

BOOK REVIEW

RICHARD LYMAN BUSHMAN, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*. (New York: Knopf, 2005. Notes, Bibliography, Photographs, Maps, Index. \$35.00 hardback.)

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I

Just as a dramatic movie is not criticized for not being good comedy, and a historical documentary is not criticized for not being innovative science fiction, a book needs to be evaluated for what it is and what its author intends it to be. This principle needs to be applied when evaluating Richard Bushman's *Rough Stone Rolling*, the award-winning biography of Joseph Smith. Some believing Latter-day Saints have found the book troublesome, perhaps misinterpreting its intentions. Published by a national press in New York City and marketed to a national readership, the book shows every indication of having been written first and foremost for Bushman's academic colleagues, including—and perhaps particularly—for non-Latter-day Saint historians. I suppose that were such not the case, the book would have been written differently and published in a Latter-day Saint venue. Even so, it is likely that the vast majority of its readers have been, and will continue to be, believing Latter-day Saints.

Unexpressed but apparent throughout the book, Bushman's writing addresses previous biographies of Joseph Smith, making up for their deficiencies and presenting Joseph Smith in a way that responds to their biases. Chief among these is Fawn Brodie's *No Man Knows my History*,¹ long discredited by scholars who know Joseph Smith but, oddly enough, still touted by some as the place where intelligent non-Latter-day Saints should turn to learn about the Mormon prophet.

II

In writing about religious issues for an academic readership made up of people with different beliefs, good scholars adopt a tone that does not proselytize their readers. Faith claims are temporarily set aside (they cannot be proved academically anyway) so participants can meet on a common, neutral, ground to communicate with each other in a nonthreatening way. It is a policy based on good manners, and it works. That kind of academic writing assumes an air of neutrality, and thus it differs from writing which has a denominational readership in mind and is intended to strengthen the faith of believers or to convert others. Academic writing is aimed at the one audience, and devotional writing at the other. In *Rough Stone Rolling*, Bushman is speaking to the first audience, addressing the academy in its own language and operating according to its rules. But his task is made difficult not only because he identifies himself as a believer (xix) but also because many of his readers will be non-academic Latter-day Saints who are not accustomed to seeing their Prophet discussed in academic language.

III

Just as it is appropriate to set aside faith claims to engage in the broad community of scholarship, it is also good manners when discussing a religion to employ the perspective of believers in that religion, using their terminology and telling the story as they would tell it. Thus for the sake of respect, brevity, and conversation, scholars temporarily—as a rhetorical tool—concede to the truth of the faith claims of the religion they discuss. Thus, even non-Latter-day Saint writers will use words like “the angel Moroni visited Joseph Smith in the night,” rather than “Joseph Smith *claimed* (or *said*) that the angel Moroni visited him in the night.” And Latter-day Saints can write such things as “Muhammad’s revelations,” rather than “Muhammad’s *purported* revelations.” Using the voice of the believer does away with the need to qualify every occurrence of a faith assertion by adding cumbersome and demeaning modifiers, and thus it is the method used by good scholars in religious studies, including Bushman in *Rough Stone Rolling*.² Terryl Givens begins his *By the Hand of Mormon* by first dealing with this matter: “In a history of a religiously controversial subject, of which the Book of Mormon is a premiere example, the disputability of the facts is too obvious to bear repeating on every page. I have therefore avoided constructions like ‘Joseph Smith’s *alleged* vision,’ or ‘the *purported* visit of Moroni,’ as they would become tiresome and pedantic if repeated on every page.”³

But if the rhetorical voice of the believer is used by a scholar who also *is* a believer (as in the case of Givens and Bushman), does the work then automatically become apologetics, and not scholarship? Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, in a review of *Rough Stone Rolling*, concludes that the book is too apologetic. She points out the “yawning epistemological divide” that separates sacred from secular history. “Sacred historians look to the past to see evidence of divine agency in the world, in order to discern the patterns in God’s activities.” But “secular historians . . . proceed generally from the assumption that persuasive interpretations should be based on observable and verifiable evidence. At best, they remain agnostic about the workings of God in history.” This may be true, but difficulties arise when the writer adopts the voice of the *disbeliever*. Maffly-Kipp continues: “In this rendering, Smith’s revelations would need to be explained materially as a product of his cultural or physical environment.”⁴ Herein lies a significant problem: to write that Joseph Smith’s revelations are “a product of his cultural or physical environment” is to make a faith assertion no less based on religious belief than devotional writing among believers—and no more provable using academic tools. That is why scholars who “remain agnostic about the workings of God” in a given religious tradition generally have to suspend their *disbelief*, at the same time appropriating the believer’s rhetoric when writing about the tradition.

