



Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling

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Founder of the largest indigenous Christian church in American history, Joseph Smith published the 584-page Book of Mormon when he was twenty-three and went on to organize a church, found cities, and attract thousands of followers before his violent death at age thirty-eight. Richard Bushman, an esteemed cultural historian and a practicing Mormon, moves beyond the popular stereotype of Smith as a colorful fraud to explore his personality, his relationships with others, and how he received revelations. An arresting narrative of the birth of the Mormon Church, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* also brilliantly evaluates the prophet's bold contributions to Christian theology and his cultural place in the modern world.

Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling Details

Date : Published March 13th 2007 by Vintage (first published 2005)

ISBN : 9781400077533

Author : Richard L. Bushman

Format : Paperback 740 pages

Genre : Biography, Religion, Nonfiction, History, Christianity, Lds, Mormonism

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From Reader Review Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling for online ebook

Bryan Tanner says

Finishing this book is like climbing Mount Kilimanjaro:

- 1) There's a solid chance of (spiritual) injury if you try to climb it unprepared. If your bones (testimony) are strong, but brittle, they might break after taking a bump.
- 2) We've all heard of Mount Kilimanjaro, and probably think we're familiar with it. But after you travel to Tanzania and summit the highest free-standing mountain in the world, you realize it was a lot more complicated than you had first supposed.
- 3) Once you've conquered it, you will feel compelled to tell everyone about it. (You will become member of a sacred brotherhood.)

Why This Book Is Soooooo Valuable!

- 1) Most literature written by LDS Church members about Joseph Smith ignores or inappropriately justifies controversial aspects of his life (gold hunting, fiscal irresponsibility, re-instituting polygamy, "de-deifying" God in the King Follett Sermon, etc.).
- 2) Critical "anti-Mormon" literature addresses these issues but does not present it in the context of Joseph Smith's life, time period, and present learning.
- 3) This book bridges the divide between these two camps and helps each group not only better understand the other, but also helps us understand the life and thoughts of Joseph Smith. I recommend this scholarly history to any interested in Joseph Smith and the early-Mormon church.

Why Did I Read This?

- 1) I'm on a biography kick generally. I love to learn from the real lives of people.
- 2) Joseph Smith was a particularly interesting subject for me, as I am a member of the Church he restored in 1830.
- 3) The author, Richard Bushman, is comprehensive, yet concise (and relatively objective) in his telling of Joseph's story.
- 4) Reading this was a way for me to be aware of Church criticisms without needing to go *too far left*. "Whenever you go to a different place where you feel it's just a little off-putting, that's good." —Louis C.K., Comedian. It will shake the testimonies of dogmatic Mormons (in a good way). At the same time, it makes a human being out of that "devil, Joe Smith." In both instances, it shakes free some the convenient notions we may have carried and stretches our once-inflexible beliefs regarding Joseph and the early church.

