitions, but it means at least acknowledging one's dependence on the Lord, acknowledging when and where one is not self-sufficient. Joseph, according to those who knew him best, was in that sense humble.

Here we are not talking about boldness—he had that; it is not the opposite of humility. We are not talking about willingness to endure in strength—he had that, and that too is not the opposite of humility. We are saying that Joseph did not manifest the debilitating pride that destroys humility. That is the witness left by several who knew him best.

Eliza R. Snow, who had heard of the Prophet and some very ugly things in that connection, happened to be at home one day when the Prophet called and visited with her family. "In the winter of 1830 and '31, Joseph Smith called at my father's," she wrote of this visit, "and as he sat warming himself, I scrutinized his face as closely as I could without attracting his attention, and decided that his was an honest face."<sup>43</sup> Later, after joining the Church, she was often in his home as a kind of babysitter and help for a time in Kirtland. She first admired him in his public ministry, saw him as a prophet, but not until she saw him in his own home, on his knees in prayer, and in his relationship with his children did her whole heart go out to him in admiration.<sup>44</sup> He was, she said, as humble as a little child.<sup>45</sup>

Was the Prophet an emotional man? In all the worthy senses of that word, the answer is yes. The tears sprang easily to his eyes, and this happened in varied situations. There is, for example, the occasion on which Parley P. Pratt returned to Nauvoo by boat, having been on a long mission, and the Prophet came down to greet him and just wept. When Parley could extricate himself he said, "Why Brother Joseph, if you feel so bad about our coming, I guess we will have to go back again."<sup>46</sup> He wept, too, at good-byes: the tears were flowing fast on the day he said good-bye to his family before he left for Richmond Jail. The Lord himself acknowledged this compassionate heart when he said in a revelation, speaking of Joseph, "His prayers I have heard. Yea, and his weeping for

Zion I have seen, and I will cause that he shall mourn for her no longer."<sup>47</sup>

He characterized himself as "like a huge, rough stone rolling down from a high mountain; and the only polishing I get is when some corner gets rubbed off by coming in contact with something else."<sup>48</sup> He also called himself a "lone tree."<sup>49</sup> He had learned in Vermont that those maples that stood alone had to develop deep roots early; if they did not, the inevitable blast of winter storms would take them down. For all of his social sense, there were times when he felt deeply lonely. "O that I had the language of the archangel to express my feeling once to my friends," he said. "But I never expect to."<sup>50</sup>

"You don't know me," he said in the King Follett discourse. "You never knew my heart." And then this remarkable phrase, "I don't blame any one for not believing my history. If I had not experienced what I have, I could not have believed it myself."<sup>51</sup>

In that loneliness, he had to keep to his own bosom (those were his words)<sup>52</sup> certain deep understandings the Lord had vouchsafed to him with the command that he not share them. "The reason," he once said, "we do not have the secrets of the Lord revealed unto us is because we do not keep them but reveal them . . . even to our enemies." Then he added, "I can keep a secret till Doomsday."<sup>53</sup> And so he did.

As an emotional and loving man, what kind of a home life did the Prophet have? Under the buffetings that relentlessly began with the Prophet's announcement of his first vision and continued until his death, it is miraculous that he had as much time at home as he did. He and Emma had nine children, of whom four died at birth and one at fourteen months. In the ache of her bosom at the loss of twins, Emma moved the Prophet to go and bring home twins, a boy and a girl, whose mother had died in that same week. Emma raised those children. The boy died at eleven months under the exposure he suffered the night the Prophet was mobbed in Hiram, Ohio—beaten, tarred and feathered, and left. The girl lived to maturity but never responded to the

message of the gospel. Only in one instance did Emma bear a child in a home she could call her own, and that was David Hyrum, born after the Prophet's death.

