

The Looseness of Zion: Joseph Smith and the Lighter View

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This morning I should like to say a few words about things we have found in the documents in the Church Archives that bear on the life and character of Joseph Smith. During the past two years I have had the opportunity of going through the diaries, letters, and histories of the Prophet and of those associated with him. This has given me an added appreciation of Joseph Smith as a person and leader.

With respect to his life as a boy, the evidence accumulated by Richard Anderson, Marvin Hill, Dean Jessee, Ivan Barrett, and others shows that the family in which he grew up were hard workers, intelligent people, but not highly educated. They apparently prayed as a family every morning and evening, enjoyed singing hymns, read the Bible together, and were very interested in religion. The boys enjoyed homemade sports such as playing ball, wrestling, and pulling sticks. One neighbor described Joseph as “a real clever, jovial boy”; another neighbor said that the Smiths were “the best family in the neighborhood in case of sickness,” and said that Young Joe, as he called him, worked for him “and he was a good worker” (William H. and E. L. Kelley interviews, *Saints’ Herald* [1881], 161–68, quoted in Richard L. Anderson, “A Corrected View of Joseph Smith’s New York Reputation”).

Joseph’s father, it appears, reacted against the strict discipline required by the contemporary religions of the day. The devout people of his day were not many generations removed from the Puritans, and the goal set up by the ministers of the time was that each church member should become a spiritual athlete—that is, work unceasingly at being a religious person. Brigham Young, who was five years older than the Prophet, described how he was brought up:

When I was young [he said], I was kept within very strict bounds, and was not allowed to walk more than half-an-hour on Sunday for exercise. [In fact, he said], the proper and necessary gambols of youth [were] denied me. . . . I had not a chance to dance when I was young, and never heard the enchanting tones of the violin, until I was eleven years of age; and then I thought I was on the high way to hell, if I suffered myself to linger and listen to it. . . . The Christian world of my youth considered it very wicked to listen to music and to dance. [Journal of Discourses, 2:94]

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He went on to say that the parents of his day whipped their children for reading novels, never let them go to the theater, and prohibited them from playing or associating with other children. In his words, “They bind them to the moral law.” The consequence was that duty became “loathsome,” he said; “when they are freed by age from the rigorous training of their parents, they are more fit for companions to devils, than to be the children of such religious parents” (*Journal of Discourses*, 2:94).

The result of this strictness, he said, was that when such a child was in his late teens he tended to “steal away from father and mother; and when he has broken his bands,” he said, “you would think all hell was let loose, and that he would compass the world at once” (*Journal of Discourses*, 2:94). He left the church and ended up not belonging to any church. (I think Milton Backman has discovered that something like 90 percent of Joseph Smith’s and Brigham Young’s parents’ generation did not belong to any church [Milton V. Backman, Jr., *American Religions and the Rise of Mormonism* (Salt Lake City, 1965), p. 283].) As for those who did belong to churches, they were so conditioned by their early repressive experience that they felt guilty if they enjoyed the ordinary things of life and expressed that guilt in a sanctimonious demeanor and grave countenance.

“Man Is that He Might Have Joy”

It was in such an environment that Joseph Smith grew up. But before he went through the stage of rebellion, before the development of a guilt complex, the Lord granted to him, at the age of fourteen, that glorious First Vision. The Lord got to him, in other words, before the religions of the day were able to deaden his youthful exuberance and openness, his capacity for enjoying the mental, cultural, and physical aspects of life. He thus avoided the artificially severe, ascetic, fun-abhorring mantle that contemporary religion seemed to insist upon. He was pious, but not inhibited; earnest, but not

fanatical; a warm, affectionate, and enjoyable personality—a prophet who was both serious and playful—a wonderful exemplar of the precept “Man is that he might have joy.”

Jedediah M. Grant, who knew the Prophet well, underscored this point when he declared that Joseph Smith preached against the “super-abundant stock of sanctimoniousness” that characterized contemporary religion. According to Elder Grant, a certain minister, out of curiosity, came to see the Prophet in Nauvoo and carried this sanctimonious spirit so far that the Prophet finally suggested to the minister that they engage in a little wrestling. The minister was so shocked that he just stood there rigid and dumbfounded, whereupon the Prophet playfully acted as though to put him on the floor and help him get up and then called attention to the so-called Christian “follies” of the time, the absurdity of the long, solemn, “asslike” tone of speaking and acting, and the dangers of excessive piety and fanaticism (*Journal of Discourses*, 3:66–67).

