



Joseph Smith: America's Hermetic Prophet

by Lance S. Owens

This article first appeared in *Gnosis: A Journal of Western Inner Traditions*, Spring 1995. In slightly revised form, it also appears in the book *The Prophet Puzzle: Interpretive Essays on Joseph Smith* (edited by Bryan Waterman, Signature Books, 1999). It is reproduced here by permission of the author.

Those readers seeking a more in-depth study of the material covered in this short article might be interested in a longer essay, "[Joseph Smith and Kabbalah: The Occult Connection](#)" by Lance S. Owens -- published in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, Fall 1994.

| [GNOSIS ARCHIVE](#) |

*You don't know
me--you never
will. You never
knew my heart. No
man knows my
history. I cannot*

***tell it; I shall
never undertake
it. I don't blame
anyone for not
believing my
history. If I had
not experienced
what I have, I
could not have
believed it myself.***

***--Joseph Smith,
April 7, 1844.***

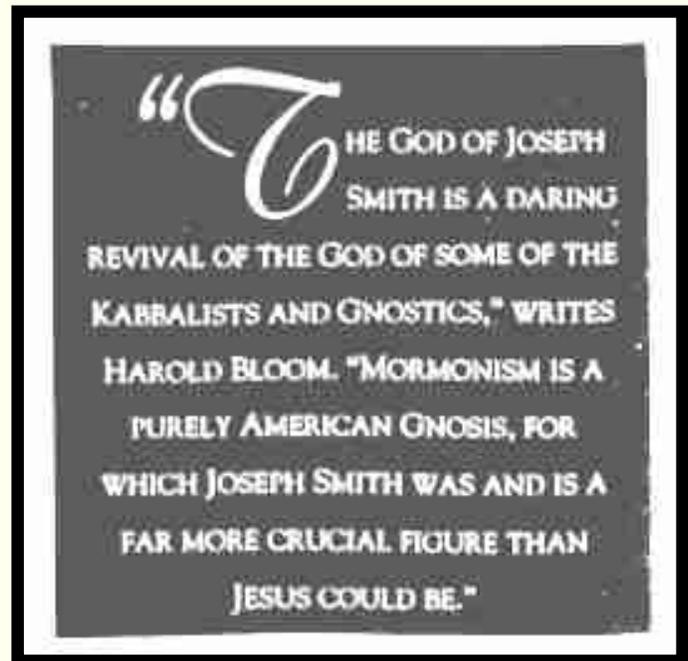
IF THERE IS A RELIGION uniquely and intrinsically American--a religion worked from its soil, and cast in the ardent furnace of its primal dreams--that religion must be Mormonism. Founded in 1830 by the then twenty-four year old Joseph Smith, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (as it is formally named) has emerged from relative insularity during the mid-twentieth century to become a world-wide movement now numbering nine million members. Patriotic, conservative, influential, and vastly wealthy: modern Mormonism is a bastion of American culture.

Despite its success and respectability, however, a fundamental crisis looms before Joseph Smith's church--and the crux of the predicament is Joseph Smith. Late twentieth-century Mormonism is being forced into an uncomfortable confrontation with its early nineteenth-century origins--an inevitable encounter given the preeminent import of the founding prophet to his religion. From the start, Joseph Smith has been cast by his church as a man more enlightened than any mortal to walk the earth since the passing of the last biblical apostles. No historical life could be granted a more mythological tenor than has his. To Mormons, Joseph Smith is, simply, "The Prophet". He bares the imago Christi. He alone stands as doorkeeper to the last dispensation of time; to him angels came and restored God's necessary priestly "keys" and powers; he built the Temple and taught the ancient rituals which therein make of men and women, gods.

But now, one hundred and fifty years after his death, Smith's place in Western religious history is undergoing an important and creative reevaluation. Historians and religious critics alike are examining him anew. And in his history's newest reading, themes unrecognized by its orthodox interpreters are quickly moving to stage center. Quite simply put, modern Mormonism--guardian of the Prophet's story--has no idea what to do with the rediscovered, historical, and rather occult Joseph Smith.

Two years ago, Harold Bloom's boldly original work, *The American Religion*, offered introduction to this unknown Prophet. The intrinsic and true American religion, pronounces Bloom in his widely reviewed book, is a kind of Gnosticism--alone a

surprising enough declaration. But in evidence of this American Gnosis and as first hero of his story, Bloom gives us Joseph Smith. Of the man himself, he judges:



Other Americans have been religion makers....but none of them has the imaginative vitality of Joseph Smith's revelation, a judgment one makes on the authority of a lifetime spent in apprehending the visions of great poets and original speculators.... So self-created was he that he transcends Emerson and Whitman in my imaginative response, and takes his place with the great figures of our fiction."¹

And of his religious creation,

The God of Joseph Smith is a daring revival of the God of some of the Kabbalists and Gnostics, prophetic sages who, like Smith himself, asserted that they had returned to the true religion....Mormonism is a purely American Gnosis, for which Joseph Smith was and is a far more crucial figure than Jesus could be. Smith is not just 'a' prophet, another prophet, but he is the essential prophet of these latter days, leading into the end time, whenever it comes.²

II.