And as for Emma in general, the certainty of the record is this simple: Joseph Smith loved her with his whole soul. And the corollary is, Emma loved him with her whole soul. She was "an elect lady."<sup>54</sup> She was not only a remarkable woman but, except for the difficulties that came with plural marriage, she was also a noble and glorious supporter of all the Prophet did, as Mother Smith indicated in her personal tribute.<sup>55</sup>

The Prophet's home life with Emma included prayers three times a day, morning, noon, and night.<sup>56</sup> It included her leading the family in singing. The "family" was always larger than Joseph's blood relatives—visitors from different places, immigrants needing temporary accommodation, and so on. Some came for a week or so, and some, like John Bernhisel, for three years. Being so commanded as "an elect lady," she compiled a hymnal, some of whose contents are still in our present hymnbook.

The Prophet Joseph helped Emma in taking care of the children and the domestic chores—building fires, carrying out ashes, bringing in wood and water, and so on. He was criticized more than once for that, some men thinking that was beneath his dignity. With kindly reproof the Prophet set them straight and counseled that they go and do likewise. The Prophet was neat, too. His axe was always carefully sharpened and properly placed after he had used it. His store of wood was always neatly stacked, his yard was well kept, and until his death he was a farmer who earned much of what he was able to eat by plowing, planting, weeding, and harvesting.<sup>57</sup>

We have a glimpse of his sleeping ability from Lorin Farr, who observed that even in the Missouri persecution days, even under pressure—and of course he was then under the kind of pressure that leads to the worst fatigue—he could sit down at the base of a tree and almost instantly fall into slumber, but almost as instantly snap back to full and alert activity. That may have something to

do with a clear conscience and the assurance that God is with you.<sup>58</sup>

He avoided, but could not wholly avoid, the tedious trivia of life. He did not like the clerical functions. He was less than enthusiastic about the commandment which came on the very day the Church was organized that a record must be kept day by day and that in it all of the important events should be recorded.<sup>59</sup> But he complied. He had helpful scribes. He was patient with them, and they with him.

In a relaxed moment one day the Prophet turned to his secretary, Howard Coray, and said, "Brother Coray I wish you were a little larger. I would like to have some fun with you," meaning wrestling. Brother Coray said, "Perhaps you can as it is." The Prophet reached and grappled him and twisted him over—and broke his leg. All compassion, he carried him home, put him in bed, and splinted and bandaged his leg. Brother Coray later said, "Brother Joseph, when Jacob wrestled with the angel and was lamed by him, the angel blessed him. Now I think I am also entitled to a blessing." Joseph had his father give him the blessing, and his leg healed with remarkable speed.<sup>60</sup>

To Robert B. Thompson, his secretary, the Prophet said, "Robert, you have been so faithful and relentless in this work, you need to relax." He told him to go out and enjoy himself, to relax. But Thompson was a serious-minded man. He said, "I can't do it." Joseph responded, "You must do it, if you don't do it, you will die." One of the sorrows of Joseph's life was that Robert B. Thompson had a premature death and that he had to speak at the funeral.<sup>61</sup>

He learned to relax, and when chided for it he commented that if a man has a bow and keeps it constantly strung tight, it will soon lose its spring. The bow must be unstrung.<sup>62</sup> Somebody who saw him with his head down, pensive and deep in thought, said to him, "Brother Joseph, why don't you hold your head up and talk to us like a man?" The Prophet's response was, "Look at those heads of grain." The man looked out at the field of ripened wheat and saw that the heaviest sheaves, the ones full of grain, were bent down. The Prophet

was implying that his mind was heavy laden.<sup>63</sup> But fortunately he could unleash.

Two other glimpses of his home life: When mistreated, he was inclined to “get even” by offering the hospitality of his home. That involved Emma and her talents in cooking. Often he invited people with little warning—“If ye will not embrace our religion, accept our hospitality.”<sup>64</sup> There were times when the cupboard was bare. One day they had nothing to eat but a little corn meal. They made out of it a johnnycake, as it was called, and the Prophet offered the blessing as follows: “Lord, we thank thee for this johnnycake and ask thee to send us something better. Amen.” Before the meal was over a knock came at the door, and there stood a man with a ham and some flour. The Prophet jumped to his feet and said to Emma, “I knew the Lord would answer my prayer.”<sup>65</sup> He shared and shared until he was utterly impoverished.

