

INTERPRETIVE ESSAYS ON JOSEPH SMITH



THE PROPHET  

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**PUZZLE**

EDITED BY BRYAN WATERMAN

Joseph Smith: America's Hermetic Prophet  
by Lance S. Owens

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The Prophet Puzzle:  
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## Joseph Smith: America's Hermetic Prophet

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*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, 7 April 1844

IF THERE IS A RELIGION UNIQUELY AND INTRINSICALLY AMERICAN—a religion worked from America's soil and cast in the ardent furnace of its primal dreams—that religion must be Mormonism. Founded in 1830 by 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 worldwide movement now numbering 10 million members. Patriotic, conservative, influential, and vastly wealthy, modern Mormonism is a mainstay of American society.

Despite its success and respectability, however, a fundamental crisis looms before Joseph Smith's church—and the crux of the predicament is Smith himself. Today's Mormonism is being forced into an uncomfortable confrontation with its early nineteenth-century origins—an inevitable encounter given the importance 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 his. To Mormons, Joseph Smith is simply "The Prophet." He bears 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 make gods of men and women.

But now, more than 150 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 history's newest reading of Smith's life, themes unrecognized by its orthodox interpreters are quickly moving to stage center. Quite simply, modern Mormonism, guardian of the prophet's story, has no idea what to do with the rediscovered, historical, and rather occult Joseph Smith.

Several years ago, Harold Bloom's boldly original work, *The American Religion*, offered an introduction to this unknown prophet. The true American religion, pronounces Bloom, is a kind of Gnosticism, which is in itself a surprising enough declaration. But as evidence of this American gnosis, and as first hero of his story, Bloom gives us Joseph Smith. Of the man himself, Bloom 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."<sup>1</sup> And of Smith's 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."<sup>2</sup>

Bloom's coupling of Smith to the Gnostic tradition has aroused animated disagreement among students of Mormonism and Gnosti-

cism alike. Several questions crucial to modern Gnostic studies are raised by this dialogue: What is the relationship of later "Gnostic" movements to classical Gnosticism? Were rudiments of the tradition conveyed to postclassical groups by historical links such as 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 Smith had some historical connection with late remnants of Gnosticism conveyed by Renaissance Hermeticism and Kabbalah, his religious creation nonetheless is clearly derived in largest part from a personal experience. Was that primal creativity "Gnostic"? If so, how did it relate to the matrix of tradition?

These questions defy simple declarations. Nonetheless Smith did apparently espouse Gnostic themes, including the necessity of continuing, individual revelation as the source of salvific knowledge. Smith and his religion thus eschewed theology in favor of the dynamic process of revelation. The result was best summarized in what Bloom calls "one of the truly remarkable sermons ever preached in America," a discourse delivered by the prophet on 7 April 1844. Known as the King Follett Discourse, it was Smith's last major address to his church, presented just ten weeks before his death at age thirty-eight.

"There are but very few beings in the world who understand rightly the character of God," he said. "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 that is "as immortal as, and coequal with, God Himself." God is not, however, to be understood as one and singular. Turning to an oddly kabbalistic exegesis of the first three words of the Hebrew text of Genesis, Smith pronounced that there are a multitude of Gods which have emanated from the First God, existing one above the other without end. He whom humankind calls God was himself once a man; and man, by advancing in intelligence, knowledge, and consciousness, may be exalted with God, may *become as God*.

Near the beginning of his ministry in 1833, Smith declared that "the glory of God is intelligence," eternal and uncreated. Those who wish to find a Gnostic in Smith have pointed out that he used the word "intelligence" interchangeably with "knowledge" in his prophetic writ-

ings during this period. Indeed, they suggest, his words might be read poetically to proclaim that God's glory *is* gnosis—a gnosis that saves woman and man by leading them together to a single, uncreated, and intrinsically divine Self.

## II

Joseph Smith a modern Gnostic prophet? Certainly nowhere within the vast domains of American religion did this proclamation cause more amazement than within Mormonism itself. But Bloom (a self-proclaimed "Jewish Gnostic") is no casual observer; his knowledge of gnosis and Kabbalah is tempered by vast experience critiquing their creative matrices. 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 place in the vocabulary employed by those trying to understand him.

In this form, 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—remain so central to the Mormon past and present that it must be heard before exploring the evolving (and heretical) rereading.

