
THE MORMON AS MAGUS

EARLY MORMONISM AND THE MAGIC WORLD VIEW

by D. Michael Quinn

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*Reviewed by Stephen D. Ricks
and Daniel C. Peterson*

MICHAEL QUINN'S *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, like his other studies, is well written and articulate, and, except for the unfortunate incorporation of his references into the body of the text, proceeds with a smooth and deliberate flow. Like his other writings, this volume reflects deep erudition. Fully sixty-seven pages are devoted to listing bibliography, their usefulness enhanced by an introductory section giving those entries treating specific topics, e.g., "theories of magic," "the relation between magic, religion, and rationality in early modern Europe," "the interrelation of the occult and Mormonism," and "Mormon folklore." In addition, there are forty two pages of figures.

Quinn has provided a wealth of information concerning the early history of Joseph Smith, his family, and the early period of Mormon history, frequently from almost inaccessible sources. He offers considerable evidence indicating that Joseph Smith, members of his family, and some of his early associates were involved in the use of seer stones, divining rods, amulets, and parchments, as well as in the search for buried treasure. Further, he adduces evidence to indicate that Joseph maintained some interest in these matters even after the New York period. Quinn believes that involvement in such things in no way compromises

STEPHEN D. RICKS and DANIEL C. PETERSON teach in the Department of Asian and Near Eastern Languages at Brigham Young University.

Joseph Smith's role as a prophet and, indeed, bears his testimony early in the book.

Up to this point, we see no need to contest Quinn's basic evidence or to disagree with what we understand to be his thesis. On the other hand, we have considerable reservations about his uncaredful and potentially misleading use of the terms "magic" and "occult," as well as the extent to which he might seem to be implying that these activities had a formative influence on the coming forth and current composition of the Book of Mormon.

Quinn says in his introduction (pp. xi-xii) that he has adopted Webster's Third New International Dictionary as a guide for his use of the terms "magic" and "occult." He also describes a "magic world view" which he believes characterized the Smith family and many of their associates. However, even a casual reflection on some aspects of the most normative of Western religious traditions, such as Judaism and Christianity in its major forms, reveals rites that could easily be construed to fit Webster's definition of "magic," and beliefs that correspond to Quinn's further refinements on the "magic world view." With some ingenuity, it could be argued that the more radical fundamentalist Protestant formulations of confessing Christ as one's personal savior—with their concomitant guarantee of salvation—represent a kind of "magic." The Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation could also be (and has been) viewed in the same way.

Quinn is not unaware of the problems inher-

ent in his definition. In his introduction and in the first chapter of the book, he discusses the difficulty of establishing an objective set of criteria to distinguish "magic" from religion. Yet, throughout the book, he persists in describing certain activities of Joseph Smith as "magical."

Quinn's calculus for distinguishing "magical" actions from those that are not is certainly not the same as that of Joseph Smith, who provides no explicit evidence that he viewed the use of seerstones and divining rods, the possession of amulets and parchments, or digging for money as "magical." The assumptions of Quinn's definition are, to a large extent, the assumptions of normative Protestant Christianity, influenced by Enlightenment rationalism. But are these the optimal presuppositions to use in a work of this type? We think not. Protestants influenced by the Enlightenment were precisely those who opposed Joseph Smith most vehemently. Why, in a volume that wishes to be objective about, if not sympathetic to, Joseph Smith and early Mormonism, does Quinn purchase the assumptions of Joseph Smith's hostile critics?

There is a growing consensus in the social sciences that, since there are no objective criteria for distinguishing magic from ritual, "magic" is useless as a classificatory term. In some ways, we are inclined to think it worse than useless. It is so frequently pejorative in connotation, and its polemical potential is so high, that it tends to draw its users away from the standards of objectivity that the social sciences claim to espouse. (The same observation applies to the term "occult," as well.) Borrowing the "center/periphery" (i.e., "outsider/insider") model from the sociologist Edward Shils, "magic" might perhaps best be defined as ritual action of the periphery as it is viewed by those at the center. Such a definition would clearly imply that it is the perspective of the speaker or writer, and not the nature of the act itself, that determines whether that act is viewed as magical. It seems to us that other, less value-laden terms, such as "religion," "popular religion," and even "folk religion," might be used with more profit, objectivity, and, ultimately, less misunderstanding. We suspect that the rather sinister and, for many believing Saints, uncomfortable overtones to the discussion of Joseph Smith's relationship with "magic" and the "occult" would be substantially reduced or altogether eliminated if one of these other, less titillating terms were substituted, or if those actions broadly categorized as "magical" were described more specifically. To say that Joseph Smith had a seer stone, and sometimes used it to look for treasures hidden in the earth, is one thing; to say that he was involved in "magic"

and in "the occult" (though actually describing the same activity) sounds far more serious.