New Ideas, Washed Over During My Religious Education

- Joseph was poor his whole life. Early on, he was involved with a shipping deal that could have set him and his family up for life. But he got hosed by his business partner, which led to chronic debt. Some might argue that it was his life of poverty (read: humility) that prepared him to be the prophet the Lord needed him to be. The only moment in his life which hinted at comfortable living was when they lived above the red-brick store in Nauvoo; and even then, they housed family and took on boarders to help pay down debts.
- When Joseph Smith said that there was "an unusual excitement on the subject of religion" in the place where he grew up, he wasn't kidding! His Methodist and Presbyterian parents were also totally into spiritualism and magic! I had no idea that peep stones were commonly used in that day to find gold and treasure. Young Joseph indeed traveled with parties of treasure hunters seeking treasure. I do not recall if Joseph ever used the seer stones given to him by Moroni for that purpose, but I know he was relentlessly tempted to use them by his former associates. There came a moment in Joseph's growth (after receiving the Golden Plates) when he drew a moral line in the sand and put that part of his life behind him.
- He regularly verbally ripped people apart. He was a jerk to people at times. I'm sure his fiery disposition was partially caused by how people harassed him since his birth, and especially since he claimed to have seen God. But despite his lion-like roar, he rarely actually acted on his threats. And when he did, Joseph was quick to humble himself and offer apologies and forgiveness liberally.
- His relationship with Emma was rough!!! It wasn't all lovey-dovey. They got into some rows. (That must have been what made their relationship so deep.) So much poverty! So much living in fear! So much infant death! Discord in their relationship was a constant source of inspiration Joseph used to seek and receive revelations, even if not directly such as section 89 of the Doctrine and Covenants (Word of Wisdom). The book made Emma out to be the strongest opponent of polygamy. She threatened divorce, and the book intimates at attempted poisoning of the prophet over the subject.
- In that pre-civil war setting, Mormonism was a legitimate threat to the way of life of non-believers. For Mormons, religious law superseded any civil law. And Joseph openly preached the combining of Nauvoo's civil government with religious law (which was essentially whatever he said). It's no wonder the people of Missouri and the State and Federal Government were afraid of the Mormonism's rapid expansion and its larger-than-life leader, Joseph Smith.
- Joseph was awaiting the Second Coming. He knew that it still be about 40 years due to some prophecies which were yet to be fulfilled. But he taught and acted like things were wrapping up.
- New converts were cool with the Book of Mormon. But then the "deep doctrine" started coming out. These later revelations (Polygamy, God was a man, etc.) played a major role in why so many left the Church. If my wife had been secretly approached by the prophet and was told that he had received a revelation for her to marry him. But that she only had 24 hours to decide if she felt right about it before the offer would be withdrawn and those blessings never again available, my first inclination would be to pack our bags. It's difficult to even imagine, but we would have to receive an awfully strong (and jointly-received) divine confirmation in order to exercise the requisite faith to follow the prophet.

Karen says

This year I was finally ready for this book. It's not one I could read quickly (actually I don't read anything quickly). I read it over the course of about 7 months, reading 4-5 pages at a time, then pausing to let things

sink in. I took a few breaks to read other books about Mormon history, just to fill in the context. Huge book, so hard to encapsulate. My regard for Joseph Smith and everything he established has grown immensely. Here are a few of the big takeaways:

1. The Church was in its infancy. It struck me over and over again that so much of what he introduced was NEW to him and those around him. Things that are familiar and well established now, they were just figuring out what it all meant. There were imperfections and mis-understandings, of course! They were just getting started and lacked the perspective of time and continued revelation.
2. Joseph had a grand vision of what needed to happen before Christ's 2nd Coming. He was building the kingdom of God on the earth. He saw what needed to be established, and was trying to do it all right then. Almost 200 years later and we are still working on it and there is a lot left to do.
3. Joseph's suffering. I have often heard him described as an easy going personable fellow, so I didn't really appreciate that stress, worry, and hardship seemed to accompany him most of his life. He carried a tremendous burden of trying to the best of his ability to carry out God's will. His efforts weren't usually popular or easy or even widely successful, but he stayed true to his errand, even if he implemented it imperfectly.
4. Historical context. It's hard not to look at historical figures through a modern lens. I really appreciated Bushman's focus on cultural and historical context for Joseph's life and work.

Praise to the Man. Hard to believe that as a young adult I questioned my faith in him as a prophet. That time is past. Reading this thorough biography just strengthened my sober respect for Joseph Smith as God's prophet. It wasn't a role he asked for, but he carried it through admirably.

