
TURNING THE TIME OVER TO . . .

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TREASURE-SEEKING THEN AND NOW

LAST AUGUST I attended the BYU conference on the Mark Hofmann documents where I had an opportunity to reflect on what the documents meant to me. After searching my thoughts and testing my feelings, I came to the conclusion that they meant very little. They did not mean much when they first came out, and their fall from historical authenticity had little effect on me later. That may sound like a strange confession from one who was writing on the early life of Joseph Smith at the very moment the “Salamander” and 1825 Joseph Smith letters came to light, with their presumably earth-shaking revelations about Joseph Smith’s money-digging. Yet it is true.

I first heard of the letter from Marvin Hill when I was correcting the page proofs of *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*. Marvin did not have the letters in his possession, but he knew enough of the contents to think they were relevant to my study. Like the good friend he has always been, he took the trouble to phone me the news. His message put me in a difficult spot. I could not cite the letters because they were not yet deposited, and their very existence was still a rumor. On the other hand, to disregard them altogether put my book in danger of instant obsolescence after it was published. Somehow or other I had to alter my text to take the supposed contents of the letters into account without actually referring to the letters themselves.

Interestingly, I could make those alterations in a very few words, which I proceeded to do even though the book was in page proofs at the time. Not all readers thought I succeeded; Marvin Hill among other reviewers commented that the timing of the book’s publication was

unfortunate because the letters were not included. Now I am enjoying what I hope will be the last laugh in this connection, though with all the reverses in recent years one can never be sure. The main point is that the information in the letters could be so easily accommodated because I had already come to the conclusion that there was likely money-digging in the Smith family and had included it in my version of the story. There had always been evidence of it in the hostile affidavits from the Smith’s neighbors, evidence which Mormons dismissed as hopelessly biased. But when I got into the sources, I found evidence from friendly contemporaries as well, Martin Harris, Joseph Knight, Oliver Cowdery, and Lucy Mack Smith. All of these witnesses persuaded me treasure-seeking and vernacular magic were part of the Smith family tradition, and that the hostile witnesses, including the 1826 trial record, had to be taken seriously.

I had been prepared for this change in my own thinking by events in the world of scholarship. The Hofmann letters had less impact on my perspective than the work of Keith Thomas and Jon Butler.¹ With the help of other scholars, the two of them had actually worked a minor revolution in the understanding of religious history. Thomas especially had shown what a large part magical practices had played in the religious lives of Christians up until around 1700. The clergy had done their best to purge magic from the lives of the European populace, but with limited success. Not just the poor and ignorant but people at all levels had believed in magic and practiced its rituals, without sensing any contradiction with their Christian belief. Christianity and magic were blended into a kind of general faith in supernatural powers. That scholarship helped me understand Joseph Smith, because the sources

made it clear that not just the Smith family but many people in the neighborhood were invoking spells and rituals to find buried treasure while still claiming to be believing Christians. Although Thomas had marked 1700 as the era when magic declined in England, Butler had shown it persisted long after in America. Palmyra, I decided, had simply inherited this culture.

This realization transformed my thinking about the Prophet. Before this time, I had been aware of the evidence of treasure-seeking without taking it seriously. It seemed so entirely incongruous with everything I knew of Joseph, like asking me to believe that my grandmother was a lifelong member of the Mafia. Whatever the evidence, it was too farfetched to be believable. Thomas and Butler helped me to see that treasure-seeking and deep religious belief had not seemed contradictory in early America; so why should they seem contradictory in Joseph Smith? From that time on, the question for me was simply a matter of evidence. If we could actually show that Joseph Smith, Sr., or one of the Smith brothers went looking for buried treasure with the aid of hazel wands we should believe it; that fact did not contradict the family’s belief in divine revelation or Joseph’s latter divine calling. Treasure-seeking was simply a part of their culture, as baseball is a part of ours.

Historians of all persuasions now seem to have adopted a point of view much like this. The question that remains in dispute is whether or not the Smiths shed their involvement in magic after Joseph retrieved the plates of the Book of Mormon. I am one who believes that treasure-seeking lost importance in their lives. There is quite a bit of evidence that they were putting it behind them after 1826. In the South Bainbridge trial of 1826, W. D. Purple, no friend of the Smith family or the Mormons, recorded lengthy testimony about Joseph’s seerstones and money-digging, but the one statement that impressed him more than any other came from Joseph Smith, Sr. Father Smith said that

“both he and his son were mortified that this wonderful power which God had so miraculously given him should be used only in search of filthy lucre.

. . . His constant prayer to his Heavenly Father was to manifest His will concerning this marvelous power. He trusted that the Son of Righteousness would some day illumine the heart of the boy, and enable him to see His will concerning him.”²

The statement shows Father Smith looking away from crass money-digging toward some

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more exalted use of Joseph's power. Smith treasure-seeking did not end right away; but from that time on, the Prophet and his family were caught up more and more in translation, the organization of the Church, the building up of the Kingdom, and all the events that fill thousands of pages of the public record. Treasure-seeking slid into the background. To claim that through the remainder of their lives they were still fundamentally magicians seems like an outlandish distortion of the historical facts.