Joseph Smith a modern Gnostic prophet? Certainly nowhere within the vast domains of America religion did this proclamation cause more consternation or amazement than within its Mormon provinces and borderlands. But Bloom (a self-pronounced "Jewish Gnostic") is no casual observer; his knowledge of Gnosis and Kabbalah is tempered by vast experience critiquing the creative matrix of its vision. His thesis deserves--and is receiving--attention. Joseph Smith is taking on a new visage, and words like "gnostic",

"kabbalistic" and "hermetic" have suddenly gained a quite prominent place in the vocabulary employed by those trying to understand him. [\[See the sidebar, "Joseph Smith A Gnostic?"\]](#)

In the form now foreshadowed, Joseph Smith's story is, of course, almost entirely unknown to his church. The oft-repeated orthodox version of the story--and the mythic function of that story's recounting--remains so central to the Mormon past and present that it must be heard before exploring the evolving (and in turn, heretical) rereading.

That story begins around 1820 when the adolescent Smith retired to a grove near his family's farm in Palmyra, New York and knelt in prayer. Troubled over his own deeply aroused religious yearnings and uncertain where to turn for sustenance, he felt compelled to petition God's mercy. "The Lord heard my cry in the wilderness", he wrote in his diary several years later, "and while in the attitude of calling upon the Lord a pillar of light above the brightness of the sun at noonday came down from above and rested upon me and I was filled with the spirit of God and the Lord opened the heavens upon me and I saw the Lord."³ When he came to himself again, he was lying on his back, totally drained of strength, looking up at heaven. This was the new Prophet's first vision.

The young man apparently told several persons about his experience but, outside his own closely knit family, the account was met with general derision. Then in 1823 there came a second manifestation. On the night of September 21, while engaged again in prayer, a light suddenly began filling his room. Within the light there appeared an angelic being. "His whole person was glorious beyond description, and his countenance truly like lightning."

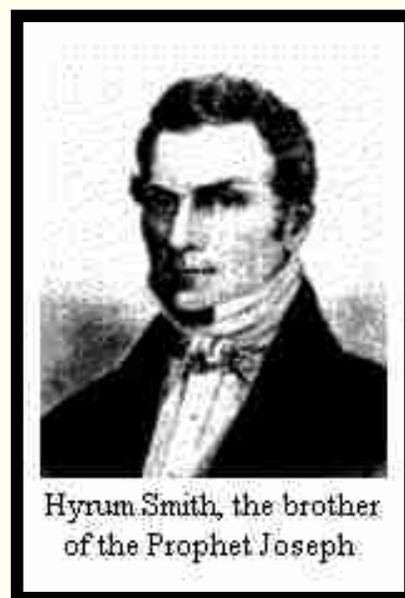
The angel--named Moroni--explained there was a book deposited in a nearby hill, a record written upon gold plates by the ancient inhabitants of the American continent. Joseph was instructed that in due time he would be allowed to obtain the record and commence its translation. No sooner had the messenger departed and the vision ceased, than it began again. Three times the messenger came, each time repeating exactly the same message. As the cock crowed dawn, the final apparition ended. His experience had occupied the entire night.

That day Joseph visited the hill. Straightway he found the location shown him in the vision, and there unearthed a stone box containing the plates. The angel Moroni again appeared, however, warning he could not yet remove the plates from their resting place. Instead, he would need return to the spot on this same appointed day each year for four years. Only on the fourth visit would he be allowed to remove the treasure and begin the work of translation. Smith did as instructed and four years later, on September 22, 1827, the angel delivered the record to his charge.

Soon after obtaining the records, Joseph began his translation. The record was engraved upon the plates in "reformed Egyptian", a language Smith read by gazing into

the "Urim and Thummim", the biblical "seers" delivered to him with the plates. Called the Book of Mormon after its last ancient redactor and scribe, the record purportedly contained an abridged history of America's ancient inhabitants--descendants of a Jewish clan who fled Jerusalem shortly before destruction of the first Temple. Led by their prophetic patriarch, the wandering Israelites had built a boat, launched themselves into the ocean, and eventually been washed ashore somewhere in the Americas. After arrival in the new land, their descendants multiplied greatly, but were plagued by perpetual fratricidal divisions: a few of the people remained loyal to God, the prophets and their heritage as descendants of Israel, while many more became unbelieving pagans.

According to the book, Christ had appeared after his resurrection and taught this American remnant of Israel. For a century thereafter the converted Christians lived in peace; but, inevitably, dissension returned. About 400 years after Christ's visitation there came a final series of great wars in which the barbarous unbelievers vanquished the last of Christ's people. Prior to this final catastrophe, the golden records comprising the Book of Mormon were hidden up to await the time when God would call them forth again.



The call came in 1830. In March of that year three thousand copies of the Book of Mormon were printed. A few weeks later the Church of Christ (as it was first named) was established with Joseph Smith as its prophet, seer and revelator. Though central to the events, the Book of Mormon was, however, only one element in the complete "restoration". Smith soon produced several other less noted pseudepigraphic works, prophetic texts authored under identity of the ancients: books of Enoch, Abraham, and Moses. After the Angel Moroni (who, we should add, returned and retrieved from Smith the golden plates), several other angelic messengers also came bearing "keys" pertaining to the true church of God--priestly powers and consecrations lost in the great apostasy overtaking Christianity after its first centuries. John the Baptist appeared and ordained Smith and a disciple to the lesser, or Aaronic, priesthood, granting the authority to baptize. Next came a visitation of the apostles Peter, James and John, who ordained Joseph to the higher priesthood after the ancient

order of Melchizedek. By 1836, Elijah, Moses, and Christ had all appeared to the new prophet, restoring the fullness of God's power and truth.