Bushman goes one step farther than Givens in explaining why it is necessary in writing about Joseph Smith to use the language of believers. He argues that to write from a perspective at odds with the mindset of the early Latter-day Saints would be to do damage to the earliest sources and those who produced them. He writes:

Some readers will consider it obvious that the revelations came from Joseph Smith’s mind and nowhere else. His revelations of the afterlife, for example, can be summed up by saying “Joseph Smith imagined a heaven divided into three degrees of glory.” Only a Mormon reader would say bluntly, “God revealed a heaven with three degrees of glory,” without any disclaimer. Out of respect for the varied opinions of readers, it would seem judicious to compromise with “Joseph Smith *purportedly* received a revelation about a heaven with three degrees of glory.”

But there are reasons for not inserting a disclaimer every time a revelation is mentioned, no matter how the reader or writer feels about the ultimate source. The most important is that Joseph Smith did not think that way. The signal feature of his life was his sense of being guided by revelation. . . . To blur the distinction—to insist that Smith devised every revelation himself—obscures the very quality that made the Prophet powerful. To get inside the movement, we have to think as the early Mormons thought of him and as he thought of himself—as a revelator. (xxi)

In another context, Bushman writes:

To account for the plates' presence in the records, skeptics look for signs of trickery. Fawn Brodie, the most eminent of Joseph Smith's unbelieving biographers, referred to a neighbor's account of Joseph filling his frock with white sand and telling his family it was gold plates. Dan Vogel, a recent biographer, hypothesizes that Joseph fabricated plates from tin while he was at Cumorah. Contemporaries speculated that he wrapped a tile brick in a cloth. One deception led to another until Joseph had fabricated a fabulous tale. These explanations keep the story within the realm of the ordinary but require considerable fabrication themselves. Joseph "may" have done this and "probably" did that. Since the people who knew Joseph best treat the plates as fact, a skeptical analysis lacks evidence. A series of surmises replaces a documented narrative.

Incredible as the plates were, hunting for deception can be a distraction. It throws us off the track of Joseph Smith the Prophet. In devising a story of a charlatan, we lose sight of the unprepossessing rural visionary who became a religious leader admired by thousands. What is most interesting about Joseph Smith is that people believed him. To understand the emergence of Joseph the Prophet, we must follow the stories told by family and friends who believed they were witnessing a miracle. From their accounts issues the Joseph Smith who has a place in history. (58)

The abundant sources on Joseph Smith are very revealing, and almost all who know them well come to the same conclusion: No matter what one might think of the ultimate origin of his doctrine and revelations, Joseph Smith himself really thought that they came from God. This may be inconvenient, but it is what the evidence tells us. In arguing otherwise, biographies by Brodie and other critics of Joseph Smith miss the mark widely.⁵ Bushman wrote in full view of that fact. How will academics react to him writing from the perspective of the early Latter-day Saints, knowing that he himself is not merely a courteous scholar but also a believer? I suspect that for many historians, the book will appear too apologetic—too believing. Had Bushman used the same approach and the same language writing about Muhammad, for example, perhaps his work would be more acceptable. But Bushman is a believer in the religion of Joseph Smith, and thus there likely will be more readers who feel he has sacrificed his academic integrity by writing from a position of faith than there will be readers who feel he has sacrificed his spiritual integrity by not expressing his faith enough.⁶

IV

As in any book as long, complex, and sensitive as this one, *Rough Stone Rolling* presents its share of features with which a reviewer can find fault. Here are some particular aspects of the book that I find disappointing.