This 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 deep 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."<sup>3</sup> 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 people 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 21 September, while Smith was again engaged in prayer, a light suddenly began to fill his room. Within the light there

appeared an angelic being. "His whole person was glorious beyond description, and his countenance truly like lightning," recounted Smith.

The angel, named Moroni, explained that a book was deposited in a nearby hill, a record written upon gold plates by the ancient inhabitants of the American continent. Smith was instructed that in due time he would be allowed to obtain the record and translate it. 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. Smith's experience had occupied the entire night.

That day Smith 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 Smith that he could not yet remove the plates from their resting place. Instead he would need to return to the spot on this same 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 22 September 1827, the angel delivered the record to his charge.

Soon after obtaining the records, Smith began his translation. The record was engraved upon the plates in "reformed Egyptian," a language he read by gazing into the "Urim and Thummim," the sacred implements of 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 in 586 B.C.E. Led by their patriarch, the wandering Israelites had built a boat and launched themselves into the ocean, and were eventually washed ashore somewhere in the Americas. Their descendants multiplied greatly in the new land, but were plagued by 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 appeared after his resurrection to teach 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 constituting the Book of Mormon were hidden to await the time when God would call them forth again.

The call came in 1830. In March of that year 5,000 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 only one element in the complete "restoration." Smith soon produced several other less noted pseudepigraphic works, prophetic texts attributed to ancient figures such as Enoch, Abraham, and Moses.

After the angel Moroni (who returned to retrieve the golden plates from Smith), 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 Smith 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, Smith's disciples fanned out across the northeastern states. Their message was simple: the ancient church of God had been restored with its powers and priesthood and with a reopened canon—a restoration accomplished by God through a modern prophet.

The flock grew quickly. By 1836 a Mormon communal society flourished at Kirtland, Ohio (near Cleveland), and a second gathering of Latter-day Saints (as Smith's disciples called themselves) 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 that finally forced all Mormons out of the state under threat of extermination in 1839. After this debacle, the beleaguered Mormon

refugees retreated to Illinois and to 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 the state of Illinois. Nearly 20,000 converts answered the call to Smith's new Zion, 4,000 of them arriving from England alone. Handsome brick houses and shops lined the city's well-planned streets; river boats 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 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 of publishing 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.

This act of obstructing a free press played directly into his enemies' hands: the prophet had proved himself a theocratic tyrant. He was charged with treason and commanded by the governor of Illinois to surrender himself. Hoping to prevent 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 27 June 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 shot to death both Joseph and his older brother Hyrum.

### III

This summary of Smith's history is widely canonized in published accounts of his life. But another side to the story is now emerging. More than ten years ago a bizarre series of events focused attention on several other even more curious facts that had never before been

integrated into accounts of Joseph Smith's story. When added, they change its tenor entirely.

In the early 1980s 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 of these was a letter purportedly written in 1830 by one of Smith's first disciples. Brimming with references to treasures and enchantments, the letter related how 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 other "newly discovered" materials, particularly any that might impugn orthodox versions of their history. These secret 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 bomb maker and killer.<sup>4</sup>

By then, however, several historians had already undertaken detailed reevaluations of Smith, focusing careful attention on 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 it is a work still very much in progress, Joseph Smith's story is now being pieced together in a new and entirely unorthodox fashion.<sup>5</sup>

Beginning in his late adolescent years, Smith 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 possess a "seer stone" into which he could gaze and locate things lost or hidden in the earth, but it has recently become evident that this same stone was probably the "Urim and Thummim" later used to "translate" portions of the Book of Mormon. According to contemporary accounts, Smith 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.

The treasure digging had also involved magical rituals, and it is likely that Smith knew 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 Luman Walter(s), who was a distant cousin of Smith's future wife and a member of the circle associated with the early treasure quests. According to contemporary accounts, Walter(s) was not only a physician but a magician and mesmerist who had traveled in Europe to obtain "profound learning," probably including knowledge of alchemy, Paracelsian medicine, and Hermetic lore.