Duly ordained to the restored priesthood, and with Book of Mormon in hand, Joseph's disciples fanned out across the northeastern states. Their message was simple: the ancient church of God had been restored with its powers, priesthood, and with a re-opened canon--a restoration accomplished by God through a modern prophet. The flock grew quickly.

By 1836, a Mormon communalist society flourished at Kirtland, Ohio (near Cleveland), and a second gathering of Saints was taking form on the Missouri frontier. But between 1837 and 1839 a series of disasters struck. First, amidst a general financial collapse, the Kirtland community was abandoned. Then the new Zion in Missouri came under violent persecution, culminating in the "Mormon war", a conflict which finally forced all Mormons out of the state under threat of extermination. From this 1839 debacle in Missouri, the beleaguered Mormon refugees retreated to Illinois, and the new city named by the Prophet "Nauvoo".



Over the next four years the Mormon settlement at Nauvoo emerged from a swampy backwater to become, in 1844, one of the largest cities in state of Illinois. Nearly twenty thousand converts answered the call to Joseph's new Zion, four thousand of them arriving from England alone. Handsome

brick homes and shops lined the city's well-planned streets; riverboats unloaded at its Mississippi docks. And on the bluff above, overlooking the city and river, masons raised a new temple after the ancient order of Solomon.

But behind a facade of success, danger and turmoil encompassed the Prophet. By the Spring of 1844 rumors of his multiple marriages and sexual liaisons, of strange rituals and unorthodox teachings, heralded growing turmoil within the Mormon community. Plots abounded. Events were quickly escalating towards scandal and open schism. In early June prominent Mormon dissidents assembled a press in Nauvoo with the intent to publish a paper exposing Smith's secret teachings, including the practice called polygamy. The first (and only) issue of the paper did just that, creating an intolerable situation for Smith. He responded by declaring the press a public nuisance and ordering it destroyed.

For his enemies, this act of obstructing a free press was the last straw: the Prophet had proven himself a theocratic tyrant, and played directly into their hands. He was charged with treason and commanded by the Governor of Illinois to surrender himself. Hoping to avoid the mob violence sure to be directed at Nauvoo if he resisted or fled, Smith surrendered to jail in the nearby but hostile village of Carthage, well aware that he would probably never be allowed to escape alive. As expected, his most rabid enemies quickly gathered to Carthage, and on June 27, 1844 a mob with painted faces--composed in part of the militia assigned by the Governor to protect him--battered down the jail doors and there shot to death both Joseph and his brother, Hyrum.

III.

This summary of Smith's history is widely canonized in published accounts of his life. But there is another side to the history just now emerging. Ten years ago a bizarre series of events focused attention on several other even more curious facts--elements never before integrated into narrations of Joseph Smith's story. When add, they change its tenor entirely.

In the early 1980's an obscure book dealer in Salt Lake City named Mark Hofmann began unearthing a series of previously unknown documents relating to the early history of Mormonism. Most troublesome among these was a letter purportedly written in 1830 by one of Joseph's first disciples. Brimming with references to treasures and enchantments, the letter related how Joseph Smith actually obtained the Book of Mormon not from an angel, but from a magical white salamander which transfigured itself into a spirit. When disclosed publicly in 1985, the "Salamander letter"--as it became known--received prominent discussion in the national media, and stimulated intense new activity in circles studying early Mormonism.

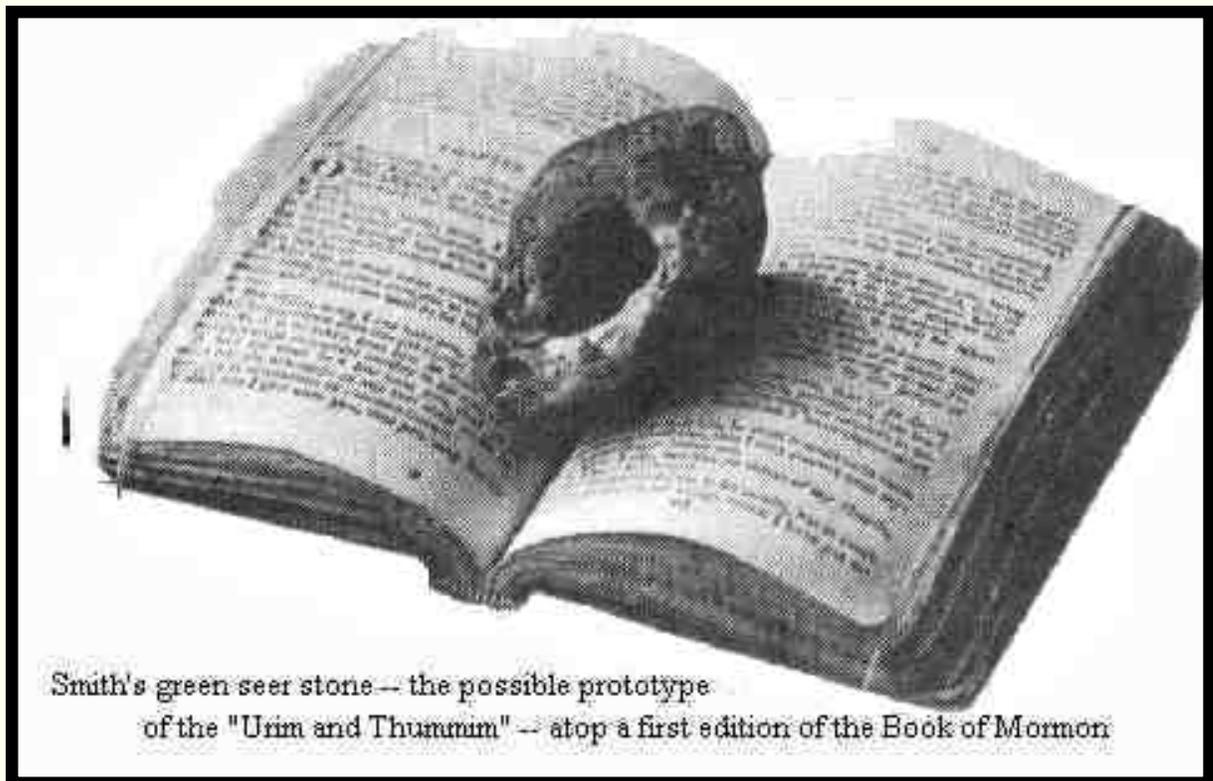
Unsettled by the damaging publicity brought by the letter, Mormon church authorities began negotiating with Hofmann to purchase and sequester other "newly discovered" materials, particularly any that might impugn orthodox versions of their history. These