Shannon says

This is a superb book. However, I wouldn't recommend it indiscriminately; the book can shake your testimony if you're not careful. If you do read it, keep these things in mind:

*Don't stop in the middle; read to the very end. Bushman does a great job of showing Joseph's development not only as a prophet but also as a man . . . and as a new convert to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

*Although the author is a "believer," he is also a historian. He necessarily takes a historian's perspective on many events. For example, his explanation for the church's failure to establish Zion in Missouri is that the people were impoverished, they were surrounded by a community filled with all sorts of suspicion and prejudices (and the Saints weren't "normal" by their neighbors' standards), and their numbers threatened the county's political aims. On the other hand, God's explanation for the Saints' failure to establish Zion in Missouri was that the Saints had not attained an appropriate level of righteousness. As you go through the book, you might find it interesting to compare the historian's explanations with scriptural explanations for various failures and successes.

*Joseph Smith was a man whose history shows that he was in the process of being tutored in his calling as

prophet and leader of God's church. He was not infallible. He was not without fault. He was not, as Busman points out, the "model man." He never claimed to be. Moreover, he lacked the age and experience that our modern prophets have had as they have led the church; comparing Joseph Smith with them is unfair.

In truth, this book showed Joseph Smith much as the Old Testament showed its prophets: they were imperfect men. Adam had a murderous son. Noah got drunk and passed out naked in his tent while his sons looked on. Abraham expelled his wife and first-born son to fend for themselves in a hostile wilderness; he also obeyed God in the unthinkable act of nearly killing his son (arguably comparable to Joseph Smith's willingness to obey the law of plural marriage). Moses (who also engaged in plural marriage) dared to take personal credit for providing water for the children of Israel. David and Solomon had serious chastity problems. Who knows what other prophetic follies have gone untold in holy writ? And still, God used these imperfect (and, from the world's perspective, accusable) prophets to carry out his will. Except for our example in Christ, our human aspirations for perfection in God's anointed are all in vain.

Joseph Smith for me has been so well lauded by Saints and hated by the world that I've long wanted to push aside the curtains to see what's behind all the fanfare--I've wanted to know what kind of person he really was. This book has taught me both positives and negatives about the man. The most valuable impression I've had is that Joseph was firmly convinced--enough to sacrifice absolutely everything--that his revelations were of God. Moreover, the complexity and ingenuity of those revelations leave little other plausible explanation.

In the end, despite all the knowledge you can gather about him, one's belief in Joseph Smith as a prophet (like one's belief in the Bible, Jesus Christ, the Creation, and so on) is inescapably a matter of faith. You must choose your beliefs as best you can.

Jake says

In terms of research, this book is fantastic. But in terms of objectivity, the author comes up short. This biography is unmistakably written from the biased perspective of a believer. So here is my recommendation:

Pair this book with *No Man Knows My History* by Fawn M. Brodie. She is clearly biased from the opposite end of the spectrum. They are both compelling historical works. I've heard respected scholars affirm that. So reading them back to back might offset their respective author's biases.

Lucy says

While reading this book, I think I recommended it to about every person I had a conversation with about it. Now that I'm actually finished reading it, I have mixed emotions. I'm not left with the feeling I wanted to have -- the triumphant "Praise To The Man" feeling. But I do feel grateful. Grateful for Joseph for the questions he asked, for the organization he established and for those early saints and their willingness to believe in what had to be SO hard to believe. Grateful for its continuation and the clear heads of the 12 apostles who didn't let the chaotic end of Joseph Smith's life translate into a chaotic religion.

The book serves its purpose - narrating the history of Joseph Smith's life. The author, Bushman, seems neutral throughout most of the book. He acknowledges early on that writing a true history about Joseph

Smith is an almost impossible task. Defenders of his reputation write from the perspective of believers and disregard any story that finds fault with him. Other biographies are written by non-believers or former believers who have to discount any inspiration he claimed to have. Bushman, a believer but historian, writes Joseph as a prophet who made mistakes. I think that it is a fair assessment.

I started this book a bit nervous about what I would discover. I have never read much about him other than what the church publishes. The only bad stuff I had ever read was on the internet when I'd be searching for a primary sharing time idea. Googling can be dangerous. As I'd start to read, a sick feeling would start in my stomach and I would immediately stop. That was a road I didn't want to go down. I already knew most of the rumors but there aren't many "safe" answers to those questions in church literature.

