

## NEWS AND COMMENTARY

JOSEPH SMITH, REVISED AND ENLARGED  
THE PROPHET HAS NEW CLOTHES,  
BUT DO THE SEAMS SHOW?

By Hugo Olaiž

*Joseph Smith is back—larger, more heroic, and more correlated than ever. The bicentennial of his birth occasioned a year-long celebration that included exhibits, symposiums, seminars, pageants, and even an opera (The Book of Gold, performed at BYU). In Salt Lake City, a choir of 16,000 teenagers in gold T-shirts sang and clapped through a nearly two-hour show. At BYU, some 55,000 people attended “Remembering the Prophet Joseph Smith, Youth Spectacular and Youth Showcase.” KBYU produced a six-hour documentary on the Prophet. In Washington, members from the Spokane area performed 32 continuous hours of temple service, completing more than 7,300 ordinances for more than 4,200 individuals.<sup>1</sup>*

IN HIS CLASSIC essay, “Joseph Smith Visits Redwood City First Ward,” Sam Taylor imagines the Prophet dropping by an average LDS ward and failing to recognize the Church he’d founded.<sup>2</sup> The bicentennial celebrations of the first Mormon’s birth have been marked by a further irony. Not only has the Church changed since Joseph’s day, Joseph himself has been revised. The Man Who Communed with Jehovah has been re-fitted with clothing that better fits the Saints’ contemporary tastes. Once a polygamist, Joseph Smith is now presented as a devoted monogamist, and his home life has become the object of idyllic celebration.<sup>3</sup> Once the bellicose general of an army, he is now presented as a pacific city-builder.<sup>4</sup> The man who denounced all creeds as abominations has become a national treasure—the “American Prophet.”

How was this revision achieved? Is the newly correlated portrayal of the Prophet seamless, or do the stitches from the patching show? Let’s consider three major components of the bicentennial celebration: the new website JosephSmith.net, the new Church-produced movie *Joseph Smith: The Prophet of the Restoration*, and the birthday bash held this past 23 December.



“JOSEPH SMITH, PROPHET of God,” proclaims the headline on the home page at JosephSmith.net, the website the Church launched last June (the month of the Prophet’s martyrdom). Never before has the Church made available so many maps, photographs, and documents relating to the life of the Prophet. The photograph section includes early and contemporary pictures of Church historic sites, from the Sacred Grove to Nauvoo. The documents section includes reproductions of original letters, manuscripts, and journal entries, with a zoom-in function to let readers get as close as they like. In addition to sections on the mission and life of the Prophet, the new website features testimonies by all members of the current First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve.

The photos and documents lend the site a powerful air of historical authenticity and transparency. And yet the seams left by correlation show through—for instance, the euphemisms used to avoid all reference to

polygamy. The site’s introduction to D&C 132 explains that “this section came at the request of Hyrum Smith for a written revelation to convince Emma Smith of the truthfulness of the principles of eternal marriage.” Why would Emma have difficulties with the principle of *eternal* marriage? Astute readers are left to wonder.

A section of the site called “The Life of the Prophet” reduces Joseph Smith’s complex motivations, impulses, and actions to hagiography. “Joseph led with love” reads a page entitled “A Servant of All.” “He recognized the worth of every soul as a child of God. When asked why so many followed him, he replied: ‘It is because I possess the principle of love. All I can offer the world is a good heart and a good hand.’” There is some dissonance, however, between this characterization of Joseph Smith and the portrait accompanying the page: John Hafen’s 1887 *Joseph Smith Directing the Nauvoo Legion*, which depicts General Smith in full military attire with drawn sword. The leader of love, it appears, is also a leader of war. An accompanying quotation from Joseph likewise suggests a frame of mind that some observers might find self-aggrandizing: “I, like the towering rock in the midst of the ocean, which has withstood the mighty surges of the warring waves for centuries, am impregnable, and am a faithful friend to virtue, and a fearless foe to vice.”