1. Italic type is used for the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants. This will probably be unnoticed by many readers, but it is a significant and annoying error. Whereas book titles are appropriately italicized in all

style guides, names of sacred texts—such as the Qur’an, the Bible, and the Book of Mormon—are always in roman type. The *Chicago Manual of Style* does not list the LDS standard works among its examples, but the principle applies to Mormon scriptures as to others.⁷ Givens and the Oxford University Press got it right in *By the Hand of Mormon*; Bushman’s earlier work on the Prophet, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, also got it right;⁸ and even Brodie, Vogel, and their publishers got it right. The italic type demeans the LDS scriptures. Bushman should have fought with his editors and publisher over this matter.⁹

2. On occasion, Bushman seems to pay more than enough attention to matters that seem to be of lesser importance. Perhaps in doing so, he is simply signaling to potential critics that he is aware of the sources and the issues. But some of the extraneous or trivial issues will predictably take on a life of their own and become sources of criticism for Latter-day Saints who feel the book is not faithful enough.¹⁰ There are several places where I wish he had reworded sentences in order to make the story more familiar and more comfortable for his Latter-day Saint readers.

3. Bushman provides his readers with very little nuance regarding his sources, either primary or secondary. Readers of his notes seldom have any way of knowing which sources are reliable and which are not, nor which come from informants or modern interpreters friendly or hostile to Joseph Smith, nor which have been discredited or reinterpreted by recent scholarship. Much literature now exists that discusses and reviews publications critical of Mormonism and its history, yet Bushman does not cite much of it. Critics from Joseph Smith’s day to Wesley Walters, Dan Vogel, and Michael Quinn appear frequently in the notes even in instances when Bushman himself presents evidence that is incompatible with their positions. He was obviously intent on letting historians know he was aware of the issues, but sometimes he overlooks responsible academic scholarship on those same issues that argues the Latter-day Saint position. In this regard, some of the notes give the impression that they were compiled after the fact by someone other than the author of the text, sometimes almost at cross-purposes with the text. What is the point, for example, of including the following note regarding the date the Church was organized? “Quinn, *Early Mormonism [and the Magic World View]*, 176, argues that April 6 was chosen for its astrological importance” (586). Does making reference to such an eccentric and discredited notion add to the quality of *Rough Stone Rolling*?

4. Bushman continues to hold to the position he established with the publication of *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* in 1984 that the appearance of Peter, James, and John took place in the summer of 1830, a year after the restoration of the Aaronic Priesthood and thus months after the or-

ganization of the Church (118, 588).¹¹ But strong contemporary sources show the coming of the ancient Apostles before the Church organization, probably near the end of May 1829.¹² Doctrine and Covenants 18:9, dated to sometime in June 1829, seems to be telling Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer that they are apostles, which would be consistent with both the earlier date of the priesthood restoration and also their later role in selecting and ordaining the first members of the Quorum of the Twelve. Doctrine and Covenants section 20 identifies both Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery as apostles by April 1830 (see D&C 20:1–3; see 21:1).

But the most important evidence is doctrinal, and it comes from Joseph Smith and John the Baptist. The Prophet wrote that John the Baptist told him that the priesthood he brought “had not the power of laying on of hands, for the gift of the Holy Ghost, but that this should be conferred on <us> hereafter.”¹³ John said he “acted under the direction <of> Peter, James, and John, who held the keys of the priesthood of Melchisedeck, whi[c]h priesthood he said should in due time be conferred on us.”¹⁴ Yet beginning the day of the organization of the Church—and thus months before Bushman’s late date for the coming of Peter, James, and John—Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery conferred the gift of the Holy Ghost on several people, showing that in the Prophet’s mind, the anticipated later visitation of heavenly messengers had already taken place to restore the higher priesthood.¹⁵ Bushman points out in the book that consistent vocabulary for priesthood and offices in the priesthood developed slowly in the early years of the Restoration. But by 1838–39, when Joseph Smith wrote about John’s instructions and the conferral of the Holy Ghost, the vocabulary had been clarified, and he knew what he was saying.

5. No one scholar can control all the sources and all the literature on every facet of Joseph Smith’s life. It is my understanding that Bushman shared drafts of chapters with several historians who gave him helpful feedback, insuring the quality of the work. But some parts of the book likely could have benefited from more of that practice. The discussion of the origin of the Book of Abraham, for example, does not reflect (or acknowledge) the current thinking of Latter-day Saint Egyptologists who do research on that topic (290–93).¹⁶ And someone more versed in the Bible could have told the author that “judges” in the Old Testament have nothing to do with “judges” in the Book of Mormon, outside of the English word they share in common (102).