If you are not a church history scholar, chances are you don't know the real history of Joseph Smith. From primary on, we are taught his teachings, his testimonies and recalled versions of his early history. We are given a man who was a charismatic, beloved leader. A man who loved children, had a playful side and willing to suffer any amount of persecution to bring about the full restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

After reading this book, I think all of the above descriptions are true. That doesn't seem to be a rosy, post-mortem memory of a man.

But he was not perfect and he didn't always do things perfectly. There seems to be two ways of interpreting his mistakes. Either he wasn't a prophet and the mistakes were a result of a fanatic with the idea of creating an empire and failed due to lack of experience and implementation skill or he was a prophet and tried to carry out the will of God without a full understanding of the revelations at that time. At least that's my interpretation. The revelations he received were not all neatly understood and laid out to him like they are to us in the Doctrine and Covenants. They came and he wouldn't always recognize immediately its meaning or purpose.

That's what was the most enlightening to me -- the setting that the prophet was in. What was the feeling and atmosphere during that time? The mood of the people, the religious frenzy, the political climate? Reading this book really helps a person understand the mentality of all involved from the early followers of Mormonism to his persecutors.

I'm relieved that after reading this book, my testimony of the prophet is not shaken. The stories of the "bad stuff" did not shake me. In fact, it helped me to understand the prophet even more. I finished this book tonight and I feel melancholy. I hated the frenzy at the end. There was such intense hatred in such normal people. I ache for Emma and her suffering, isolation and loss. I recommend this book to anyone who is curious about Joseph Smith and when and why he did the things he did.

Kris says

Wow. I read this book and Fawn Brodie's "No Man Knows My History" back to back, and I found this one FAR more disturbing than the Brodie book. Both books certainly have an angle, as most biographies do, and this one comes from the practicing, believing Mormon side. But the facts were more jarring to me the way they were presented here. The almost dismissive speaking about polyandry and wives who were 14 and 15 years old was disconcerting. I do appreciate that Bushman did not shy away from the hard truths, and although I did find his attempted explanations to sometimes be weak, I also found a few that helped me to see certain situations with a different perspective. This is definitely worth the read, but I struggle to see who

the best audience is - many believing members of the LDS Church could find this book faith-shaking (although I absolutely feel they should read it because this is important knowledge to have about the founder of their church), and many non-members simply won't be interested enough to read it. I do feel like I have a clearer picture of Joseph after reading this, and I suppose that is one of the goals of a good biography.

Shauni says

Having grown up in the LDS church, I was raised with a very sanitized view of Joseph Smith's life. That view was shredded to pieces by Fawn Brodie's book *No Man Knows My History*. Richard Bushman's book is a good middle ground between the church's mostly whitewashed version of Joseph Smith's life and Brodie's somewhat bitter and disillusioned view. As a devout Latter-day Saint, Bushman clearly displays a great deal of respect, admiration, and gratitude for Joseph Smith. At the same time, he does not shy away from presenting Joseph Smith's faults and mistakes in the light they deserve. This book wasn't nearly as entertaining as *No Man Knows My History*, but I felt Bushman was less speculative about theories regarding the origins of the Book of Mormon, reasons for polygamy, and other uncertain topics.

Last week I attended church in my parents' ward, and was slightly amused when the first speaker specifically named both *No Man Knows My History* and *Rough Stone Rolling* as anti-Mormon literature. He suggested that rather than paying attention to these books, we should be seeking a testimony from within our own hearts. My dad and I exchanged a funny glance because I had been reading *Rough Stone Rolling* only minutes before, and he's the one who bought it for me. I find it incredibly sad that so many members of the LDS church are reluctant, scared, and even vocally opposed to learning more than a one-dimensional view of Joseph Smith's life and legacy. I, for one, prefer the truth, faults and all.

