

*One of the world's most celebrated literary and cultural critics asks:
"How much of Joseph abides in contemporary Salt Lake City?"*

PERSPECTIVISM AND JOSEPH SMITH

By Harold Bloom

I RECALL A LUNCH DECADES AGO WITH THREE friends whom I continue to miss: the Southern historian C. Vann Woodward, the poet-novelist Robert Penn Warren, and the historian of American religion Sydney Ahlstrom. Woodward and Warren, fierce anti-Emersonians, teased me (as usual) about the Sage of Concord, and Ahlstrom silently enjoyed their banter and my counter-banter, such as it may have been. I remember saying on that occasion that Emerson allowed you no option: you could be an Emersonian or an enemy of Emerson, but not neutral. There hardly seemed to be a dispassionate stance available.

A literary critic necessarily is more at home with Emerson than with Joseph Smith, though I would name them both (with Walt Whitman) as our authentic American prophets. Yet my appreciation of the prophet, seer, and revelator Joseph has limitations, because my perspectives, varied as they can be, have their own difficulties. The more I brood on Joseph Smith, I become uncertain whether either Mormon or "Gentile" perspectives can encompass him. Something is always missing, as he himself prophesied. We don't know him.

"Sincerity" seems to me an inappropriate category in considering Smith. Ezekiel and Jeremiah were scarcely sane, on the evidence of their utterances. All bad poetry is sincere, Oscar Wilde advised us. Poetry and prophecy are near-allied, and I would blink if asked: "Is Yahweh sincere?" Judaic religious tradition teaches me to trust and love Yahweh, whom in fact I dislike and certainly do not trust at all. I keep urging him to go away, but he won't, to my chagrin. The United States fiercely persecuted the original Mormons: no one ought to forget that Joseph and his brother Hyrum were murdered by the Illinois state militia. As an outsider, I am puzzled by the current Salt Lake City hierarchy. If there is any spiritual conti-

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nity between Smith and Gordon B. Hinckley, I am unable to see it. No disrespect is intended by that observation, which may be only another consequence of perspectivism.

As an outsider, I wonder if the Mormons are not in danger of becoming just another American mainline Protestant denomination. I gather (subject to correction) that Mormon converts now are likelier to emerge from Asia or Africa than from the United States, which is hardly a deprecatory remark. Fifteen years ago, I thought that conversion to Mormonism might make it the religion of the American West, but why should Americans embrace what presents itself in such all-too-familiar garb? The prophet Joseph announced the divinity of the human: by now he is Enoch, whom the Hebrews called Metatron, the lesser Yahweh or Angel of the Divine Presence. What has the Adam/God identity, carried on by Brigham Young, to do with the contemporary Gospel out of Salt Lake City?

Perspectivism alone cannot answer that question, yet my inability to understand some of my Mormon friends in their attitudes towards the prophet-seer-revelator Hinckley surely does emanate from inevitable differences in perspective, Mormon and Gentile. This time around I cannot even place quotation marks around the word Gentile, since at seventy-six I scarcely can absorb its supposed relevance to me, as someone of the Jewish persuasion.

THE MOST RELEVANT term for the prophet Joseph is Max Weber's charisma, and part of what remains in this perspectivizing essay will be a note upon the phenomenon of charisma and Joseph Smith's astonishing exemplification of it. There are a few observations I find necessary before I embark upon consideration of the charismatic Joseph.

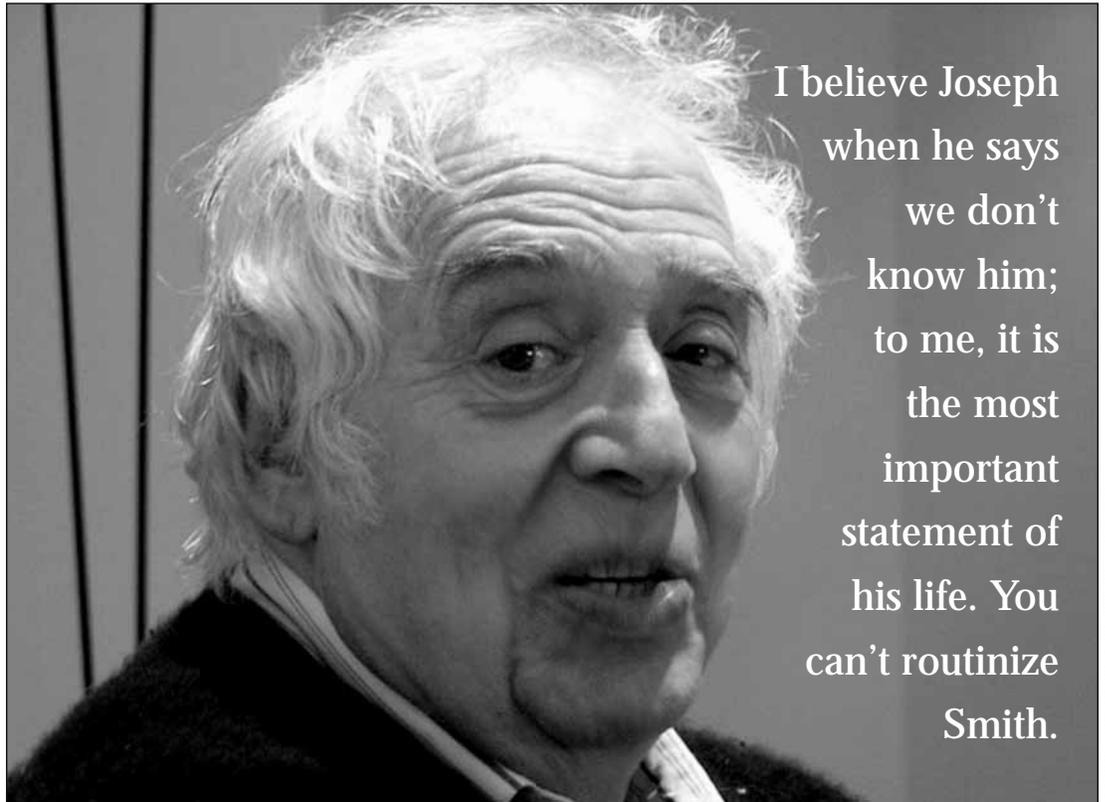
We speak of "Jesus of Nazareth," but there was no Nazareth at that supposed time; the correct term presumably is Jesus the Nazarene, a Davidic grouping of spirituals. In any case, all quests for the historical Jesus have failed dismally in my amiable judgment. But then, we have no evidence for a historical Moses, let alone for the actual human beings who made the Hebrew Covenants: Noah, Abraham, Jacob who became Israel. William Blake wrote that all religion consists in choosing