Now a few comparisons: We have the testimony of Peter Burnett, one-time Governor of California, who had known Joseph Smith in the Missouri period, that he found him a man of great leadership gifts, a man who instinctively commanded admiration and respect.<sup>66</sup> Stephen A. Douglas, whose title, “the Little Giant,” was, one source claims, applied to him by Joseph Smith—the same Stephen A. Douglas who debated Lincoln and who aspired, as the Prophet predicted he would, to the Presidency of the United States—had many admiring things to say of Joseph during the Illinois period. He said he had independence of mind.<sup>67</sup>

Alexander Doniphan was the general who refused to shoot the brothers Smith in the Far West square as ordered, and who wrote to General Lucas, “I will hold you responsible before an earthly tribunal, so help me God.”<sup>68</sup>

James W. Woods, the Prophet’s last attorney, was with him on the morning of June 27, 1844. Never a Latter-day Saint, he observed that you could see the strength of Joseph Smith in his manner and dignity, but he added that you could see by his face alone that he was not a bad man.<sup>69</sup>

Daniel H. Wells, “Squire Wells,” who heard Joseph speak twice in Nauvoo, was a kind of

nineteenth century justice of the peace. He heard him speak on the principle that every son and daughter of Adam, sooner or later, whether in this life or the next, will hear the gospel of Jesus Christ in its purity and in its fullness and will have adequate option to choose it; and that those who accept it and live it, including the disembodied spirits who would have done so if they had had opportunity in mortality, will have the right and access to all the ordinances that are performed only in this life. How? By proxy. This man, trained in law and impressed by the justice of the Prophet’s teachings, said, “I have known legal men all my life. Joseph Smith was the best lawyer that I have ever known in all my life.”<sup>70</sup>

We have from Brigham Young a comment on Joseph’s being different from Hyrum, and beyond the obvious comments is one to the effect that Joseph’s ability, including his breadth of vision, was superior to Hyrum’s.<sup>71</sup> An implication of this is that Joseph was more susceptible to the continuing impressions and revelations of God. That is, he did not become so rigidly bound to what had been given that he was unsusceptible to what yet had to be given. Yet that is a tendency. Claiming integrity, one can harden on past traditions and can thus become immune to living revelation. And the Prophet tended to judge men with that same openness: that is, not all cases are identical; each individual has his own special differences and must be brought into harmony with the Lord in ways that recognize these differences. Again, this shows a mind that is not only open but also receptive; and not only receptive, but also obedient, even when the required response seemed to run counter to former assumptions and traditions.<sup>72</sup> This was an essential element for *the* revelator of our dispensation.

To summarize, in Joseph Smith we have a man who physically, intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually was a living human multitude. He was many men in one, as it were. Many of his gifts were balanced with others, and all in all he was a superb instrument with whom the Lord could and did work in the dispensation of the fulness of times.

## Notes

1. See, for example, the acknowledgment to “S. B. Sperry” under “Addenda et Corrigenenda” in Brown, ed., *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, p. xii.

2. Wilford Woodruff remarked, “The people could not bear the flood of intelligence which God poured into his mind” (*JD* 5:83). Likewise George Q. Cannon stated: “I have sometimes thought that the Prophet Joseph, with the knowledge he possessed and the progress he had made could not stay with the people, so slow were we to comprehend things and so enshrouded in our ignorant traditions. The Saints could not comprehend Joseph Smith; the Elders could not; the Apostles could not. They did do a little towards the close of his life; but his knowledge was so extensive and his comprehension so great that they could not rise to it.” (*MS* 61 [October 5, 1899]: 629.)