6. Latter-day Saint readers may feel that on occasion, Bushman seems to go out of his way to be neutral when the evidence itself is squarely on the side of the traditional understanding of Joseph Smith. In many ways this is a strength of the book, not only because it avoids apologetics but also because the evidence speaks for itself and will draw discerning readers to correct con-

clusions. But some believing Latter-day Saints will misinterpret parts of this book as being critical or indifferent to their history and their faith.¹⁷

V

The weaknesses one might find in *Rough Stone Rolling* do not come close to outweighing its great strengths. Bushman has produced a very good book that will be the most important biography of Joseph Smith for the next generation. Significantly, its quality and importance are not the result of deft analysis or argumentation on the author's part but in the way he opens up the sources to reveal his subject matter—Joseph Smith. In this, Bushman has succeeded in an extraordinary way. *Rough Stone Rolling* is an excellent biography because it lets us come to know Joseph Smith in ways never before accomplished by a modern writer. Following are some aspects of the book that I find most remarkable.

1. By letting the original sources set the agenda for his writing, Bushman shows clearly that early Mormonism was not about Joseph Smith but about the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. The Prophet was not a charismatic genius like Jim Jones, David Koresh, or modern mega-church pastors. To early Latter-day Saints, it was the Restoration that mattered, not its messenger. “He was not the luminous central figure he is sometimes made out to be. Attention focused on his gift, not his personality. Although he served the vital function of revealing God’s word, he was thought of as an instrument. The early missionaries told audiences that revelation had been restored; they rarely named the revelator. . . . The point was not that a great prophet had arisen among them, but that revelation had come again” (112). “For Brigham Young, as for most converts, Joseph Smith was not the issue in accepting the Mormon gospel. The Youngs studied the *Book of Mormon*, met other Mormons, and felt the spirit, but did not think it was necessary to know Joseph. When converts came to Kirtland, they were curious to see the Prophet, but rarely were they overwhelmed by his charisma. In later reports of these first meetings, they usually passed over the event without registering an impression” (190).¹⁸

These findings are consistent with early Church periodical articles and other publications that highlight the restoration of truth and spiritual gifts but do not focus on Joseph Smith (see 401–2). I suspect that this will surprise many of Bushman’s readers, who will anticipate a very different role for Joseph Smith. But it should not surprise believing Latter-day Saints.

2. Bushman shows repeatedly how Joseph Smith’s revelations and the Book of Mormon were external to him. This is a point that is not made often enough in traditional Latter-day Saint literature, which sometimes has a hard time distinguishing the Prophet from his revelations. Again, the evidence will

likely come as a surprise to Bushman's academic readers, who will have a difficult time accounting for it. But Bushman makes the point with force, letting the sources guide the discussion. "The revelation [Doctrine and Covenants section 3] gave the first inkling of how Joseph would speak in his prophetic voice. The speaker stands above and outside Joseph, sharply separated emotionally and intellectually" (69).

The Book of Mormon, the longest and most complex of Joseph Smith's revelations, by rights should have been written in his maturity, not when he was twenty-three. . . . Joseph dictated the *Book of Mormon* without any practice runs or previous writing experience. It came in a rush, as if the thoughts had been building for decades. Talking to her son late in her life, Emma remembered how fluidly Joseph dictated:

When acting as his scribe he would dictate to me hour after hour, and when returning after meals or after interruptions, he could at once begin where he had left off, without either seeing the mss or having any portion of it read to him. This was a usual thing for him to do. It would have been improbable that a learned man could do this, and for so ignorant and unlearned as he was it was simply impossible.

During the three months of rapid translation, Joseph seemed to be in the grip of creative forces outside himself, the pages pouring from his mind. (105)

Bushman writes: "The revelations' language made an impression. One rhetorical feature may partly account for their authority: the voice in them is purely God's. Joseph as a speaker is absent from the revelations, just as he is from the *Book of Mormon*. . . . God speaks, with no human intermediary present. When Joseph figures in the revelations, he stands among the listeners, receiving instructions. When reprimands are handed out, he is likely to receive one" (128–29). "Joseph's followers reacted quite differently to the words spoken as revelation and the words he spoke as a man. When Joseph asked John Whitmer to be Church historian, Whitmer agreed only if the Lord would 'manifest it through Joseph the Seer.'¹⁹ Whitmer complied only when he was told in the voice of the Lord, 'Behold it is expedient in me that my servant John should write and keep a regular history'²⁰ (129).