In other words, the Prophet recognized as unhealthy the mind which lacked balance, perspective, and humor. In the society of his day there were many earnest people who habitually looked on the serious side of things that had no serious side, who regarded humor as incompatible with religion. It was common for these descendants of the Puritans to see displays of humor as a mark of insincerity, for humor suggested that nothing really mattered and that life was basically comic. To be overly humorous, they thought, was to be cynical toward life. But Joseph Smith saw humor and religion as quite reconcilable. As he saw it, once one acknowledges that there is something beyond laughter—a core of life that is solemn, serious, and tender—there is still plenty of room for jesting. At least, that is the way he was—“a jolly good fellow,” as one contemporary described him.

That this is the way Joseph Smith turned out there can be no doubt. We have a number of

contemporary descriptions of him. One person, after meeting him, said, "He possesses the innate refinement that one finds in the born poet or in the most highly cultivated intellectual." Another found him a "sociable, easy, cheerful, obliging, kind, and hospitable person." Another described him as "kind and considerate, taking a personal interest in all people, considering everyone his equal." Still another describes him as "a fine, noble looking man." All of this suggests that he had a balanced, well-adjusted, healthy personality and that people enjoyed being around him and he them.

The Prophet's Jovial Nature

Joseph was confident and sure of himself but did not take himself more seriously than the circumstances warranted. As recorded in the Sermons of Joseph Smith file at the Church Archives, he said in 1843, "I am not a very pious man [in terms of the superpiety of Christian ministers of his day]. I do not wish to be a great deal better than anybody else" (compare *History of the Church*, 5:401). Then he went on to explain that he enjoyed being with people, wanted to be with them as well in the hereafter, and thus did not wrap himself in a pious rectitude which would separate him from his brothers and sisters.

Emma's lot must have been a difficult one, for he was always bringing home a group to dinner. But she was a good cook. "When I want a little bread and milk," Joseph told William W. Phelps, "my wife loads the table with so many good things it destroys my appetite."

The Prophet enjoyed his family. There are dozens of references in his official diary that read like this one of March 27, 1834: "Remained at home and had great joy with my family." Indeed, according to a cousin, George A. Smith, one convert family apostatized because, when they arrived in Kirtland from the East, Joseph came downstairs from the room "where he had been translating by the gift and power of God" and began to romp and play with his

children (*Journal of Discourses*, 2:214). In their view, this was not proper behavior for a prophet! The Prophet's journal mentions going with his family to musical concerts, the theater, and circus performances, and taking excursions on Mississippi riverboats.

Joseph's well-adjusted nature was infectious. Those brought up in the strict, long-faced, pious tradition soon found themselves liberated so they could fulfill their foreordained roles of being leaders of the Saints. Converts who had been brought up with less enjoyment of life and spontaneity were unfrozen; their experiences and enjoyments were expanded. The wholesome healthiness of Joseph Smith, in other words, brought changes in the unhealthy piety and smugness and sanctimoniousness of others who were benefited by association with him. Religion was not to *confine* spirits, he pointed out, but to *expand* them. Direct experience with the Prophet gave them reassurance of the fuller and more joyful life the gospel called for them to live.

Brigham Young, for example, despite his pious upbringing, learned to dance, very stately to be sure, learned to be an actor (he played the part of the High Priest in "Pizarro"), and in short enjoyed life and helped those associated with him to enjoy life, despite their many trials and problems. No wonder Brigham Young said, "I feel like shouting hallelujah, all the time, when I think that I ever knew Joseph Smith, the Prophet" (*Journal of Discourses*, 3:51).

Because of this spontaneity, joviality, and combination of seriousness of purpose and good humor, everybody was quickly attracted to Joseph Smith. His religion, revelations, and spirituality attracted them, of course, but so did his person, and converts did not fail to mention this in their diaries and letters. In fact, meeting him for the first time was such a momentous occasion that nearly everyone who kept a diary or wrote his life history recorded that first encounter, as if it were the greatest

event of their lives—which, of course, for many of them it was!