ON 17 DECEMBER, the new film, *Joseph Smith: The Prophet of the Restoration*, premiered at Temple Square’s Legacy Theater; screenings at other visitors’ centers began a few days later. With a cast of more than 1,100 actors, including more than forty principal characters, the film is a visual gem, beginning with a breathtaking aerial shot approaching a riverboat as it steams up the majestic Mississippi River. The project, carried out under the close supervision of the First Presidency, took two years to complete; tens of thousand of hours were dedicated to composing the story line alone. The film was shot in the Church’s motion picture studios at BYU and on location in Missouri, Illinois, Canada, and England.

“Alvin was my oldest brother. He was a hero of mine. . . .” Thus begins Joseph Smith’s account of his life as scripted by the writers and delivered in voice-over. This “autobiography” is a collection of real quotes from sources such as Joseph Smith’s History,



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the Doctrine and Covenants, and the King Follett Discourse, pasted together with pseudepigraphal material put in Joseph's mouth by the screenwriters. The pasting is generally seamless, but there are moments that may make the discerning viewer blink. When an agonizing Joseph Smith Sr. wonders if he will ever see Alvin again, the Prophet assures him, "You will always be his father, and he will always be your son. The Lord has revealed that that is His plan," Joseph continues. "We can be together with the ones we love forever."

The scene is noteworthy for several reasons, including the fact that this dialogue did not—and could not—have occurred. The screenwriters may have been inspired by an account by Lucy Mack Smith, who reports that the Prophet instructed his father on his deathbed about the doctrine of baptism for the dead. According to Lucy, the father asked the younger Joseph to "be baptized for Alvin immediately." Just before dying, Joseph Sr. added, "I see Alvin."<sup>5</sup> But the premise, "You will always be his father, and he will always be your son," hinting at the doctrine of eternal families currently treasured by the Saints, anachronistically places later doctrinal developments into the Prophet's mouth. During his life, Joseph Smith used the word "sealing" to mean at least five or six different things, but he never used it to describe the ritual sealing of children to their parents as a way to ensure that the parent-child relationship endures into eternity.<sup>6</sup> That concept and practice did not emerge until 1894, when Wilford Woodruff instituted the sealing of children to their birth parents as a substitute for the earlier practice of "adoption" in which Mormon men were sealed to Church leaders.<sup>7</sup> In sum: Only after transposing and rescoring Joseph's unfinished theological compositions can today's Saints sing, "Families can be together forever."

Another aspect of Joseph Smith's history has experienced a remarkable revision in the new film. Many of us remember (and the Church continues to sell) the 1976 film *The First Vision*, with its dramatic depiction of revival preachers and convicted sinners crying "I believe!"—a depiction so dramatic it ap-



Scene from the new Church-produced film, *Joseph Smith: The Prophet of the Restoration*

proaches parody. The new film's telling of the First Vision steers well away from anything that might be interpreted as ridicule or, for that matter, that would strike most viewers as controversial. Joseph and his family are troubled by preachers who declare that God has already chosen who is to be saved and whose hellfire style causes people to "fear God too much." In today's religious climate, most viewers will sympathize with the Smiths on these points. In this film, the warring parties we read about in Joseph Smith's History are reduced to polite disagreement. The minister who confronts the young prophet about his claims is firm in his disbelief but comparatively civil. Instead of warning that the First Vision is "of the devil" (Joseph Smith—History 1:21), he merely advises Joseph to abandon his "foolish notions."

The movie makes a point of informing readers that Mormons do not worship Joseph Smith. Yet the Joseph Smith portrayed in this film is a strikingly Christ-like figure. Like Jesus, Joseph charismatically communes with the common folk—children, the poor,

the sick, and the outcast, including a company of black converts that includes recently rediscovered African-American pioneer Jane Manning James.<sup>8</sup> The instant healing of a young boy in the Nauvoo swamps recalls similar miracles performed by the Savior. "Tell us, Joe, which Mormon house is going to burn tonight," one of the guards taunts him at Liberty Jail, evoking the tormentors who taunted Jesus to prophesy (Matthew 26:67–68, Luke 22:64). When a grief-stricken Emma asks why Joseph could work no miracle to save one of their own sick children, Joseph replies, "I can only do God's will," an echo of words spoken by Jesus in the Gospel of John (John 5:30, 6:38).