3. Bushman's contextualization of the revelation of doctrine within the Restoration is a masterwork. *Rough Stone Rolling* is as much a biography of Restoration doctrines as it is a biography of Joseph Smith, if not more. It is a book about how Latter-day Saint doctrine came to be, and the doctrinal dimension absent in other biographies is center stage in it. With the thread of the unfolding Restoration running unmistakably through their pages, the chapters on the doctrinal contributions of the Book of Mormon and the revelations are extraordinary. For a believer such as myself, they were faith-promoting and

inspiring. I often found myself wondering how someone not so inclined could even begin to explain the ideas that came out of the mind of Joseph Smith.

4. *Rough Stone Rolling* shows that Joseph Smith was dramatically unlike his world. This is by no means a book about how Mormonism grew out of American culture and society, as one might perhaps expect. It is, indeed, the opposite. The book has already been criticized for not giving enough attention to Mormonism as a reflection of 19th-century America.²¹ Bushman shows instead how Joseph Smith's revelations time and time again produce exactly *not* what one would expect from someone in his generation. For example, Joseph Smith was not alone in his day to present a proposal for the origin of the Native Americans, and early Church members understood the Book of Mormon to contain that origin. But there is nothing recognizably "Indian" in the Book of Mormon to match the geography of Joseph Smith's world, Native American names or place names, or the stereotypes current at the time (94–97). Even more remarkable is the way the Book of Mormon assigns roles to Indians and whites that contrast dramatically with contemporary views, championing "the Indians' place in world history [and] assigning them a more glorious future than modern American whites" (98). Whereas others taught that if the Indians would be civilized they could become good Euro-Americans like them, the Book of Mormon taught that if Euro-Americans would be righteous, they could join with the Indians in their covenant family. The United States—God's chosen and ideal nation in much of American literature in Joseph Smith's time—is eclipsed by the Native Americans and their destiny. "All this turned American history upside down. . . . Literal Israel stood at the center of history, not the United States. The book sacralized the land but condemned the [white] people. The *Book of Mormon* was the seminal text, not the Constitution or the Declaration of Independence. The gathering of lost Israel, not the establishment of liberty, was the great work" (104). And although Joseph Smith loved American democracy and its Constitution,²² ideal government in the Book of Mormon was not in the hands of citizens but of hereditary rulers who employed no separation between Church and state (102–3).

Joseph Smith's doctrines—although including basic Christian principles such as faith, repentance, baptism, and the reception of the Holy Ghost—expanded far beyond those first principles to produce a Christianity hardly recognizable to other Americans. "Joseph's revelations redefined the nature of God and man so radically that Mormonism has been seen as a departure from traditional Christianity as serious as Christianity's from Judaism. The critics have questioned if the temple, priesthood, baptism for the dead, and plural marriage were Christian at all" (108). Regarding doctrines revealed in new scripture and in the Prophet's sermons, Bushman writes: "No other nineteenth-century religious imagination filled time and space with stories

like these. . . . Only Joseph Smith wrote a pre-earth history of God and then filled out humanity's future in the expanding universe. Did Joseph realize he was departing from traditional Christian theology? The record of his revelations and sermons gives no sense of him arguing against received beliefs. He does not refer to other thinkers as foils for his views. . . . His storytelling was oracular rather than argumentative. He made pronouncements on the authority of his own inspiration, heedless of current opinion" (457–58).

5. *Rough Stone Rolling* places a clear focus on Joseph Smith unfolding a religious system that democratized both spiritual gifts and much of Church government. Non-Latter-day Saint readers will learn that among the first things the Prophet revealed was the idea that each believer had access to spiritual gifts like his. Some of the earliest revelations teach lay Church members how to receive revelation. Despite Joseph Smith's unique role within the Church, its government was designed to be quite egalitarian, with councils set in place to govern its affairs. Bushman's discussion of these developments is fascinating (251–58, 274, 374, 390). "Rather than monopolizing inspiration, Joseph spread it widely, always with the proviso that revelation at one level did not regulate the authority above. . . . At a moment when Joseph's own revelatory powers were at their peak, he divested himself of some responsibility for revealing the will of God and invested that gift in the councils of the church, making it a charismatic bureaucracy." (257). The genius of this system is in the fact that it still works today, 175 years after Joseph Smith's time, with the vast majority of Church governance taking place in the same way in local ecclesiastical units.