3. The Prophet’s uncle John Smith stated, “The Prophet Joseph stood even six feet high in his stocking feet and weighed 212 pounds . . . Hyrum Smith stood five feet eleven and a half inches high and they weighed in the same notch, varying from 210 to 212 pounds” (*Salt Lake Herald*, January 12, 1895).

4. See Wirthlin, “Joseph Smith’s Boyhood Operation: An 1813 Surgical Success,” pp. 131–54.

5. Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner said in a late recollection that Joseph said to her, “I have asked the Lord to take me out of the world. I have stood all I can.” (Sketch by Elsie E. Barrett, p. 16.)

6. John Taylor later took these casts to England, where a Mr. Gahagan, who created busts of the Duke of Wellington, Lord Nelson, and the Emperor of Russia, used them to make authentic busts of Joseph and Hyrum (see Cannon, *George Cannon the Immigrant*, p. 131; also letter of John Taylor in *MS* 12 [November 1, 1850]: 329–30).

7. Jane Snyder Richards, for example, who met him first when he was thirty-seven in Nauvoo, wrote that “his hair was of a light brown, blue eyes and light-complexioned” (“Reminiscences of Mrs. F. D. Richards,” p. 11). Compare the statement of Wandle Mace, who wrote that Joseph had a “light complexion, blue eyes, and light hair,

and very little beard” (journal of Wandle Mace, p. 37). James Palmer noted: “He wore no whiskers” (journal of James Palmer, p. 70).

8. Elam Chenery uses the phrase “no breakage about his body” (see *YWJ* 17 [December 1906]: 539–40). Compare James Palmer’s description: “He had a large full chest and intelligent eyes and fine limbs” (journal of James Palmer, p. 282). A non-Mormon visitor in 1843 said, “Joe Smith the Mormon Prophet is a large tolerably good looking man 38 years of age—light hair light eyes nothing very extraordinary in his appearance . . . possessed of the most astonishing degree of vanity” (see diary of J. M. Sharpe [1843–48]).

9. He defeated the strongest wrestler of Davies County, throwing him three times (see *Autobiography of Andrew Jenson*, p. 161; also pp. 164–65). Edwin Holden said he could play until the boys tired of the games and then unite all together to build a log cabin (*Ji* 27 [March 1, 1892]: 153). He wrestled for exercise. When he sent Jacob Gates on a mission he said, “Go and fill your mission, and we will wrestle after you come back” (*Jenson, Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia* 1:198).

10. “Often after a heated discussion with ministers over doctrinal points, the prophet would say, ‘Gentlemen, let’s lay the scriptures aside for a moment and I’ll challenge you to jump at the mark with me’” (Barrett, *Joseph Smith, the Extraordinary*, p. 9). In Nauvoo, Saturday afternoons were the time for races, jumping at a mark, pulling up stakes, wrestling, and throwing (see Anderson, ed., *Joseph Smith III and the Restoration*, p. 27).

11. “In the evening, when pulling sticks, I pulled up Justus A. Morse, the strongest man in Ramus, with one hand” (*HC* 5:302; see also p. 466).

12. See recollection of Calvin W. Moore in *Ji* 27 (April 15, 1892): 255.

13. *History of Joseph Smith*, p. 82.

14. See Zucker, “Joseph Smith as a Student of Hebrew,” pp. 41–55.

15. Seixas came to Kirtland from Hudson, Ohio, and began his school on January 26, 1836, continuing for two months. By that time “only two of the class knew enough Hebrew to discuss it or to

discourse on Hebrew phraseology from the Bible, Joseph Smith and Orson Pratt" (Berrett, *Joseph Smith, Symbol of Greatness*, p. 3). Hebrew and Latin were taught over a period of six months. Lorenzo Barnes writes: "I obtained considerable information of the Hebrew and Chaldaic languages so I could read and translate tolerably well" (see journal of Lorenzo Barnes, vol. 2). The Prophet also worked sporadically in Greek, Latin, and German.