Rex says

This is the best biography I've read of Joseph Smith. Bushman is an LDS historian with any ivy league pedigree. While most writers seem to ignore either his virtues or weaknesses, this book presents the real Joseph Smith in an appropriate context that both Mormons and non-LDS alike can agree upon.

Literature written by most LDS members about Joseph Smith ignores controversial aspects of his life (polygamy, gold hunting, money issues, etc.). The most vicious "anti-Mormon" literature addresses these issues but does not present it in the context of Joseph Smith's life, time period, and present learning. This book bridges the divide between these two camps and helps each group not only better understand the other, but also helps us understand the life and thoughts of Joseph Smith. I recommend this scholarly book to any interested in Joseph Smith and early Mormon history.

Tyler says

Richard Bushman is one of the most interesting people in Mormonism today. He's very different from a Hugh Nibley, who was more of an apologist, but I think Bushman's beginning to fill a similar role in the minds of many: a man who is clearly intelligent and respected inside and outside of the Mormon circle, who knows about all the skeletons in the church's closet, and still chooses to believe—although his faith may be quite different from that of a typical member. For more background on Bushman, I recommend listening to

the podcast interview he did for John Dehlin at mormonstories.org.

Richard Bushman Part 1—Experiences as a Faithful Mormon Historian

Richard Bushman Part 2—The Art of History, Joseph Smith's First Vision Stories, and Joseph's Participation in Folk Magic and Treasure Digging

Richard Bushman Part 3—Joseph Smith and the Translation of the Book of Mormon

Richard Bushman Part 4—Book of Mormon Historicity and the Three and Eight Witnesses

Richard Bushman Part 5—Final Thoughts

In general, Bushman surprised me again and again with the number of things he was willing to bring up in *RSR*—things that believing writers have traditionally not been forthcoming about, or in other words things you won't read about in *Truth Restored*. But he does so in a rather guarded way. When addressing faith-challenging events like Fanny Alger or the BoM historicity or many others, he suddenly becomes a journalist. 'Critics say this, but apologists counter that such and such,' and that's it, end of story. By doing this he keeps himself above the fray, not actually advancing the apologists' arguments but still leaving readers with the sense that all criticisms have been dealt with and there's no need for concern. This approach tends to create a false sense of equivalency between the evidence for and against Joseph, which is why ex-Mormons sometimes refer to this book as the Bushman booster shot, intended to inoculate members against information they encounter elsewhere.

Time and again Bushman outlines challenges but then does not draw any conclusions. Of course we already know he believes, so it would be nice if he would tell us *why*. Like when he drops this bomb on p. 323, "There is evidence that Joseph was a polygamist by 1835. Was he also an adulterer?" and then never offers his own opinion. Arghh! He just outright admitted (in the footnotes at least) that Emma caught Joseph in the barn with Fanny Alger sometime around 1835, but accepts on no evidence that there was some kind of "sealing" beforehand that made this all holy. As a believer I think that's your right, but as a historian? Well, at least he had the gumption to ask the question.

In short, this book sets out to tell a faithful history of Joseph's life but showing more sides to the story than have typically been explored, and it does that well. But you are not reading secular history, as is evident right from the opening chronology. It reads like a growth chart for the Prophet, and omits topics that don't fit the pattern. There are no "glass-looking" trials. The "vision of Moses" merits mention but not the revelation that introduced plural marriage. Fanny Alger, his first plural "wife," isn't there, nor is Lucinda Harris, first polyandrous wife. (Both predate the one marriage Bushman saw fit to mention.) The Kinderhook plates aren't here; the 1843 revelation is there, but he calls it "priesthood marriage." Even his anointing as king of the world didn't make the chronology. Still well worth reading though.