Mormonism would not develop a professional clergy. "No clerical class ever formed in Mormon congregations, and no special education was required of its preachers. Ordinary converts took charge of the little branches that grew up in the missionaries' wake. Priesthood was a right of citizenship in the Kingdom of God" (265). Moreover, "priesthood holders could be trusted with power. They would constitute a government that blessed and redeemed people and was received with gladness rather than fear and suspicion" (269). This is not at all what one would expect from one claiming to speak for God and to be called to preside over His kingdom. But it was central to Joseph Smith's "governing passion" "to have his people experience God" (451).

6. *Rough Stone Rolling* presents us with a very real Joseph Smith. This has made it a troubling book to some who are uncomfortable with the idea of their prophet being altogether human. In his introduction, Bushman alerts us to the matter: "A believing historian like myself cannot hope to rise above these battles or pretend nothing personal is at stake. For a character as controversial as Smith, pure objectivity is impossible. What I can do is to look frankly at all sides of Joseph Smith, facing up to his mistakes and flaws. Cov-

ering up errors makes no sense in any case. Most readers do not believe in, nor are they interested in, perfection. Flawless characters are neither attractive nor useful. We want to meet a real person” (xix).

In his assessment of what readers want, Bushman may be in error. Some Latter-day Saints indeed want to see only a perfect Joseph Smith. But *Rough Stone Rolling* is a good argument against that point of view. Perhaps its most impressive aspect is the way it shows how Joseph Smith’s prophetic gifts utterly transcended his humanity and made of him something he would not have been without them. If Joseph Smith naturally exceeded his contemporaries in wisdom, kindness, piety, good judgment, leadership skills, and intelligence, then his life’s accomplishments would not be as remarkable; we would expect great things from him. Elder Boyd K. Packer counseled Church educators a quarter of a century ago not to emphasize that a prophet was a man but rather that a man was a prophet.²³ Bushman does that. He does not belabor Joseph Smith as a human but simply describes him as the contemporary evidence presents him and then tells us what he did with his life. “Even his family members, who thought he was virtuous, had no premonition of his powers,” and even Joseph Smith himself “could not reconcile what he had become with what he had been. Near the end of his life, he said he could not fault the skeptics for their disbelief: ‘If I had not experienced what I have, I should not have believed it myself’” (143).

Rough Stone Rolling shows Joseph Smith as the good, honorable, courageous, exemplary, and virtuous man that he was. But it is in the greatness of his prophetic gifts that we see the transcending greatness of Joseph Smith. This should not pose a problem for believing Latter-day Saints, but it will do so for many of Bushman’s historian colleagues. *Rough Stone Rolling*’s depiction of Joseph Smith draws his readers into a position where they have to ask themselves hard questions: Given the fact that Joseph Smith—like other men—was fallible, imperfect, and human, how then can we explain what he accomplished? How then do we explain his radical doctrines? How then do we explain his revolutionary religion? How then do we explain the remarkable new scriptures he produced? One part of me wants to suspect that drawing out questions like these was a deliberate tactic on Bushman’s part. But more likely, his intent was simply to present Joseph Smith as he was and then let the story of his life speak for itself. For me, already a committed believer in the divinity of Joseph Smith’s mission, it was a strategy that worked. Joseph Smith stands out in this book greater than ever before.

VI

To historians and scholars of religion: The many extant contemporary sources, including diaries and private correspondence, show that Joseph Smith actually believed that he obtained the Book of Mormon from an angel and received revelations from God. Draw whatever conclusions you desire, but that is what the evidence shows. The available options seem to be that Joseph Smith was delusional or that he was inspired by some source beyond himself. But what one cannot conclude from real evidence is the very thing that previous biographies like Brodie's and Vogel's are based on—the notion that Joseph Smith consciously made up the stories to deceive people. If you are going to read, recommend, or assign to your students a biography of the founder of Mormonism, where is the virtue in choosing one by someone openly critical of him (like Brodie and Vogel) over one who is friendly like Bushman, especially in light of the fact that of these, Bushman is the only one who presents Joseph Smith as Joseph Smith understood himself? Why do you think that their bias is acceptable and Bushman's is not? Would you apply the same standard to a Muslim writing about Islam or a Jew writing about Judaism?