16. Though Heber C. Kimball saw himself as "illiterate and unlearned, weak and feeble," he became one of the most powerful and fruitful missionaries in modern history. See the letter to his son William in foreword to Young, *Letters of Brigham Young to His Sons*, p. xii.

17. *TPJS*, p. 137; *HC* 3:295.

18. See D&C 121, 122, and 123. The entire letter is published in *HC* 3:289–305 and in *TPJS*, pp. 129–48.

19. *TPJS*, p. 137.

20. *TPJS*, p. 137.

21. He records there were "little variation[s]," i.e., differences, in citations from Malachi; but that the verses in Acts 3:22 and 23 were quoted "precisely as they stand in our New Testament." Either he had memorized these verses and could recognize "little variations" as he heard them or he remembered exactly how they were spoken and later read or reread them in the Bible and noticed the variations. Either way, he had a precise memory. See Joseph Smith—History 1:36–41.

22. One acquaintance of Joseph claims he could "read over a passage of scripture three times and one year after reading it he could quote it verbatim and open the book to the portion quoted" (Elijah Knapp Fuller, according to a grandson, told to N.B. Lundwall, "Lundwall Microfilm Collection," Reel 2-55).

23. D&C 132:7.

24. See William Clayton's testimony of February 16, 1874, as cited in Jenson, *The Historical Record* 6:224–26. Joseph F. Smith, among others, asserts that from 1831 Joseph understood plural marriage would be introduced in modern times. On July 12, 1843, he was encouraged by Hyrum to put it on paper. "Joseph said he knew it from

beginning to end. He then dictated it word for word to Wm. Clayton as it is now in the Doctrine and Covenants. . . . After it was done Joseph said, "There, that is enough for the present, but I have a great deal more.'" (Utah Stake Historical Record, March 3 and 4, 1883. See also comments of Orson Pratt in *JD* 13:183–96; *CHC* 2:100–101.)

25. Minerva Wade Hickman wrote, "The mind of the Prophet Joseph Smith was as clear as crystal. He cleared up the difficulties of ages" ("Sketch of Minerva Wade Hickman," May 30, 1842). Emmeline B. Wells wrote in retrospect: "He was beyond my comprehension" (*YWJ* 16 [December 1905]: 556). Mercy R. Thompson wrote, "I have seen him in the lyceum [in Nauvoo] and heard him reprove the brethren for giving way to too much excitement and warmth in debate, and have listened to his clear and masterly explanations of deep and difficult questions. To him all things seemed simple and easy to be understood, and thus he could make them plain to others as no other man could that I ever heard." (*Jl* 27 [July 1, 1892]: 399.) Jedediah M. Grant said: "Why was it that Joseph could take the wisest Elder that ever travelled and preached, and, as it were, circumscribe his very thoughts? Simply because he had the Holy Ghost." (*JD* 3:10.)

26. Contrasting Joseph Smith's literary style with Oliver Cowdery's "flowery journalese," Arthur Henry King continues: "I am asked sometimes, 'Why don't we have any great literature now?' And we don't, you know; we may kid ourselves or other people may try to kid us that we do, but we don't. There were Homer, Vergil, Dante, Shakespeare, and Goethe; and there it seems to have stopped. There seems to have been no supreme figure since then. But I tell you there was one: Joseph Smith." (See "Joseph Smith As a Writer," in *The Abundance of the Heart*, pp. 197–205.)