secret and highly irregular dealings tragically unraveled after a Mormon historian involved with the documents was the victim of a brutal bomb murder. Complex forensic investigations revolving around the murder eventually revealed the "Salamander letter" and several companion documents to be bogus--the pathologically intuitive creations of Hofmann, a master forger turned killer. [4](#)

By then, however, several historians already had undertaken detailed reevaluations of Smith, focusing careful attention towards any overlooked associations he might have had with things magical. Ironically, investigators soon brought to the surface a wealth of unquestionably genuine historical evidence--much of it long available but either misunderstood, suppressed, or ignored--substantiating that Smith and his early followers had multiple involvements with magic, irregular Freemasonry, and traditions generally termed occult.

IV.

Though a work still very much "in progress", Joseph Smith's story is now being pieced together in a new and entirely unorthodox fashion. [5](#)



Beginning in his late-adolescent years Joseph was first recognized by others to have paranormal abilities, and between 1822 and 1827 he was enlisted to act as "seer" for several groups engaged in treasure digging. Not only did he possessed a "seer stone" into which he could gaze and locate things lost or hidden in the earth, but it has recently become evident this same stone was probably the "Urim and Thummim" later used to "translate" portions of the Book of Mormon. According to contemporary

accounts of the book's writing, Joseph would place his "seer stone" in the crown of his hat, and then bend forward with his arms upon his knees and his face buried in the hat. Gazing into the stone while in this posture, he would visualize and then dictate the words to a scribe seated nearby.

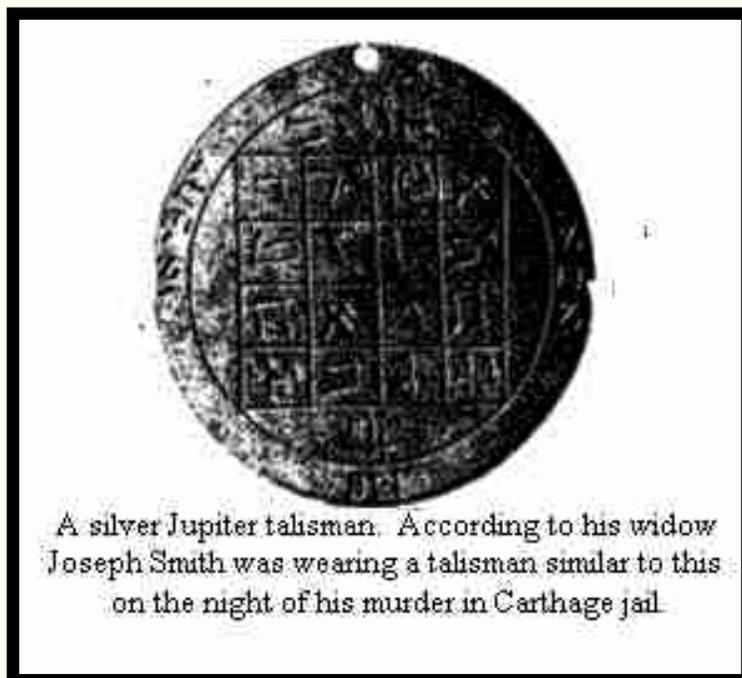


One of several magical parchments in the possession of the Joseph Smith family. This one is called the "Holiness to the Lord" parchment

The treasure digging activities also had involved magical rituals, and it is likely Joseph Smith was cognizant of at least the rudiments of ceremonial magic during his adolescent years. A possible occult mentor to the young Smith has also been identified--a physician named Dr. Luman Walter. Walter was a distant cousin of Smith's future wife and a member of the circle associated with Smith's early treasure quests. By contemporary reports he was not only a physician, but a magician and mesmerist who had traveled extensively in Europe to obtain "profound learning"--probably including knowledge of alchemy, Paracelcian medicine, and hermetic lore. Other pieces of evidence added to the picture. Three very curious parchments and a dagger owned by Joseph Smith's brother, Hyrum, have been carefully preserved by his descendants as sacred relics, handed down from eldest son to eldest son after his death. Family tradition maintained they were religious objects somehow used by Hyrum and Joseph. When finally allowed scrutiny by individuals outside the family, it was recognized they were the implements of a ceremonial magician.

