

JAMES B. ALLEN

BUT DICK TRACY LANDED ON THE MOON



ANTI-MORMONS have claimed that because Joseph Smith said there were men on the moon, he must be a false prophet and Mormonism must be false. I recognize, of course, that they use this bit of information only as one more piece in a mountain of data that, in the aggregate, is supposed to prove that Joseph was a deceiver. But why do they assume that mature rational Mormons cannot accept the possibility, even the probability, that their prophets have often said things that later have proved to be incorrect? As a believing Mormon who is also a historian, I confess that I worry about those who learn about all the mistakes and suddenly find themselves on the verge of apostasy. What is the basis of their faith? Is it some mythological or idyllic concept that in some strange way Mormon prophets are totally immune from error? That kind of faith is, of course, easily torn to shreds. But I still believe that most Mormons are mature and rational enough to recognize that even Church leaders, including Joseph Smith and his successors, are human and that neither God nor his prophets have ever claimed that they were above making mistakes.

As a believing historian, however, I also feel some deep concerns for my students in terms of what impressions they may be receiving. As I look at all that has been written about Joseph Smith among the Mormons, I find a myriad of miscellaneous, sometimes even misleading or erroneous, images being created. I am almost as concerned about this tendency as

I am about the penchant of others to debunk, for I think it could create some unrealistic expectations in my students and, in the long run, set them up to be hurt.

I am reminded that during his lifetime Joseph Smith continually protested the tendency in some of his disciples to expect too much or for outsiders to look for too much. One thing I respect about Joseph Smith is that when I encounter him I find a man who recognized his own human frailties, was candid about them, and was trying to overcome them. "This morning," his *History* reports on 8 February 1843, "I read German and visited with a brother and sister from Michigan, who thought that 'a prophet is always a prophet'; but I told them that a prophet was a prophet only when he was acting as such."¹ In a Sunday sermon on 23 July 1843 he said, "It has gone abroad that I proclaimed myself no longer a prophet. I said it last Sabbath ironically: I supposed you would all understand. It was not that I would renounce the idea of being a prophet, but that I had no disposition to proclaim myself such. . . . The burdens which roll upon me are very great. My persecutors allow me no rest, and I find that in the midst of business and care the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. Although I was called of my Heavenly Father to lay the foundation of this great work and kingdom in this dispensation, and testify of His revealed will to scattered Israel, I am subject to like passions as other men, like the prophets of olden times."² His closest friends even heard him say that "Some revelations are of God; some revelations are of man; and some revelations are of the devil."

Now I am not one to go about making long lists of all the Prophet's errors. But I do think it important for faithful Mormons to accept the *principle* Joseph Smith

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was trying to put across. It is possible for a prophet to say something that was not given to him by revelation. If such things lead to mistaken information, that does not prove other information was not given by revelation or that the prophet was not a prophet.

As Van Hale has pointed out, Joseph Smith may have believed in moonmen, but many of his contemporaries,

WHY COULDN'T MATURE MORMONS ACCEPT THE POSSIBILITY, EVEN THE PROBABILITY, THAT PROPHETS HAVE OFTEN SAID THINGS LATER PROVED TO BE INCORRECT?

both in and out of the Church, believed the same thing. I have seen no evidence that anyone else suggested that they dressed like Quakers, but there is abundant evidence that even very late in the nineteenth century this was a common belief—especially among certain religionists. Timothy Harley's *Moon Lore*, written in 1885 is one example. Harley, an English divine, spent an entire chapter examining all the scientific and logical evidence at his disposal. By this time the scientific world was having a definite impact on religious thought, and Harley very gingerly threaded his way through all the evidence in order to show that he was not anti-scientific or dogmatic in his assumptions. And he stated his conclusions firmly, though with a clear pronouncement that he realized that science may yet prove him wrong. "We cannot admit the probability that the earth is the only tenement with tenants: we must be confirmed in our judgment that the sun and the planets, with their moons, ours of course included, are neither blank nor barren, but abodes of variously organized beings, fitted to fulfil the chief end of all noble existence: the enjoyment of life, the effluence of love, the good of all around and the glory of God above."³ In other words, his religious perceptions led him to accept the evidence on the side of moonmen.

Mormons then were not so different from other people in many of their religious perceptions. While it is true that by the end of the Nauvoo period there were many unique doctrines in Mormonism, many elements had their counterparts in society. This is not to say that Joseph deliberately copied from anyone, but the evidence is abundant that at least some of his ideas were in the air. And why should this surprise or bother anyone, especially with regard to moonmen? Great thinkers from Pythagorus to Jules Verne—and others even more recently than him—have suggested the notion of moonmen, so why not Joseph Smith?

Certainly neither he nor Brigham Young, who also believed it, made a creedal, irreversible issue of it. If they picked up what was in the air, who is to blame them? All this should do is make Mormon scholars and theologians especially careful as they try to define what came by revelation, what was "essential" to the Mormon faith, and what elements in the whole body of private and pulpit pronouncements were personal views or speculations. It is healthy, I believe, for historians to look at all the possible sources for Mormon thought—not with the idea of defining them environmentally but rather of increasing our understanding of how they were related to the intellectual world around them.

Mormons need to be more aware of the history of the doctrines of the Church. One of the important contributions, I believe, of something like the Sunstone Theological Symposium is that it is helping to open to our minds the realization that Mormonism is not and never has been a static faith. Some of us may find a few of our pet ideas or biases a little wrenched by certain historical discoveries. But I think it is far better to know what has happened and to be able to rationalize some elements of our understanding accordingly than to live our lives in ignorance and suddenly have our faith destroyed by some sudden shaking of a rather sandy foundation.

Now, however, I must make fun of a rather disturbing statement that Van Hale made in his paper on moonmen. "Nobody today," he says, "believes in moonmen." As an avid fan of Dick Tracy, I am stunned—for I am suddenly confronted with my own tragic reassessment of a great American hero. About 1968 Dick Tracy and Diet Smith landed on the moon—I know it because I read about it in the funny papers. There they found a great sub-surface culture and intelligent people with little antennae sticking out from their heads. In 1969 other Americans landed on the moon—I know that because I read that in the paper, too. But they found no moonmen, and neither have their successors. Nevertheless, Chester Gould, the writer of Dick Tracy, persisted. Tracy brought back a girl from the moon, and Junior Tracy even married her and they had offspring. But, alas for the final evidence of our last great hope for life on the moon, since that time even Dick Tracy seems to have reneged. The moon maid died, her child has disappeared from the comic strip, and Junior Tracy has even married Sparkle Plenty. It is as if the moon maid and her race never existed—and perhaps Dick Tracy never really went there in the first place. But you can't destroy my faith in moonmen by saying that no one believes in them, for someday I will resurrect the old Dick Tracy strips and then, despite the complete lack of evidence in today's comic strip, my own latent belief in moonmen well may be revived, at least for a little while. So there.

Notes

1. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, edited by B.H. Roberts (6 vols., Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1946) 5:265.

2. *Ibid.*, 5:516.

3. Timothy Harley, *Moon Lore* (London:1885), p. 256.

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