The film comes to an abrupt end with the martyrdom at Carthage. After his brother Hyrum dies in his arms, Joseph springs to the jailhouse window. The camera follows his point of view: we see what Joseph sees as he crashes through the glass—and then, instead of plummeting to the ground, he ascends (yet again like Jesus) into the clouds. Is Mormon triumphalism no longer able to stomach its founder's death? A viewer not familiar with Mormonism might conclude that we believe there was no martyrdom but only *apotheosis*—that Joseph Smith literally leaped from the window into heaven.



ON 23 DECEMBER, President Gordon B. Hinckley conducted a special event broadcast via satellite and streaming online video from two different locations: the Conference Center in Salt Lake City, and Joseph Smith's Vermont birthplace. "This is a glorious and wonderful day," President Hinckley declared from Vermont. "It is a day of remembrance, a day of great rejoicing, a day for gratitude and thanksgiving, a day in which we acknowledge the moving hand of God in bringing to pass his eternal purposes on behalf of his sons and daughters of all generations." The roll of speakers was limited to members of the First Presidency and Elder M. Russell Ballard.

The choice of Apostle Ballard as speaker was heavy with symbolic significance. A direct descendant of Joseph's brother Hyrum, Ballard represents a palpable link with the Smith family. One of the complexities of Joseph Smith's legacy is that his own wife and children did not follow the bulk of his followers west, instead helping found the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (known today as the Community of Christ), which rejected polygamy and temple ceremonies. Herein lies one of Mormonism's unresolved preoccupations. During the invocation at the opening of the event, President Boyd K. Packer prayed that Joseph and Emma's descendants may be "gathered in" to join the true church. Almost as if in fulfillment of that prayer, the benediction was offered by Uriah A. Kennedy, a fourth great-grandson of Joseph Smith from a line that converted back to Utah Mormonism. Through this symbolic act of vindication, the LDS Church can claim Joseph's progeny as its own—ironically, at a time when the Church's erstwhile rival, the Community of Christ, has laid aside its claim to leadership by the Prophet's descendants.

"We will be adjourned for another 100 years," quipped President Hinckley as he closed the Vermont event. He intended it as a joke, but Freud might detect anxiety beneath the humor—the anxiety that results from asking ourselves: Where will we be, as a church, in 100 years? What will Mormonism look like in the year 2105? Will 22nd-cen-

tury Mormons be hard at work reclothing their founder to fit their times? What aspects of the Prophet's life and teaching will *they* find problematic? What doctrines will *their* Joseph emphasize? In what language will his birthday celebration be conducted? Or is it possible that, having drifted closer toward the Christian mainstream, the Church might celebrate the Prophet's next centennial the way the Community of Christ celebrated this one—with a single, low-key event and a single reference on its website?<sup>9</sup>

**W**HAT do these celebrations mean? How does this combination of high-tech communications, cinematic craft, and old-fashioned pilgrimage help millions to know Brother Joseph again? By traveling to Vermont, President Hinckley wasn't merely paying tribute to Joseph Smith. He was also reenacting the pilgrimage that Joseph F. Smith had made for the first centennial in December 1905. Of that first centennial, Kathleen Flake has written:

Memorialization of a birth is . . . the blankest of slates upon which to write retrospective meanings. The monument erected in Vermont was susceptible to embodying not only the nature and permanence of the Latter-day Saints' claims about their founding prophet, but their claims about the nature and permanence of their church.<sup>10</sup>