The dagger bears the sigil of Mars. The three parchments, each apparently intended for a different magical operation, are inscribed with a variety of magic symbols and sigils. Another heirloom also fell into perspective: a "silver medallion" owned by Joseph Smith and carried on his person at the time of his murder in Carthage jail, was identified to be a talisman. It is inscribed front and back with the magic square and sigil of Jupiter, the astrological force associated with the year of Joseph Smith's birth. All of these items could have been constructed using the standard texts of ceremonial magic available in

the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century: Agrippa's Occult Philosophy, Sibly's Occult Sciences, and Barrett's The Magus.



In this light, the visit of the angel Moroni took on unusual aspects. The angel had appeared on the night of the Autumnal equinox, between midnight and dawn--hours auspicious for a magical invocation. On the day of the equinox Joseph had subsequently made his four annual visits to the hill. When finally he retrieved the plates, it was the eve of the equinox, in the first hour after midnight. Accounts suggested he had been required to take with him that night a consort (his wife), to ride a black horse, and to dress in black--all lending a further magical tenor to the operation.

Historians puzzled over how this information fit into the more commonly recounted story of Smith. Had the magical parchments been used to invoke the Angel Moroni or other of the angelic visitors seen by Joseph? And above all, how did this relate to the doctrinal substance and evolution of Mormonism, which seemed outwardly devoid of a magical tenor?

V.

While ceremonial magic was a virtually unknown--or at least, little documented--element in Mormonism as encountered by Joseph's followers, other occult aspects in his religion were openly evident. The most obvious was its irregular Masonic connections. In 1842, two years before his death, Joseph had embraced Masonry. But long before his own initiation as a Mason in Nauvoo, he had traveled in company with Masons--a society which included, among other prominent disciples, Brigham Young. His earliest connection with the Craft probably came with his brother (and close life-long companion) Hyrum's initiation as a Mason around 1826, just shortly before Joseph began work on the Book of Mormon.⁶

Sometime before 1826, Joseph may even have had contact with the historically important Masonic figure, Capt. William Morgan. Morgan published the first American authored exposé of Masonic rites at Batavia, New York in 1826; his disappearance (and assumed murder) just before the book's printing was widely judged an act of Masonic vengeance and sparked a national wave of fierce anti-Masonic activity. Given their close geographic proximity--they lived about twelve miles apart--it is quite possible Morgan and Smith met; one nineteenth century Masonic historian even suggested that Smith influenced Morgan.

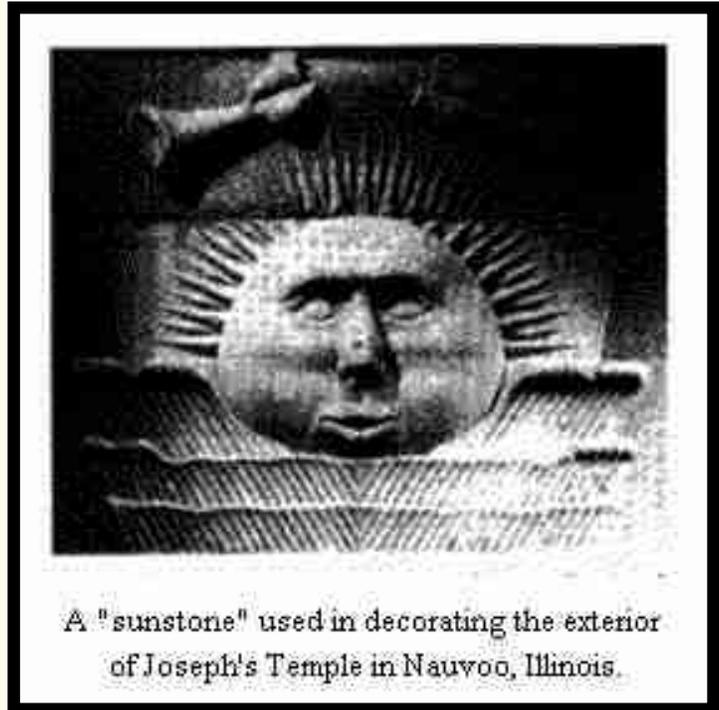
Interestingly, in 1834 the widow of William Morgan, Lucinda, converted to Mormonism along with her second husband, George Washington Harris. Harris was also a Mason and former associate of William Morgan. Joseph Smith became closely acquainted with George and Lucinda around 1836, and sometime thereafter he entered into an intimate relationship with Lucinda. Eventually Lucinda became one of his ritually wed "spiritual wives"--a relationship which fully evolved despite her still being married to Harris.

The Prophet's intercourse with Masonry after 1841 became extremely complex. In June of 1841, efforts to establish a Masonic Lodge at Nauvoo began, and a few months later a dispensation for the Lodge was granted. On March 15, 1842 the lodge was installed, and that evening Joseph Smith was initiated. The next day he was passed and raised to the sublime degree of Master Mason. Two days later Smith organize a "Female Relief Society", perhaps intending it to be a Masonic auxiliary, or the beginning of an "adoptive", androgynous new Mormon Masonry. Eventually ever officer of the Female Relief Society also became a spiritual wife and consort of Joseph's, with his first wife Emma acting as president of the Society (a situation understandably complicated by the fact that Emma did not completely understand Joseph's relationship with the other women).