On the other hand, there is evidence here and there of a continuing interest in treasure-seeking and perhaps a fascination with the ancient lore of magic, as Michael Quinn has recently argued.³ All of that evidence will have to be weighed and entered into the story. But what intrigues me still more is that nowhere, so far as I can see, did the revelations ever repudiate treasure-seeking. Joseph had no reason to believe that it was all superstitious hogwash, as we are inclined to think today. At one point Moroni warned Joseph that the money-diggers were evil men and to avoid them; he did not say Joseph or his family had been grievously misled in believing in such foolishness. There was opportunity to do that when Oliver came to help Joseph. The revelation given at that time, in its original version, spoke of Oliver's gift of working with the rod, presumably something in the vein of a water-witching rod. The instruction to Oliver was not to abandon the practice; rather he was told to use his gifts for righteous and higher purposes, namely to assist the Prophet in the work of restoration. The revelations did not bluntly deny the validity or value of working with the rod; they redirected Oliver's efforts toward the Kingdom.

These facts bring us beyond history to theology. They compel us to ask why treasure-seeking was not exposed and forbidden by God. Is it because there is actual validity in magical practice which our post-Enlightenment minds cannot comprehend? Perhaps we are the ones who are narrow and blind, not the treasure-seekers. That may be true, but there is an even larger issue here in my opinion.

What would happen if the Lord were to forbid and deny every cultural practice that is inconsistent with his divine order? What if every aspect of our lives that is unworthy of a perfect celestial existence was condemned? When we look at the lives we lead, what parts would suffer? Consider academic learning, or professional ambition, or artistic creativity. We foster and encourage all of these, at Brigham

Young University for one place, but everywhere else in the Church besides. The lives of most adult male Mormons in the United States are deeply regulated by their desire to advance themselves in their work, to improve and to make more money. And yet this ambition, along with learning and art, has often been the subject of warning, in the scriptures and from contemporary prophets. President David O. McKay told us that success in life may deflect us from that which is most important, our families. The Book of Mormon is an extended tract against the evil power of riches to canker our souls and make us forget God. Learning, we know, can lead us to deny God and be lifted up in worldly pride. The arts can become an artificial religion that substitutes beauty created in great prideful acts of exhibitionism for humble submission to God's power. Virtually all of the cultural values we prize most highly can become the enemies of religion and are based at least partially on false assumptions about the innermost realities of the universe.

Why do not the revelations repudiate these, along with Joseph Smith's treasure-seeking? Surely the contradictions in Joseph's culture are no more extreme than in our own. Should we not be stripped of worldly culture just as we wish the Lord had repudiated the magic in his? The answer, I believe, goes to the heart of our understanding of life. What would happen to us if we were stripped of every trace of worldly culture? What would remain? I think to purge us now of everything that was not celestial would cripple if not destroy our personalities, as amputating a leg or cutting out our lungs would cripple our bodies. Our personalities could not survive the trauma. Instead, as the scriptures say, we are expected to grow from grace to grace, line by line. The idea is not to rip away all error instantly, but to redirect and purify as Oliver was told to redirect his gift. To do otherwise would deny the very purpose of earth life. We did not come here to live in a celestial culture. We lived that life before we came. We are here to live amidst error, evil, suffering, and corruption in a terrestrial world. The central purpose of our lives is to discover truth and goodness in the midst of confusion and evil, and live by what we discover. We are not to abandon this world but to transform it. We are here to reform worldly culture, inch by inch, into godly culture. That struggle is why we came. We are on earth to make our ambition, our learning, our art serve God.

From that perspective Joseph Smith's treasure-seeking can be looked on as a great success. Whether or not magical powers truly exist, the belief in magic which Joseph inherited from his New England forebears was not

pure godliness; if not repudiated, magic had to be changed. Joseph made that change in his life. From the place where he entered history as a poor New England farmboy caught up in treasure-seeking and a hundred other worldly things, he went on to become a prophet and revelator who used all of his gifts to advance God's kingdom. Far from condemning him for his failure to cast off his culture more decisively, we should look to ourselves, and ask if we are as effectively redirecting our lives and our culture to godly purposes. Are we doing as well as he did in turning our treasure-seeking into service to our Heavenly Father's children?

NOTES

1. Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Scribner's, 1971); Jon Butler, "Magic, Astrology, and the Early American Religious Heritage," *American Historical Review*, 84 (April 1979), 317-346. See also Herbert Leventhal, *In the Shadow of the Enlightenment: Occultism and Renaissance Science in Eighteenth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 1976); Alan Taylor, "The Early Republic's Supernatural Economy: Treasure Seeking in the American Northeast, 1780-1830," *American Quarterly*, 38 (Spring 1986), 6-34.

2. The trial record can be most conveniently consulted in Francis W. Kirkham, *A New Witness for Christ in America: The Book of Mormon* (Independence, Mo.: Press of Zion's Printing and Publishing Company, 1951), 2:366.

3. D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987).



THOMAS THE APOSTLE
John 20:28-29

No blessing for Thomas;
He only knew
Past all confusion
The word was true.

Lord, greatly doubting,
Skeptic or worse,
I ask no blessing
Upon my head.

Surer than blessing,
Living or dead
Grant me, Savior,
Thomas's curse.

LOUISA MCDONALD