Other pieces of evidence add to the picture. Three very curious parchments and a dagger owned by Smith's brother Hyrum have been carefully preserved by Hyrum's descendants as sacred relics, handed down from eldest son to eldest son after his death. Family tradition maintained that they were religious objects somehow used by Hyrum and Joseph. When finally scrutinized by individuals outside the family, they were recognized as 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 reputedly carried on his person at the time of his murder in Carthage jail, was identified as a talisman. It is inscribed front and back with the magic square and sigil of Jupiter, the astrological force associated with the year of Smith's birth. All these items could have been constructed using the standard texts of ceremonial magic available in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth

centuries: Cornelius Agrippa's *Occult Philosophy*, Ebenezer Sibly's *Occult Sciences*, and Francis Barrett's *The Magus*.

In this light the visit of the angel Moroni takes on another aspect. The angel appeared on the night of the autumnal equinox, between midnight and dawn—hours auspicious for a magical invocation. Smith made his subsequent visits to the hill on the same day for the next four years. When he finally retrieved the plates, it was the eve of the equinox, in the first hour after midnight. A contemporary account suggests that he was required to take a consort (his wife) with him, 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 familiar story. Were the magical parchments used to invoke the angel Moroni or the other angelic visitors? And above all, how does this relate to the doctrinal substance and evolution of Mormonism, which seems 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 Smith's followers, other occult aspects of his religion were evident. The most obvious was its irregular Masonic connections. In 1842, two years before his death, Smith had embraced Masonry. But long before his own initiation as a Mason in Nauvoo, he had traveled in company with Masons, who included, among other prominent disciples, Brigham Young. Smith's earliest connection with the Craft probably came with the initiation of his brother (and close companion) Hyrum as a Mason around 1826, just shortly before Joseph began work on the Book of Mormon.<sup>6</sup>

Sometime before 1826, Joseph may even have had contact with a historically important Masonic figure named Captain William Morgan. Morgan published the first American-authored exposé of Masonic rites at Batavia, New York, in 1826; his disappearance (and presumed murder) just before the book's printing was widely judged to be 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 that Morgan

and Smith met; one nineteenth-century Masonic historian even suggested that Smith influenced Morgan.

Interestingly, in 1834 Morgan's widow, Lucinda, converted to Mormonism along with her second husband, George Washington Harris. Harris was also a Mason and had been an 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 Smith's ritually wed "spiritual wives," although she remained married to Harris.

The prophet's connection with Masonry after 1841 became extremely complex. In June 1841 efforts to establish a Masonic lodge at Nauvoo began, and a few months later a dispensation for it was granted by the Grand Lodge of Illinois. On 15 March 1842 the Nauvoo lodge was installed and Joseph Smith initiated. The next day he was passed and raised to the sublime degree of Master Mason. Two days later Smith organized a Female Relief Society, perhaps intending it to be a Masonic auxiliary, or the beginning of an "adoptive," androgynous new Mormon Masonry. Eventually every officer of the Female Relief Society also became a spiritual wife and consort of Smith's, with his first wife, Emma, acting as its president (a situation complicated by the fact that Emma did not completely understand her husband's relationships with the other women).<sup>7</sup>

The last three years before Smith's murder in 1844 were unquestionably the most creative period in a uniquely creative life. Shortly after his Masonic initiations, he 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 Smith gave a first version of this "endowment" (as the ritual was subsequently called) 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 somewhat corrupted remnant 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 Masonry, Smith had almost certainly heard of Kabbalah. But in 1841 a Jew named Alexander Neibaur, raised in the Polish borderlands of Prussia, educated at the University of Berlin, and familiar with Kabbalah, joined the Mormon church. He migrated to Nauvoo, and there became Smith's frequent companion and tutor in Hebrew. Documentation has recently come to light suggesting that Neibaur not only knew of Kabbalah, but may have possessed in Nauvoo a copy of its classic text, the Zohar. Smith probably gained some familiarity with the Zohar while under Neibaur's tutelage. Indeed it appears that Smith's 7 April 1844 declaration of a plurality of Gods was supported by an exegesis of the first Hebrew words of Genesis (*Bereshith bara Elohim*) drawn from the opening section of the Zohar.<sup>8</sup>