These last three years before his murder in 1844 were unquestionably the most creative period in a uniquely creative life. Shortly after his Masonic initiations, Smith began formulating the rituals that would be instituted in his own Mormon Temple, then still under early phases of construction in Nauvoo. Six weeks later a first version of this "endowment" (as the ritual was subsequently called) was given by Joseph to a "Holy Order" of nine disciples, all of whom were Master Masons. Many elements of the "endowment" ritual directly paralleled Masonic ceremony, a fact plainly evident to participants. Smith explained to his followers that Masonry was a remnant--even if somewhat corrupted--of the ancient priesthood God had commissioned him to restore in its fullness. In turn, essentially every prominent male figure in the Mormon Church who was present as an adult in Nauvoo became a Master Mason.

Another unusual element entered the matrix of Smith's creativity around this time. From his associations with ceremonial magic and then Masonry, Smith had almost certainly heard of "Cabala". But in 1841 a Jew raised in the Polish borderlands of Prussia, educated at the University of Berlin, and familiar with Kabbalah, joined the Mormon

church, migrated to Nauvoo, and there became Smith's frequent companion and tutor in Hebrew. Documentation has recently come to light suggesting this individual, Alexander Neibaur, not only knew Kabbalah, but probably possessed in Nauvoo a copy of its classic text, the Zohar. Joseph likely became familiar with the Zohar while under the tutelage of Neibaur. Indeed, it appears Smith's April 7, 1844 public declaration of a plurality of Gods was supported by an exegesis on the first Hebrew words of Genesis (Bereshith bara Elohim) drawn from opening section of the Zohar.⁷



During the period after 1841, Joseph introduced the practice of plural "celestial marriage"--what later evolved into Mormon polygamy in Utah--to a small group of his most trusted followers. In this era not only men, but a few women--like Lucinda--secretly took a "plural" spouse. The sacred wedding ritualized by Smith was a transformative union that anointed men and women to become "priests and priestesses", "kings and queens", and then ultimately Goddess and God--the dual creative substance of Divinity in eternal, tantric intercourse. The ceremony was intended to be performed in the holiest precincts of his new Temple. By late 1843 Joseph revealed several ritual extensions to the "endowment", all ultimately incorporated into Mormon Temple ceremony. This legacy of mysterious initiatory rituals revealed by Joseph Smith between 1842 and 1844 remains little altered as the sacred core of Mormonism.

Fifty years later, at the end of the nineteenth century, leaders of the Utah church would still occasionally state in private that the Mormon temple ritual embodied "true Masonry"--a fact unknown to most modern Mormons. But then, of course, almost all of this history is unknown to the average modern Mormon. Even well-educated "Latter-day Saints" today seldom understand the origins of the compass and square embroidered upon the breasts of the ritual garment worn by temple initiates. The relationship of these temple rituals' development with Joseph Smith's occult vision and the concurrent

introduction of Masonry in Nauvoo is now, however, becoming the subject of intense renewed interest.

VI.

In the autumn of 1994 pieces of the prophet puzzle began falling into place; a unifying pattern was discerned within the unusual array of historical information outlined above. Joseph Smith's quest for a sacred golden treasure buried in dark earth, his involvement with ceremonial magic, the angelic visitations, the pseudepigraphic texts he "translated", his declaration of Masonry as a remnant of priesthood, and his restoration of a Temple with its central mystery of a sacred wedding--all could be fitted into one very recently recognized context: Hermeticism.

Not only did Smith have numerous documented associations with historical legacies of Hermeticism such as magic and Masonry, but his religious creation also evidenced several parallels with Hermetic ideas. John L. Brooke, professor of history at Tufts University, has recently explored this subject in a seminal 1994 study of Mormonism and Hermeticism, *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644-1844*

⁸ Brooke notes the "striking parallels between the Mormon concepts of coequality of matter and spirit, of the covenant of celestial marriage, and of an ultimate goal of human godhood and the philosophical traditions of alchemy and Hermeticism, drawn from the ancient world and fused with Christianity in the Italian Renaissance." Of course, in this light Harold Bloom's poetic reading of Joseph Smith as a "Gnostic" takes on broadened nuances: though unnoted by Bloom, Smith's religion-making imagination was allied in several ways with remnants of an hermetic tradition frequently linked to gnosticism.

In investigating Smith's connection with Hermeticism, historical attention is also being newly focused on evidences supporting an oft-ignored claim of esoteric lore: the import of Hermeticism in the evolution of early America's religious consciousness and political culture. This has broad implications for our understanding of the new nation's religious history. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there developed within Europe's religious crucible a complex alloying of Hermeticism and alchemical mysticism with radical aspirations for Christian reformation. Brooke well documents how this intersection between dispensational restorationism and the hermetic occult flowed into early American culture and religion: among Quakers, Pietists, and perfectionists coming to Pennsylvania and New Jersey between about 1650 and 1730; through the "culture of print" conveyed by alchemical and hermetic texts brought from Europe; and in the development of late-eighteenth century esoteric Masonry with its rich foundations in Kabbalistic, hermetic and alchemical mythology.

As a young man in the company of occult treasure seekers, drawing magic circles and battling enchantments in the Pennsylvania countryside, Joseph Smith probably first

learned about this alternative and very un-Puritan religious vision. Smith may even have there heard the old Rosicrucian legend of a sixteen year old prophet named Christian Rosencreutz and the mysterious Book M which he had translated. Certainly he would have learned of alchemy's transmutational mystery, and of the Philosopher's Stone. Soon after, the eighteen year old Smith found his own sacred treasure buried in earth, a treasure golden and yet--as alchemical lore promised--of substance more subtle than vulgar gold. Gazing into his seer stone, he saw in the Book of Mormon's golden plates a record of ancient fratricidal oppositions, and a Christ who brought union.