While we're at it, if you have a better explanation for how the uneducated, unsophisticated, and barely literate twenty-three-year-old Joseph Smith produced the Book of Mormon than the one he gave himself, I would like to hear it.

To Latter-day Saints: The history of the Prophet Joseph Smith includes some issues that might be confusing or troubling to readers who are not aware of them. In addition, most Latter-day Saints have been exposed only to a view of their leaders that reveals their strengths and inspired contributions, not whatever imperfections they may have. Although we are aware that our leaders—including Joseph Smith—are human, the focus in Church literature and believing scholarship is rightly on the positive and uplifting components of their ministries. Even so, the early sources on the Prophet sometimes reveal aspects of Church history that need, and sometimes even cry out for, explanation. Part of Bushman's mastery is his ability to provide a context for them that is consistent first and foremost with how Joseph Smith and his contemporaries experienced them.

For example, any discussion of plural marriage in the days of Joseph Smith requires care and finesse. As uncomfortable as some Latter-day Saints may feel about it, a good biography of Joseph Smith cannot ignore the matter nor dismiss what the evidence tells us. Bushman's discussion is probably the best there is in print. He deals with the issue with candor, acknowledging what the sources say. But he also places it in a context of revelation, with a

focus on principle, doctrine, ordinance, and covenant—just as Joseph Smith did—pointing to the ultimate destiny of humankind. He emphasizes throughout that Joseph Smith viewed plural marriage as a “religious principle” (326) and that it was the Prophet’s immovable belief that it came from God that guided his actions in it. In carefully drawing distinctions between “priesthood plural marriage” (538) on the one hand and adultery and 19th-century marriage innovations on the other, Bushman remains true to all the evidence and depicts plural marriage as the divine principle that Joseph Smith taught it to be. His depiction will surprise many of his academic readers—not because they do not know that plural marriage existed but because they will never have seen it presented in the doctrinal framework that Bushman provides. In addition, they will have a hard time explaining the statements Bushman includes from early Latter-day Saints—especially from Joseph Smith’s wives—in which they tell of receiving revelations that confirmed to them that the practice came from God.

Some Latter-day Saints may be uneasy with *Rough Stone Rolling* because of the wisdom of not imparting every truth to an unprepared audience, a principle well established in scripture (see Matthew 7:6; Alma 12:9).²⁴ I am sensitive to this matter in my own writing, as are other authors on gospel topics. No writer of Church history should violate sacred covenants or other proprieties nor seek in any way to damage the faith of readers. But I am not embarrassed by Joseph Smith, nor by any aspect of his life, nor by anything God revealed to him or asked him to do. The reality that Bushman faced as a writer was that all the sensitive matters regarding Joseph Smith’s life were already on the table and part of the historical conversation. In writing *Rough Stone Rolling*, he was not revealing anything but responding to what was already being discussed. Today, many things are public knowledge that were known only to a few a generation ago, including historical information previously found only in archives. Sadly, much of our history is distorted by critics of the Church who are intent on discrediting Joseph Smith and his teachings. Bushman’s biography of the Prophet could have no credibility with his intended readership were he to have left undiscussed such matters. Perhaps more important, nor could it have as much value for Latter-day Saints. This is not to say that the book should be used in seminary classes or given to individuals investigating the Church or to new converts. Nor is it to say that Bushman got it right every time; again, there were several places where I wish he had worded things differently. But faithful Latter-day Saints who are not scholars and who seldom read academic books have bought tens of thousands of copies of *Rough Stone Rolling*, indicating that very many believers like it and are recommending it to others. I have had conversations with individuals who have told me with great feeling how reading the book was a spiritual experience. To me, the truth of

Joseph Smith's calling is so self-evident in the record of his life that *Rough Stone Rolling* cannot help but strengthen testimonies in the lives of many readers, despite whatever weaknesses it might have.