During the period after 1841, Smith introduced the practice of plural "celestial marriage" (which later evolved into Mormon polygamy) to a small group of his most trusted followers. In this era not only men, but a few women, including Lucinda Harris, 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 gods and goddesses, the dual creative substance of divinity in eternal, Tantric intercourse. The ceremony was intended to be performed in the holiest precincts of the new temple. By late 1843 Smith revealed several ritual extensions to the "endowment," all of which were ultimately incorporated into Mormon temple ceremony. This legacy of mysterious initiatory rituals revealed between 1842 and 1844 remains more or less unaltered 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. Nonetheless the relationship of these rituals with Joseph Smith's occult vision and the concurrent introduction of Masonry in Nauvoo is becoming the subject of intense interest.<sup>9</sup>

## VI

In the autumn of 1994 pieces of the prophet puzzle began falling into place, revealing a unifying pattern behind 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, his angelic visitations, the pseudepigraphic texts he "translated," his declaration of Masonry as a remnant of the 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 many documented associations with historical legacies of Hermeticism such as magic and Masonry, but his religious creation also evidences 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*.<sup>10</sup> 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." In this light Harold Bloom's poetic reading of Joseph Smith as a "Gnostic" takes on broader nuances: though Bloom does not mention it, Smith's religion-making imagination was allied in several ways with remnants of a Hermetic tradition frequently linked to gnosticism.

The investigations of Smith's connection with Hermeticism are focusing new attention on an oft-ignored claim of esoteric lore: the importance of Hermeticism in the evolution of early American 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, a complex alloy of Hermeticism and alchemical mysticism developed within Europe's religious crucible, displaying radical aspirations for Christian reformation. Brooke 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 New York and Pennsylvania countryside, Joseph Smith probably first learned about this alternative and very unpuritanical religious vision. He may even have heard the old Rosicrucian legend of a seventeen-year-old prophet named Christian Rosenkreutz and the mysterious “Book M” that he translated.<sup>11</sup> Certainly he would have learned about the Philosopher’s Stone and alchemy’s transmutational mystery. Soon after, the eighteen-year-old Smith found his own sacred treasure buried in the 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 of a Christ who brought union.

For a decade, Brooke suggests, Smith’s emergent Hermetic theology was disguised under the coloring of traditional Christian restorationism. But 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 metaalchemical experience running from opposition to union, an experience shaped and driven by the personality of Joseph Smith.”<sup>12</sup>

## VII

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

Smith 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, 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 Smith's millennial dreams and establish Zion unhampered by a hostile world. But it was not to be. With the full force of the U.S. government and a Victorian public morality marshaled against the Mormon church, the practice of polygamy had to be publicly abandoned in 1890. After its defeat in that epochal battle, Mormonism slowly found accommodation with the world it had fled. In the process, many elements of Smith'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 without comment, 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 novelists, accomplished dramatists to tell his history, and they have not yet come to him."<sup>13</sup> 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.

## NOTES

1. Harold Bloom, *The American Religion* (New York: Simon and 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 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 overall biography remains Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945; 2d ed., 1971).
4. See Linda Sillitoe and Allen Roberts, *Salamander: The Story of the Mormon Forgery Murders* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988); and Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *The Mormon Murders* (New York: Weidenfield & Nicolson, 1988).
5. Smith's associations with occult traditions in early America are comprehensively detailed in D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987; 2d ed., 1998). For an interpretive reading of this history, see Lance S. Owens, "Joseph Smith and Kabbalah: The Occult Connection," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 27 (Fall 1994): 117-94.
6. The interactions of Smith and his religion 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* 27 (Fall 1994): 1-113.
7. Emma's role in these events is comprehensively reviewed in an excellent biography by Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery, *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith* (New York: Doubleday, 1984).
8. Owens, 178-84.
9. It has occasionally been suggested that Masonic revenge was somehow involved in Smith's murder. While clear evidence for this is lacking, the assertion deserves comment. Smith's secret—and, by some interpretations, loosely "Masonic"—religious practices clearly impelled the many groups seeking his death, and Masons undoubtedly were present among his assailants at Carthage. Indeed, as musket balls ripped his body, Smith stood in the window of Carthage jail, raised his arms to the square, and with his last breath began to address his brothers with the old Masonic distress call: "Oh Lord my God, is there no help for the widow's son?" In the midst of these words, he tumbled from the window, dead.
10. John L. Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644-1844* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
11. See the "Fama Fraternalitatis" and "Confessio Fraternalitatis," along with

the accompanying discussion, in Frances A. Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), 238-51.

12. Brooke, 281.

13. Bloom, 127.