For a decade, Brooke suggests, Smith's emergent hermetic theology was disguised under the coloring of traditional Christian restorationism and formed as new Christian church. But finally, in the last years of his life, the veil was parted:

At Nauvoo he publicly and unequivocally announced his new theology of preexistent spirits, the unity of matter and spirit, and the divinization of the faithful, and he privately pursued the consummation of alchemical-celestial marriage as the ultimate vehicle to this divinity. The alchemical-hermetic term of coniunctio powerfully summarizes the resolution that Smith had achieved at Nauvoo by the summer of 1844. He had established a theology of the conjunction--the unification--of the living and the dead, of men and women, of material and spiritual, of secular and sacred, all united in a "new and everlasting covenant" over which he would preside as king and god. In these circumstances the conventional boundary between purity and danger, right and wrong, law and revolution, simply melted away.... In effect the greater Mormon emergence can be visualized as meta-alchemical experience running from opposition to union, an experience shaped and driven by the personality of Joseph Smith.⁹

VII.

How this strange hermetic religion evolved into today's Mormon church is one of the more interesting questions awaiting detailed study, particularly as the contours of Joseph Smith's vision become more sharply defined. I can here, however, give only a rough summary of what followed Smith's death.

Joseph established no clear order of prophetic succession, and in the chaotic period after his martyrdom several followers claimed his office and prophetic mantle. Brigham Young, long a loyal apostle to Smith, emerged as the natural organizational leader and was eventually proclaimed the new "prophet, seer and revelator"--a position he held until his death three decades later. Forced to abandon Nauvoo in the winter of 1846, Brigham Young led his people through their difficult flight to the valley of the Great Salt Lake, and there organized the new Mormon society.

Young staunchly defended the teachings and rituals presented by Smith in Nauvoo, including the temple ceremonies and the doctrines relating to polygamy. Isolated in the

Rocky Mountain wilderness, he hoped to realize Joseph's millennial dreams and establish Zion unhampered by a hostile, misunderstanding world. But it was not to be. With the full force of the United States government and a Victorian public morality marshaled against the Mormon church, in 1890 the practice of polygamy had to be publicly abandoned. After its defeat in that epochal battle, Mormonism slowly found accommodation with the world it had fled. In the process, many elements of Joseph's mystery religion were necessarily veiled or attenuated--and by the late twentieth century, perhaps largely forgotten.

For students of religion, the Prophet Joseph Smith today remains a grand American enigma--too potent a force to be dismissed uncommented, and yet too complex for facile categorization. In the final analysis, I must agree with Bloom that "we do not know Joseph Smith, as he prophesied that even his own could never hope to know him. He requires strong poets, major novelist, accomplished dramatists to tell his history, and they have not yet come to him." But the tides may be shifting. While the Prophet still awaits his poets, historians are examining with new wonder this most extraordinary chapter in American religious history.

A "Gnostic" Joseph Smith?

Harold Bloom's coupling of Joseph Smith to the Gnostic tradition has aroused animated disagreement among students of Mormonism and Gnosticism alike. Several questions crucial to modern Gnostic studies are raised by this emerging dialogue: What is the relationship of later "Gnostic" movements to classical Gnosticism? Were rudiments of the tradition conveyed to post-classical groups by historical links (oral transmissions, myths and texts); was it instead the independent product of a recurrent type of creative vision? Or are dual forces of historical transmission and primary Gnostic experience generally interdependent, even occultly linked? While Joseph Smith had historical connection with late remnants of Gnosticism conveyed by Renaissance Hermeticism and Kabbalah, his religious creation nonetheless clearly derived in large part from a personal experience. Was that primal creativity "Gnostic"? If so, how did it relate to the matrix of tradition?

The complexity of these questions defy simple declarations. Nonetheless, Smith did apparently espouse themes familiar to Gnosticism--prominent among them being his affirmation of the reality and necessity of continuing, individual revelation as the source of salvific knowledge. Joseph Smith and his religion eschewed theology in favor of the dynamic process of revelation. The result was best summarized in what Bloom remarked to

be "one of the truly remarkable sermons ever preached in America", a discourse delivered by the Prophet on April 7, 1844. Known as the the King Follett Discourse, it was Joseph's last major address to his church, presented just ten weeks before his death at age 38.

"There are but very few beings in the world who understand rightly the character of God," he began. "If men do not comprehend the character of God, they do not comprehend their own character." Within humankind there is an immortal spark of intelligence, taught the Prophet, a seed of divine intellect or light which is "as immortal as, and coequal with, God Himself." God is not, however, to be understood as one and singular. Turning to Hebrew and an oddly Kabbalistic exegesis of the first three words of Genesis (an exegesis probably taken directly from the Zohar), Smith pronounced there are a multitude of Gods emanated from the First God, existing one above the other without end. He who humankind calls God was Himself once a man; and man, by advancing in intelligence, knowledge--consciousness--may be exalted with God, become as God.

Near the beginning of his ministry in 1833, Smith declared "the glory of God is intelligence", eternal and uncreated. Those who wish to find in him a Gnostic have pointed out that Smith used the word "intelligence" interchangeably with "knowledge" in his prophetic writings during this period. Indeed, they suggest, his words might be read poetically to proclaim God's glory is Gnosis--a Gnosis that saves woman and man by leading them together to a single uncreated and intrinsically divine Self.