27. The *Timaeus*, one of Plato's last dialogues, deals with cosmology, the relationship of *nous*, or mind, to the soul and the soul to the body. It also presupposes complex theories of the nature of truth, and of universals (ultimate ideas) in abstraction. Section 93 was received in May 1833, when Joseph was twenty-seven years old. It defines

beginningless beginnings, the interrelationships of truth, of light, of intelligence, of agency, of element, of embodiment, of joy. Every sentence, every word, is freighted with meaning. In one fell swoop it cuts many Gordian knots. For example: How can there something come from nothing? Answer: The universe was not created from nothing. "The elements are eternal." How can Christ have been both absolutely human and absolutely divine at the same time? Answer: He was not both at the same time. Christ "received not of the fulness at the first, but continued . . . until he received a fulness." If man is totally the creation of God, how can he be anything or do anything that he was not divinely pre-caused to do? Answer: Man is not totally the creation of God. "Intelligence . . . was not created or made, neither indeed can be. . . . Behold, here is the agency of man." How can man be a divine creation and yet be "totally depraved"? Answer: Man is not totally depraved. "Every spirit of man was innocent in the beginning; and God having redeemed man from the fall, men became again, in their infant state, innocent before God." What is the relationship of being and beings, the one and the many? Answer: "Being" is only the collective name of beings, of whom God is one. Truth is knowledge of things (plural), and not, as Plato would have it, of Thinghood. "Truth is knowledge of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come." How can spirit relate to gross matter? Answer: "The elements are the tabernacle of God." Why should man be embodied? Answer: "Spirit and element, inseparably connected, receive a fulness of joy." If we begin susceptible to light and truth, how is it that people err and abuse the light? Answer: People are free; they can be persuaded only if they choose to be. They cannot be compelled. The Socratic thesis that knowledge is virtue (that if you really know the good you will seek it and do it) is mistaken. It is through disobedience and because of the traditions of the fathers that light is taken away from mankind.

28. Joseph Smith—History 1:28.

29. Rachel R. Grant, with many others, remarks that "he was always so jolly and happy. . . . He

was different in that respect from Brother Hyrum, who was more sedate, more serious." (YWJ 16 [December 1905]: 551.) Because of this spontaneity he sometimes had to warn the people that his manner should not be taken as flippant or irresponsible: "The Saints need not think because I am familiar with them and am playful and cheerful, that I am ignorant of what is going on. Iniquity of any kind cannot be sustained in the Church, and it will not fare well where I am; for I am determined while I do lead the Church, to lead it right." (May 27, 1843, HC 5:411.)

30. See discourse of George A. Smith in *JD* 2:214.

31. "Which one of you can beat that?" So Wilford Woodruff remembers him saying. (See Parry, comp., *Stories About Joseph Smith the Prophet*, pp. 17–18.)

32. Recalled by Jedediah M. Grant in *JD* 3:67.

33. See recollection of Daniel D. McArthur in *Jl* 27 (February 15, 1892): 129; Andrus, *They Knew*, pp. 73–74. George A. Smith, speaking of another similar incident, says that Joseph told the man "he ought not to give way to such an enthusiastic spirit, and bray so much like a jackass" (*JD* 2:214).

34. The context of this statement is that "what many people call sin is not sin" (*TPJS*, p. 193; *WJS*, p. 80). At other times Joseph had to teach that what many people called righteous was not righteous and what many assumed was acceptable to God was not acceptable. He once stunned a congregation in Nauvoo by describing a man's two-hour sermon as "pharisaical and hypocritical and not edifying the people." The man (William Clark) accepted the reproof and stayed with the Church. (7 November 1841, *WJS*, p. 80.)

35. From an 1842 address to the Relief Society, *WJS*, p. 130. This occurred at the time of John C. Bennett's defection and much slanderous publicity.

36. *Jl* 27 (February 15, 1892): 129; Andrus, *They Knew*, p. 73.

37. See experiences of Edwin Rushton as related by his son in Andrus, *They Knew*, p. 170. Edwin Rushton was seventeen when he reached Nauvoo on April 13, 1842.

38. "I told them I was but a man, and they must not expect me to be perfect; if they expected perfection from me, I should expect it from them" (*TPJS*, p. 268; *WJS*, p. 132). Elsewhere he said that though he was "subject to like passions as other men, like the prophets of olden times," he was "under the necessity of bearing the infirmities of others" (*HC* 5:516).

39. *HC* 5:265; *TPJS*, p. 278.

40. *HC* 5:390–91.