In chapters 5 and 6, Quinn attempts to demonstrate "magical" influences in the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, and seeks to document allegedly "occultic" parallels to its content. For page after page, he adduces occultic etyma that parallel the proper names found in the Book of Mormon. The number of these is sometimes simply staggering. In a single footnote paragraph (p. 131) at least a half dozen "occult" parallels are cited to the name Moroni. In these chapters, Joseph Smith begins to seem not merely a farmhand on the early American frontier, but a Renaissance magus, bedecked in a starry robe. In the introduction, Quinn says that he is not claiming that Joseph Smith or any early Mormons read "any or all of those books. Rather, the citations are intended to demonstrate the extent of the written tradition, which, in time, diffused widely within the oral tradition" (p. xviii). But how do we know that it had done so in the particular instance of the Smith family? Further, although Quinn expressly denies that these parallels represent direct thefts by Joseph Smith from magical lore, he states that they "suggest that the conceptual viewpoint (or paradigm) and language of these texts may have sometimes reflected the religious, intellectual, and cultural perspectives of the nineteenth-century folk culture to which they were directed" (p. 150). But what, precisely, does this mean? Have the names been reshaped (or actually chosen) to appeal to the cabalistic predilections and experience of the intended readership of the Book of Mormon? We ourselves find ancient Near Eastern etymologies of some of the names far more compelling than the "occult" ones supplied by Quinn.

Our general impression is that Quinn's evidence is sometimes being milked for rather more than it is worth. A few examples should suggest what we mean. Thus, to term such pseudographic texts as the Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs and the Ascension of Isaiah "occult," as he does in a discussion of the doctrine of multiple heavens (pp. 173-175), is to use the word so broadly as to rob it of any meaningful content. Further, speaking of the Italian surname Morrone/Morroni/Marony, Quinn observes that it "can refer to a man 'with a dark or swarthy complexion,' which suggests a connection to folk magic" (pp. 131-132). Surely, though, dark complexed people have no necessary connection to the occult. And in his discussion of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, Quinn stresses the magical paradigm of three supernatural visitations which

must be concluded before the dawn. Then he fails to mention Moroni's daytime fourth visit (p. 122). And what hour of the night would not be appropriate for an angelic visit, according to pages 121-122? There seems to us, additionally, no justification for his inferring magic from Joseph Smith's use of the verb "to conjure" (p. 119). The context of the passage in question is, after all, plainly not "magical" in any sense, and very common non magical usage of the word is attested as early as the thirteenth century. Finally, the tortured analysis of the Smith family's "Holiness to the Lord" parchment (pp. 108-109) serves to illustrate the weakness of Quinn's case for numerology among the founders of Mormonism. On the same topic, for example, he provides no evidence that any Latter-day Saint other than himself has ever noticed the alleged mystic meaning in the fact that the ideal quorum numbers stipulated in D&C 107:85-89 come to a total of 180—which is equal to the numbers of degrees in a triangle, "the most potent geometric form in magic." (Is it significant that this fact occurs on page 180 of Quinn's book?)

Quinn goes to great lengths to establish links between the Smith family and other early Mormons, on the one hand, and the occultic activities of the 1802 "Wood Scrape" on the other. Pages 83-97 abound in second cousins and even third cousins twice removed, linked to associates of Nathaniel Wood by marriage. No genealogical tie is too tenuous to transmit occultic lore. Yet when he wants to argue for the presence of an amphibian at the Hill Cumorah, the fact that his two main sources, Willard Chase and Benjamin Saunders, are closely related is rather casually dismissed. We are assured that Saunders's interview in late 1894, dealing with events of nearly six decades earlier, is uncontaminated by the notions of his brother-in-law, whose affidavit had been published fifty years before.

Quinn's attempted rehabilitation of the salamander is, in fact, extremely puzzling. Although there are no authentic documents explicitly linking Joseph Smith or early Mormonism to the figure of a salamander, he spends several pages (pp. 129-133) showing how perfectly proper it would be if it were there. We are sympathetic with his desire to substitute its neutral-to-positive image for the negative and sinister image of the toad, but there is simply no evidence for it in the documents. Had Mark Hofmann not planted the idea in Mormon minds, would anyone ever have thought of it? Further, it needs to be pointed out that exhaustive studies of the treasure digging motif in American folklore have failed to turn up any trace of a salamander in connection

with treasure digging.

Despite our manifold reservations, we must say the Quinn's book is important and, in many ways, brilliant. No one interested in Mormon origins can overlook it. Furthermore, its implications for traditional views of the Restoration are by no means entirely negative. His recognition of the centrality of heavenly ascent in both the temple endowment and the ancient mysteries, and of the chasm between the Masonic and Mormon rituals revealed by its absence from the former, is a point which cannot be stressed too strongly. And Quinn offers a wealth of evidence which would seem to show that, at the very times when Joseph and his associates claim something very special was going on, something quite unusual really was. Unfortunately, in his attempt to view much of Mormonism from a "magical" perspective—an enterprise in which he realized there were dangers of overemphasis (p. xx)—he has probably gone too far.

Occasionally, "discovered" or "rediscovered" elements of Mormon history have precipitated calls by historians and others to reassess the whole of early Mormon history in the light of that element. In the late sixties, work on the Council of Fifty resulted in such a call from certain quarters. Significantly, Michael Quinn was among those who showed that such revisionist history would produce more distortion than genuine insight. Some may similarly see the alleged "magic" and "occult" elements in Joseph Smith's background as requiring a reassessment of LDS history. However, if *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* is an example of such revisionist history, the hypothesis may already have reached—or exceeded—the limits of its usefulness.