Work and Recreation in the Early Church

When Brigham Young and his brother Joseph Young went to see Joseph Smith in 1832, “they found him chopping wood, for [as Wilford Woodruff said] he was a labouring man, and gained his bread by the sweat of his brow.” The Prophet, according to the account of this meeting, “received them gladly, invited them to his house, and they rejoiced together in the Gospel of Christ, and their hearts were knitted together in the spirit and bond of union” (*Journal of Discourses*, 7:100).

When Wilford Woodruff first met the Prophet in April 1834 at Kirtland, he wrote:

I saw him out in the field with his brother Hyrum: he had on a very old hat. . . . I was introduced to him, and he invited me home with him.

I accepted the invitation, and I watched him pretty closely, to see what I could learn. He remarked, while passing to his house, that this was the first hour he had spent in recreation for a long time.

*Shortly after we arrived at his house, he went into an adjoining room, and brought out a wolf-skin, and said, “Brother Woodruff, I want you to help me to tan this.” So I pulled off my coat, went to work and helped him, and felt honoured in so doing. He was about going up with the brethren to redeem Zion, and he wanted this wolf-skin to put upon his waggon seat, as he had no buffalo robe. . . . Well, we tanned it, and used it. . . . This was my first introduction to the Prophet Joseph Smith. . . . I rejoiced to behold his face and to hear his voice. I was fully satisfied that Joseph was a Prophet. [*Journal of Discourses*, 7:101; also *Millennial Star* 53 (1891): 627–28].*

Brother Woodruff had reason later on to expand that first impression. After long association with the Prophet, he wrote: “I have felt to rejoice exceedingly in what I saw of brother

Joseph, for in his public and private career he carried with him the Spirit of the Almighty, and he manifested a greatness of soul which I had never seen in any other man” (*Journal of Discourses*, 7:101).

Joseph Smith had a humanizing influence on others, like Parley and Orson Pratt and Orson Hyde. Orson Hyde, for example, began one of his sermons by admitting that he had sometimes spoken too loudly and energetically and promised:

*I shall endeavor, the Lord being my helper, to modulate my voice according to the Spirit of God that I may have when speaking, and not go beyond it, neither fall short. At the same time, I do not want my mind so trammelled as brother Parley P. Pratt’s once was, when dancing was first introduced into Nauvoo among the Saints. I observed brother Parley standing in the figure, and he was making no motion particularly, only up and down. Says I, “Brother Parley, why don’t you move forward?” Says he, “When I think which way I am going, I forget the step; and when I think of the step, I forget which way to go.” [*Journal of Discourses*, 6:150]*

The apostasy of people who saw the Prophet interspersing times of spiritual communion with periods of boisterous activity is an illustration of the teachings of his time about levity supposedly being in conflict with piety. In contrast, thousands of converts found the experience of living with the Saints in Kirtland and Nauvoo and in the Salt Lake Valley to be exhilarating. Mormonism loosened them up, as it were. From the tense and humorless pursuit of immediate goals, it gave them balance and caused them to enjoy earthly life, even when filled with sorrow and frustration. The atmosphere around Joseph was one of hope and buoyancy, of optimism and faith, of wholesome righteousness, and yet there was a loosening of the strict bonds of contemporary Calvinism.

Joseph Smith helped teach people what true religion was, and he taught them very graphically that it was *not* sanctimoniousness (*Journal of Discourses*, 3:66–67). Not only that, he taught them that it was something which expanded their lives and potentials in the way his was expanded.

Listen to the kind of recreation the Saints held under the Prophet's direction in Nauvoo: On February 20, 1843, a "wood-cutting bee" was held at the Prophet's home. Seventy brethren attended. They sawed, chopped, split, and piled up a large stack of wood in the yard, which served not only the Prophet's family, but also the many persons they helped out. "The day was spent by them with much pleasantry, good humor and feeling," says the record. "A white oak log, measuring five feet four inches in diameter was cut through with a cross-cut saw, in four-and-a-half minutes, by Hyrum Dayton and brother John Tidwell." This tree had been previously cut by the Prophet himself, and he had hauled it to the yard with his team (Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, 5:282).