Notes

1. Harold Bloom, *The American Religion* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 98, 127.
2. Ibid., 99, 123.
3. Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, Vol. 1 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1989), 6. For a detailed examination of Joseph Smith's early years, see Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984). Despite many interpretive limitations, Smith's best over-all biography remains Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945, 2nd ed. 1971).
4. See Linda Sillitoe and Allen Roberts, *Salamander: The*

Story of the Mormon

Forgery Murders

Signature Books, 1988); Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, **The**

Mormon Murders

Nicolson, 1988).

(Salt Lake City:

(New York: Weidenfeld &

5. Smith's associations with occult traditions in early America, including extensive documentation of events discuss here, are comprehensively detailed in D.

Michael Quinn, **Early Mormonism**

and the Magic World

View

(Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987). For a interpretive reading

of this history see [Lance S. Owens, "Joseph Smith Kabbalah: The Occult](#)

[Connection", *Dialogue: A*](#)

[*Journal of Mormon*](#)

[*Thought*](#)

[27 \(Fall 1994\): 117-194.](#)

6. Joseph Smith's and his religion's interactions with the Masonic tradition are fully documented in Michael W. Homer, "'Similarity of Priesthood in Masonry': The Relationship between Freemasonry and Mormonism",

Dialogue: A Journal

of Mormon Thought

1-113.

27 (Fall 1994):

7. [Owens, 178-84.](#)

8. John L. Brooke, ***The Refiner's***

Fire: The Making of

Mormon Cosmology,

1644-1844

Press, 1994).

(New York: Cambridge University

9. Brooke, 281.

| [GNOSIS ARCHIVE](#) |

Yet Joseph Smith, this frontier prophet of the early 1800s, found little honor while alive and at the age of 39 was murdered by a mob that included some of his would-be followers. Narrated before his passing by Academy Award-winning actor Gregory Peck, and remastered with all-new dramatic re-creations and scholarly and religious commentary from experts outside of the faith as well as current religious leaders from inside the faith, *Joseph Smith: American Prophet*, examines what it was about his remarkable life story that has inspired such impassioned rancor on one side and.Â The filmâ€™s dramatizations are based on Joseph Smithâ€™s accounts and those of his followers. It depicts his life as Mormons believe it happened, with context and analysis of their significance. Joseph Smith called America Zion: "You know there has been great discussion in relation to Zion--where it is, and where the gathering of the dispensation is, and which I am now going to tell you. The prophets have spoken and written upon it; but I will make a proclamation that will cover a broader ground. The whole of America is Zion itself from north to south, and is described by the prophets, who declare that it is the Zion where the mountain of the Lord should be, and that it should be in the center of the land. When elder shall take up and examine the old prophecies in the Bible, they Joseph Smith: America's Hermetic Prophet (1999). After publication of my much longer and more academic work "Joseph Smith and Kabbalah: The Occult Connection", I was asked to write a shorter version of the material for publication in a journal. Subsequently, this shorter version was more. After publication of my much longer and more academic work "Joseph Smith and Kabbalah: The Occult Connection", I was asked to write a shorter version of the material for publication in a journal. Subsequently, this shorter version was also published as a chapter in a book: "Th

The new film "Joseph Smith American Prophet" has inspired lives and strengthened testimonies since its release last fall. If you haven't seen it, you're in for a delightful experience. This re-boot of the 1999 PBS production narrated by the late great actor Gregory Peck, includes new material and scenes that bring insight into the Prophet's life. A new film represents a step toward fulfilling LDS Church President Spencer W. Kimball's hope for new ways of telling the story of the Restoration. May more such ventures follow. Share this Rating. Title: Joseph Smith: American Prophet (TV Movie 2017). 7,7/10. Want to share IMDb's rating on your own site? A PBS docudrama of the life of Mormon leader (some believe prophet) Joseph Smith (1805-44). Narrated by the late Gregory Peck. Includes interviews with historians (some of them Mormon) and LDS officers and elders. Yet Joseph Smith, this frontier prophet of the early 1800s, found little honor while alive and at the age of 39 was murdered by a mob that included some of his would-be followers. Narrated before his passing by Academy Award-winning actor Gregory Peck, and remastered with all-new dramatic re-creations and scholarly and religious commentary from experts outside of the faith as well as current religious leaders from inside the faith, Joseph Smith: American Prophet, examines what it was about his remarkable life story that has inspired such impassioned rancor on one side and. The film's dramatizations are based on Joseph Smith's accounts and those of his followers. It depicts his life as Mormons believe it happened, with context and analysis of their significance. Joseph Smith Jr. (December 23, 1805 – June 27, 1844) was an American religious leader and founder of Mormonism and the Latter Day Saint movement. When he was 24, Smith published the Book of Mormon. By the time of his death, 14 years later, he had attracted tens of thousands of followers and founded a religion that continues to the present with millions of global adherents. Joseph Smith a modern Gnostic prophet? Certainly nowhere within the vast domains of America religion did this proclamation cause more consternation or amazement than within its Mormon provinces and borderlands. But Bloom (a self-pronounced "Jewish Gnostic") is no casual observer; his knowledge of Gnosis and Kabbalah is tempered by vast experience critiquing the creative matrix of its vision. His thesis deserves and is receiving attention. VII. How this strange hermetic religion evolved into today's Mormon church is one of the more interesting questions awaiting detailed study, particularly as the contours of Joseph Smith's vision become more sharply defined. I can here, however, give only a rough summary of what followed Smith's death.