What was true in 1905 is equally true for the 2005 celebration. In his centennial celebrations, Joseph F. Smith chose to emphasize the First Vision as the foundation for Latter-day Saint belief, thus painting Mormon uniqueness as resting on modern revelation. One's acceptability and loyalty became a matter of having a testimony of the truthfulness of the First Vision rather than polygamy or other embarrassing pages from the Mormon past.<sup>11</sup> The 2005 centennial celebrations have been used as the canvas for similarly reframing Mormonism. The new film's references to Alvin's death, the questions raised about his eternal state, and his family's expressed desire to live with him forever suggest that today's Church wants to make the promise of eternal families more prominent in its message; the film also drives home that the Latter-day Saints embrace a Christ-centered faith. Curiously, despite the recent reemphasis on the Great Apostasy in the new missionary lessons,<sup>12</sup> the representation of Protestant revivals in the new film reflects a relatively positive attitude toward other churches—an attitude emphatically expressed by President Gordon B. Hinckley during the bicentennial celebrations: "We believe that all other churches do great good. We believe in the virtue in the lives of other people in other churches. We acknowledge the tremendous accomplishments of other churches."<sup>13</sup>

In the final analysis, the celebration of the Prophet's birth is important not because of the extraordinary life Joseph Smith led, but because of the Church he founded. Such anniversaries provide an opportunity for the Church to declare its strengths and set the tone for its future.

Flake observes that the Joseph Smith centennial took place during the scandalous Reed Smoot hearings—a time when the Church desperately needed something to celebrate. With the dedication of the Conference Center, the rededication of the Nauvoo Temple, and the Salt Lake City Olympics still fresh in our collective memory, the bicentennial comes at a time when we have grown accustomed—some might say, addicted—to celebrating.

In pointing out the seams in the new stitching of the Prophet's story, I in no way want to dampen the collective enthusiasm for celebrating the Restoration Joseph



"I think correlation may have gone too far on this one."

wrought. I simply want to read, as best I can, whether we're continuing on the path Sam Taylor pointed out—that instead of coming to know Brother Joseph, we're really only coming to better know ourselves. ☞

## NOTES

1. "Temple Goers Honor the Prophet," *Church News*, 14 January 2006, 15.

2. Samuel W. Taylor, "Joseph Smith Visits Redwood City First Ward," *SUNSTONE*, August 1992, 54–57.

3. "Joseph Smith deeply loved his family, and his personal writings are filled with prayerful outpourings of tenderness and concern. . . . Occasional glimpses into his family life show him sliding on the ice with his son Frederick, taking his children on a pleasure ride in a carriage or sleigh, and attending the circus" (*Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, [New York: Macmillan, 1992], s.v., "Joseph Smith: The Prophet"). Consider also books by LDS convert and Joseph's descendant Gracia N. Jones, such as *Priceless Gifts: Celebrating the Holidays with Joseph & Emma Smith* (1998), *Emma and Joseph: Their Divine Mission* (1999), *Emma and Lucy* (2005), and *The Holidays with Joseph and Emma* (2005). Consider also the iconography of LDS artist Liz Lemon Swindle. See "Reality Check," *SUNSTONE* (October 2002):26.

4. Consider, for instance, Glen Leonard's title, *Nauvoo: A Place of Peace, a People of Promise* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002). For Joseph Smith as a visionary community builder, see Terryl Givens's "Lightning Out of Heaven: Joseph Smith and the Forging of Community," in *Church News*, 17 December 2005, 11.

5. See Lavina Fielding Anderson, ed., *Lucy's Book: A Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith's Family Memoir* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2001): 714, 723; also *History of Joseph Smith by His Mother Lucy Mack Smith* (Salt Lake City: 1901): 308, 313.

6. Gregory A. Prince, *Power From On High: The Development of Mormon Priesthood* (Signature Books: Salt Lake City, 1995): 155–72.

7. Gordon Irving, "The Law of Adoption: One Phase of the Development of the Mormon Concept of Salvation, 1830–1900," *BYU Studies*, 3 (Spring 1974): 291–314.

8. For information about James, see Margaret Blair Young and Darius Aidan Gray's "Standing on the Promises" trilogy (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 2000–2003).