Joseph said that once when he was in his office, he saw two boys fighting in the street. He ran out, "caught one of the boys (who had begun the fight with clubs,) and then the other; and, after giving them proper instruction," as he termed it, "gave the bystanders a lecture" for egging the boys on instead of stopping the fight, and finally concluded the matter by saying that nobody was allowed to fight in Nauvoo but himself (*History of the Church*, 5:282-83). Joseph Smith favored music, drama, debating, hiking, boating, athletics, parties, dancing, and picnics. He liked going for long walks, horseback riding, and getting out into the beauty of nature. Here is the account of his activities for Wednesday, February 8, 1843:

This morning, I read German, and visited with a brother and sister from Michigan, who thought that "a prophet is always a prophet;" but I told them that

a prophet was a prophet only when he was acting as such. After dinner Brother Parley P. Pratt came in: we had conversation on various subjects. At four in the afternoon, I went out with my little [son] Frederick, to exercise myself by sliding on the ice. [History of the Church, 5:265]

The Balance of Seriousness and Humor

One could misunderstand all this. It is easy to carry the epicurean philosophy too far. One needs the help of the Spirit in drawing the line between living the fuller life to which we are called by the gospel and indulging in licentious behavior. The Prophet himself prayed for guidance on this principle. As with all of us, this greatest of all prophets prayed for forgiveness of his excesses, for his personal salvation. To use his own expression in a letter to Emma, "I pray that I may steer my own bark safe" (Joseph Smith to Emma Smith, 21 March 1839, Church Archives). The point I am making is that the Prophet was also concerned about extremes—becoming so concerned about the danger of overexuberance that one swings the pendulum back and focuses too heavily on repressing wrong desires. For Joseph did insist on self-control and righteous living. He was not the happy-go-lucky companion who would let his friends get away with anything: "The Saints need not think because I am familiar with them and am playful and cheerful, that I am ignorant of what is going on," he said on one occasion. "Iniquity of any kind cannot be sustained in the Church, and it will not fare well where I am; for I am determined while I do lead the Church, to lead it right" (quoted in Wilford Woodruff journal, *History of the Church*, 5:411).

Certainly the calling of prophet was one of such high seriousness that its responsibilities could well have weighted down a less vital mind. But it was humor which helped Joseph to dispose of conflicts and problems that did not really matter. The Prophet was deeply serious, but he was not solemn; he believed an

unduly solemn person had lost something of the image of his Creator.

What he was teaching the Saints in all of this, it seems to me, is something equivalent to what psychologists have referred to as the principle or law of reversed effect. This says that often our efforts to keep from doing a wrong thing are so tense and determined that they magnify our chances of doing that very thing. Paul discovered this principle when he wrote to the Romans, "I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me" (Romans 7:21). Our difficult moral struggles require a certain relaxation and surrender. We should give the Lord and the Holy Ghost a chance to do the refreshing. This principle of relaxed enjoyment and acceptance of life, rather than tense struggle to achieve perfection, fits in with the design of the Lord's purpose, "Man is that he might have joy." This, it seems to me, is one of the things the Prophet was trying to get across. And this principle is particularly important to those of us who are a little older—as, for example, graduate students, for it is at this time that we are likely to discover the gap between our earlier

aspirations and our abilities. We all have exaggerated expectations of life, and sooner or later we discover that we are less clever than we had thought, that we have to be satisfied with less income, less popularity, even a less ideal marriage than we had hoped for. In an unhealthy situation this leads to resentment, projection of blame, distress, and maladjustment. The Latter-day Saint has an ideal background for coping with this situation as he adjusts his ambitions to the place in life which the Lord has in store for him.

I pray that as individuals and as families we may laugh together, just as we pray together; that we may recognize our heritage, its few weaknesses along with its great strengths, without fear; that we may develop the cultural pride which others will expect of the Lord's chosen people; that we may appreciate the wonderfully warm and engaging persons that all of our prophets have been; and that we may continue to exhibit that loyalty to the principles of the gospel that would make the angels in heaven rejoice. And I pray this in the name of Jesus, the Christ. Amen.