41. See Evans, *Joseph Smith: An American Prophet*, p. 9.

42. *TPJS*, p. 225; *WJS*, p. 116.

43. "Sketch of My Life," *The Relief Society Magazine* 31 (March 1944): 134.

44. It is possible, if not likely, that the following lines penned by Eliza R. Snow were addressed to Joseph Smith:

*And when I saw your towering soul  
Rise on devotion's wings:  
And saw amid your pulses, roll,  
A scorn of trifling things,  
I loved you for your goodness' sake  
And cheerfully can part  
With home and friends, confiding in  
Your noble, generous heart.*

(From "Narcissa to Narcissus" in Snow, *Poems: Religious, Historical, and Political* 2:47–48.)

45. Eliza wrote of him: "Though his expansive mind grasped the great plan of salvation and solved the mystic problem of man's destiny—though he had in his possession keys that unlocked the past and the future with its succession of eternities, in his devotions he was humble as a little child" ("Sketch of My Life," p. 136).

46. See recollection of Mary Ann Winters in *YWJ* 16 (December 1905): 557; Andrus, *They Knew*, p. 166. Mary remembered that Joseph said, "Brother Parley, you have come home, bringing your sheaves with you," and that tears rolled down his cheeks. Willard Richards wrote that on this occasion Joseph "appeared melted in tenderness when he met Sister Pratt (who had been to England with Parley) and her little daughter only

three or four days old" (see entry of April 12, 1843, in Joseph Smith journal, March 10, 1843, to July 14, 1843, kept by Willard Richards; *HC* 5:354).

47. *D&C* 21:7–8.

48. *TPJS*, p. 304; *WJS*, p. 205.

49. See recollection of O. B. Huntington in *YWJ* 4 (April 1893): 321.

50. *WJS*, p. 196.

51. *TPJS*, p. 361; *WJS*, p. 343.

52. *TPJS*, p. 306.

53. *TPJS*, p. 195.

54. See *D&C* 25.

55. Mother Smith wrote of Emma: "I have never seen a woman in my life, who would endure every species of fatigue and hardship, from month to month, and from year to year, with that unflinching courage, zeal, and patience, which she has ever done; for I know that which she has had to endure—she has been tossed upon the ocean of uncertainty—she has breasted the storms of persecution, and buffeted the rage of men and devils, which would have borne down almost any other woman" (*History of Joseph Smith*, p. 191).

56. "Three times a day he had family worship; and these precious seasons of sacred household service truly seemed a foretaste of celestial happiness" (recollection of Eliza R. Snow in Tullidge, *The Women of Mormondom*, p. 66). In this custom Joseph followed his own admonition: "You must make yourselves acquainted with those men who like Daniel pray three times a day toward the House of the Lord" (*HC* 3:391). William H. Walker described coming to the front door of the Mansion House one evening and overhearing the singing of the Prophet's family: "I had never heard such sweet, heavenly music, and I was equally impressed with the prayer offered by the Prophet" (see sketch of William H. Walker in Walker and Stevenson, comps., *Ancestry and Descendants of John Walker*, p. 15).

57. See recollection of Jesse W. Crosby as reported in Cox, "Stories from Notebook," pp. 1–2. See also Andrus, *They Knew*, p. 145.

58. Lorin Farr says of the Prophet: "There was another thing about him: When he went to bed he slept. He was not nervous. He figured broadly,

but when he had done a day's work he dismissed it from his mind. It was thus that the next day he was ready for other things." (Quoted in Pardoe, *Lorin Farr, Pioneer*, p. 292.)

59. D&C 21:1.

60. Joseph weighed over 200 pounds. Coray, twelve years younger, weighed 130 pounds. In the wake of Coray's request Joseph asked his father, Joseph, Sr., to give Coray a patriarchal blessing. He himself, looking at Coray earnestly, promised, "You will soon find a companion, one that will be suited to your condition. . . . She will cling to you like the cords of death; and you will have a good many children." Coray later married Martha Knowlton. They had seven sons and five daughters. (See Coray, *Autobiographical sketches*, pp. 8–9; Andrus, *They Knew*, pp. 135–36.)