forms of worship from poetic tales and men thus forgot that all deities reside in the human breast. I am certain—as prophets, seers, and revelators go—Smith was closer to Blake than Hinckley is.

I have a fair number of Mormon intellectual friends, and some of them surprise me by insisting that they are Christians. Perhaps, but with rather a distance, tends to be my silent response. I have never understood why the magnificent Sigmund Freud, who did not trust in the Covenant, though he belonged to the Vienna Chapter of B'nai B'rith (“The Sons of the Covenant”), nevertheless insisted that monotheism was an intellectual advance over polytheism. Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, and John Taylor—three authentic American heroes, faults and all—were not even monotheists, but henotheists: they believed in a plurality of Gods, as presumably the prophet Hinckley does not. Milton, Blake, and Emily Dickinson were all Christian sects of one each. Mormonism is not a Christian sect, because it is (or should be) henotheist, and if you can be a Christian, Muslim, or Jew without even being a monotheist, then may all the angels bless you!

I remember several long and learned conversations I enjoyed with Sterling McMurrin during my Salt Lake City sojourn in the late 1980s. He was generous enough to say we shared much the same vision of the Prophet Joseph, except that he felt (rightly) I neglected Freemasonry. With so distinguished a chider, I since have mended on this matter. The Rosicrucians always were a fiction, but they seem to have transferred to the Masons the whole complex of Hermetist and Gnostic speculation, ancient and Renaissance. Researchers doubtless will continue to find occult, Hermetist, and Kabbalist sources for Joseph Smith, yet I suspect he made or remade all arcane speculations for himself. He was a Sufi who doubtless knew nothing of Sufism. What he most distinctly was not was another American Protestant revivalist. Mitt Romney would not like my saying this, but if he truly followed Smith, Young, and Taylor, then he could not honestly present himself to the electorate as a Christian. If Joseph Smith was a Protestant, then Muhammad was a Catholic. Perspective again is the crucial element: how much of Joseph abides in contemporary Salt Lake City?

The hierarchy or Tower of Power can be viewed either as the apotheosis of Joseph or as his obliteration: is any middle position possible on this? We are caught here in Max Weber's dialectic of charisma and bureaucracy, for which Weber employed Friedrich Schiller's formulation: the “disenchantment of the world.” Perhaps this essay should be retitled: “The disenchantment of Joseph Smith.” All enchantment—erotic, spiritual, literary—depends upon partial or incomplete knowledge. I believe Joseph when he says we don't know him; to me, it is the most important statement of his life. You can't routinize Smith: the Mountain of Names, when it was shown to me, transcended any reaction I could summon.



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PHOTO OF HAROLD BLOOM BY GREGORY BOTTIS, NEW YORK CITY

THE BEST WRITINGS on Joseph Smith avoid reductiveness. “What was he or she really like?” too often turns out to mean: “What is the very worst thing you can say about him or her that is essentially accurate?” Pragmatically, that is reductiveness, and takes us nowhere with Smith. Evidently he manifested the gift of grace: he was a charismatic. So was Brigham Young. Joseph could be unscrupulous, and Young could be brutal. What they accomplished was to turn a religion into a people, which was a repetition of the ancient Hebrew procedure.

I conclude by dismissing the routinization of Joseph's charisma. We are left with three entities: the Mormon people, the Gentile cosmos, and Smith. I suspect that the Mormon and the Gentile perspectives alike always will leave Joseph in darkness. Something will go on being an absence. We will not know him. Did he know himself?