9. "Bicentennial Commemorative Reunion," posted at <[www.cofchrist.org/events/Bicentennial/](http://www.cofchrist.org/events/Bicentennial/)>. (Accessed 4 January 2006).

10. Kathleen Flake, *The Politics of American Religious Identity: The Seating of Senator Reed Smoot, Mormon Apostle* (Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 112.

11. In 1996, President Gordon B. Hinckley referred to Mormonism's earlier racist policies as "those little tricks of history." See "Hinckley Takes LDS Case to the Nation," *Salt Lake Tribune*, 8 April 1996, D1.

12. John-Charles Duffy, "The New Missionary Discussions and the Future of Correlation," *SUNSTONE*, September 2005, 28–46.

13. "Pres. Hinckley Answers Myriad Questions about the LDS Church," *Deseret Morning News*, 25 December 2005, A15.

## COMMENTARY

## WHY IS IT SO HARD TO TALK ABOUT THE MORMONS?

By Seth Perry

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IT SEEMS NEARLY impossible for those in the public discourse to talk evenly about the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Commentators are given to hyperbole (the growth of Mormonism is "one of the great events in the history of religion," says intrepid sociologist Rodney Stark in a new book); fawning (according to a *Newsweek* cover story written by a Mormon, the faith is "optimistic, vigorous, a source of continuing personal growth for all who accept its blessings—[it] in many ways echoes the American Dream"); snide joviality (Larry McMurtry writes of Joseph Smith's "prattle about an angel" in the *New York Review of Books*); or outright ridicule (in a *New York Times* book review, Walter Kirn, himself a lapsed Mormon, uses an analogy to belief in Santa Claus to explain how the growth of Mormonism may have nothing to do with its content).

However one may describe the conditions of religious tolerance on the ground, our increasingly tolerant public discourse gives a wide berth to religions outside of the Jewish/Christian norm. The examples above, though, all fairly recent, suggest that there is something not quite as even-handed in the public discussion of Mormonism. Instead, there are articles celebrating Mormons—as some scholars have opined—as a "model minority" among religions: more industrious, healthier and cleaner than the rest of us. And then the opposite: the flickering smile, the whimsical tone—McMurtry, for example, writing in a formal review in a major publication that Brigham Young "fathered fifty-seven children on twenty wives" when he means "with"; and another writer's throwaway line in the *New Yorker* classing Mormons with Wiccans and Scientologists (groups decidedly further from the mainstream than Mormons).

I think the problem has something to do with the fact that Mormonism is different from our culture's de facto Christian/Jewish point of reference—but not *that* different.

Mormonism is no Hinduism: Latter-day Saints share sacraments, the Bible, and indeed the Heavenly Savior with other Christians. But everyone knows, if they know anything about Mormonism, that its followers are not just any Christians: the sacraments sometimes take place in temples where only the approved may venture; the Bible is heavily supplemented with other revealed texts and contemporary prophetic authority; and the salvation offered by the Mormon Christ is combined with a chance for each believer to progress toward godhood.

The fact that these distinctive characteristics are expressed through elements and vocabulary familiar to Christians often leads popular pundits and even otherwise detached scholars of religion to talk about Mormons the way one might talk about that kid in class with mittens pinned to his jacket—bless their hearts, they try, but they just don't quite get it. Among believing Christians, along with the condescension is often a note of defensiveness; people who would never dream of being anything but deferential to more remote religions often feel the need to police the boundaries of their own. Put a universal truth about peace and love in the Buddha's mouth and liberal Christians fall over each other to join in interfaith celebration. But tell a Christian that such a saying came from Jesus—they've just never heard this one—and everyone gets a little uncomfortable.

The answer to this discomfort, of course, is practice; increased discussion of Mormonism in more varied contexts will breed better habits. Recent coverage of the possibility that Mitt Romney—a Mormon and governor of Massachusetts—will run for president has represented a marked step forward, frankly treating his religion as a possible liability while refusing to make it the focal point of discussion. Time will tell, though, if American popular discourse can become fully comfortable with what is often called a "home-grown" American religion. ☞

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