61. Robert B. Thompson, says Huntington, was "never guilty of such an impropriety" as to go on a "good spree." He was dead within two weeks of the Prophet's prediction. (See diary of Oliver B. Huntington, p. 166.)

62. "He did not want it strung up all the time" (see recollection of William M. Allred in *Jl* 27 [August 1, 1892]: 472). On the other hand, Joseph observed: "When a man is reigned up continually by excitement, he becomes strong and gains power and knowledge; but when he relaxes for a season he loses much of his power and knowledge" (*HC* 5:389).

63. This took place in 1841 at the home of Henry Sherwood in Nauvoo. (See recollection of Henrietta Cox in *Jl* 27 [April 1, 1892]: 203; Andrus, *They Knew*, p. 147.)

64. *WJS*, p. 162.

65. Recollection of John Lyman Smith in *Jl* (March 15, 1892): 172.

66. Peter H. Burnett acted as a defending attorney for the Mormons during the Missouri period. He later wrote of Joseph: "He was much more than an ordinary man. He possessed the most indomitable perseverance, was a good judge of men, and deemed himself born to command, and he did command. His views were so strange and striking, and his manner was so earnest, and apparently so

candid, that you could not but be interested. There was a kind, familiar look about him, that pleased you. He was very courteous in discussion, readily admitting what he did not intend to controvert, and would not oppose you abruptly, but had due deference to your feelings. He had the capacity for discussing a subject in different aspects, and for proposing many original views, even of ordinary matters. His illustrations were his own. He had great influence over others. As an evidence of this I will state that on Thursday, just before I left to return to Liberty [Missouri], I saw him out among the crowd, conversing freely with every one, and seeming to be perfectly at ease. In the short space of five days he had managed so to mollify his enemies that he could go unprotected among them without the slightest danger. Among the Mormons he had much greater influence than Sidney Rigdon. The latter was a man of superior education, an eloquent speaker, of fine appearance and dignified manners; but he did not possess the native intellect of Smith, and lacked his determined will." (*An Old California Pioneer*, p. 40.) Compare the comments of another attorney, Joseph Kelting: "Joseph was a mighty man and borrowed from no one; he was original and inspiring in his talk" (see Joseph Smith Papers).

67. According to the relation of an incident by Anson Call recorded by Abraham H. Cannon, Stephen A. Douglas once remarked: "Joseph Smith is the only independent man I ever saw. We are always wondering what effect our actions will have upon our constituents or friends, but he does what he thinks is right regardless of what people think or say of him." (See entry of March 9, 1890, in diary of Abraham H. Cannon, December 29, 1889, to July 15, 1890, pp. 89–90; compare journal of Wandle Mace, p. 285.)

68. See incidents in *HC* 3:190 and following pages.

69. The exact quotation reads: "I do not think that Joe Smith was at heart a bad or wicked man, and you could see from his face that he was not naturally an unkind one" (*Iowa Democrat*, May 13, 1885).

70. As recalled by Jesse N. Smith in *Journal of Jesse Nathaniel Smith*, p. 456. Wells had a superior legal education for this period.

71. Comparing Joseph and Hyrum, Brigham Young remarked: "His [Hyrum's] integrity was of the highest order, but his ability was not equal to Joseph's. Hyrum was a positive man; Joseph was a comparative man, regarding everything according to the circumstances of the case and every person according to the intrinsic worth." (See

unpublished discourse of October 8, 1866, Church Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.)

72. "To become a joint heir of the heirship of the Son," Joseph said in 1843, "one must put away all his false traditions" (*TPJS*, p. 321; *WJS*, p. 244).

*For full citations see "Author's Note on Sources, Abbreviations, and Bibliography" in the Joseph Smith Lecture Series.*