In the end, one's response to *Rough Stone Rolling* may depend on what one brings into the reading. In my conversations with both academic colleagues and Latter-day Saints who are not scholars, my impression is that in general, those Latter-day Saints who will read the book to learn about Richard Bushman and *Rough Stone Rolling* may come out of the experience with criticisms of both. But those who will read to learn about Joseph Smith will come out of the process with an increased love, appreciation, and testimony of the Prophet and of his divinely directed work. That was my experience.

Notes

1. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith the Mormon Prophet*, 2nd ed., rev. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986).

2. A fine example is Frederick M. Denny, *An Introduction to Islam*, 3rd ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2006).

3. Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), ix.

4. Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, "Who's That on the \$50 Bill?" *Books and Culture*, January-February 2006, 42.

5. Also Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002).

6. The reaction to the book in a 2006 Mormon History Association panel (made up mostly of nonbelievers) was, in large part, not positive. Published reviews so far have been mixed in this regard. Maffly-Kipp considers the book too believing. Susan Juster, in contrast, praises Bushman for his "even-handedness." "Bushman puts in practice the method he has preached for many years: examining the Prophet's life and writings with all the tools of scientific empirical enquiry while keeping his personal beliefs in suspension." See "Joseph Smith, America's Prophet: Writing Mormon History," *Reviews in American History* 34 (2006): 442. Latter-day Saint Marvin S. Hill takes Bushman to task on several issues, but most of his criticisms appear to me to be actually criticisms of Joseph Smith and traditional Latter-day Saint history. See "By Any Standard, a Remarkable Book," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 39, no. 3 (Fall 2006): 155–63.

7. See *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 8.111 (350–51).

8. Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984).

9. That this was a wrong-headed copy-editor decision is suggested in the fact that in at least one case, the Book of Mormon was overlooked and not italicized (140), and the same happened to the Doctrine and Covenants (276). In another instance, the Book of Mormon was italicized in a nineteenth-century quotation (70)!

10. An example might be that Bushman on multiple occasions repeats his assertion that Joseph Smith Sr. had a problem with drink (42, 55, 106, 262). The references to magic are also far out of proportion to their importance and reflect the modern setting in which

Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism was written.

11. Curiously, the position seems to be based almost exclusively on one piece of very late secondary evidence (see 118, 588).

12. See Richard Lloyd Anderson's work on this topic, forthcoming in *BYU Studies*. See also Larry C. Porter, "The Restoration of the Priesthood," *Religious Studies Center Newsletter* 9, no. 3 (May 1995): 1–12; "The Restoration of the Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthoods," *Ensign* 26, no. 12 (December 1996): 30–47.

13. Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith, Volume 1: Autobiographical and Historical Writings* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 290; also Joseph Smith–History 1:70.

14. Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:291; also Joseph Smith–History 1:72.

15. See Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:302–3.

16. Bushman cites John Gee's important recent work but shows no evidence of having read it (618).

17. There are also occasional inaccuracies in the book such as typographical errors, incorrect dates, copy-editing inconsistencies, and others. For example, the birth year of Samuel Harrison Smith (xvii) is actually 1808. Joseph and Emma Smith lived in a frame house in Harmony, not a "cabin" (71). Joseph Smith's 1842 history was an article or chapter, not a "letter" (109). Brigham Young arrived in Kirtland, not Nauvoo (189). Inconsistencies in the use of italics are found (70, 140). For "strata" (258), read "stratum," and for "at seventy" (289), read "a seventy."

18. "In a sample of fifty-three life histories that mentioned conversion, only eleven described their first meeting with Joseph Smith. Of these eleven, four registered an impression, two favorable, and two neutral or negative" (601, n. 55).

19. John Whitmer, *Book of John Whitmer*, 55.

20. Book of Commandments 50:1 (Doctrine and Covenants 47:1).

21. H. Nicholas Muller III, Review of Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, *Journal of Mormon History* 32, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 246–50.

22. See Joseph Smith to The Church at Quincy, Illinois, 20 March 1839, in Dean C. Jessee, ed., *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2002), 445.

23. Boyd K. Packer, "The Mantle Is Far, Far Greater Than The Intellect," *BYU Studies* 21, no. 3 (Summer, 1981): 265.

24. My friends who are uncomfortable with the book in general are concerned with exposing sensitive issues to unprepared readers.