AKbooks says

In order to get an objective view of this book before deciding to read it, I read only 3-star reviews; this is how I usually choose books. Thus, I encountered a wave of reviews that called it a great, informative book that LDS and non-LDS alike can appreciate, an account that fairly explores all the unfavorable aspects of J.S. that are never presented to the average LDS member. Several wrote that it "challenges" faith.

If it does that, it's in spite of Bushman's best efforts. I discovered just a couple of chapters in that this is the typical explanation and justification of Mormon history that I heard for the first 20 years of my life in Mormonism. It tells me more than I heard as a Mormon, but it handles it in nearly the same way. Just

because you acknowledge that...there MAY be stuff that some people MAY think is bad, but it ACTUALLY isn't, when you look at it THIS way...doesn't make a fair account of history or reflect your Ivy League credentials.

All that being said, if you want to read a detailed (well, except some details) account of Mormonism's early years, this is a fine read. Just know that you're still getting a biased account that caters to the anti-intellectual attitude.

Bushman:

-glosses over events, taking care of seemingly crucial things in one sentence and then abandoning them, which drove me absolutely crazy.

-explains in a way that is shaky at best and laughable at worst. I actually felt bad for him trying to explain away the papyri. Essentially, this is his explanation: the wildly off-topic translation was J.S.'s "interpretation"; he really, really tried. The effort was a combination of actually trying to learn the language and "translate" in his Book of Mormon method (not reading the actual language)--give the guy a break. Oh, and the papyri pieces discovered in the 1970s were really small, so...

-largely defends J.S. with the idea that what the man did is excusable in historical context--because "everyone else was doing" similar things at the time (magic, translating, creating a fake bank). Something I heard on TV last night about somebody else made me think about this book--"Just because he/she was a racist when everyone else was, doesn't make him/her a real racist, right? Wrong."

-qualifies the evidence against the church provided by "apostates" as simply that: false claims tainted by anger that can't be trusted. No consideration of why these people were so angry--maybe because the outrageous things they say happen, actually happened? It makes me pretty upset when a "scholar" calls one of these dissenters a "borderline criminal" and provides no citation or explanation for such a label.

-gets in his own way quite a bit. For example, he repeatedly states that members were free to speak out in those days, and then--sometimes immediately after--says that J.S. wouldn't allow anyone to "insult" leaders, especially him, by casting aspersions. Indeed, this was an offense that brought them to church councils for humiliation, punishment, or worse, as Bushman shows.

I can accept the idea that we are all "rough stones," that no human is perfect, and so even the person God chooses to reveal his gospel in the latter days wouldn't be--but boy, you'd think God would've chosen a person closer to it than not, or someone who became better the longer he served as prophet. Bushman shows that J.S. actually became worse as time went on. Most of his closest friends, with him since the beginning as original "witnesses" to miraculous happenings, broke with him at one point or another, some violently. Mormons will say that this is the devil trying to tear the church apart, and they similarly explain away other inconveniences in the early history of Mormonism as persecutions, struggles, growing pains, etc. I heard it for 20 years, and it never sat right with me. It's time to confront history.

Seth Jenson says

I LOVED this book! It's been a while since I read it but I figured I'd still do a post about it anyway. It helped me get to know Joseph Smith, the man, so much better. He was just as imperfect as the rest of us, but what

made him unique and special was his courage, his faith, his determination, and his vision. Oh, and another obvious unique thing about him was the fact that he had a calling and a responsibility laid upon his shoulders that few on this earth ever have.

My appreciation for Joseph Smith multiplied as a result of reading this book. For the first time he became real to me. Someone I could relate to and empathize with and understand a little better. He struggled with some of the same things I struggle with, and he got down and discouraged sometimes too. But he never gave up, and he willingly obeyed every mandate God placed upon him. He never shrunk or shirked. His sheer grit in the face of his human frailties have inspired me many times and, in a sense, have empowered me with the knowledge that I can overcome and accomplish great things too. If Joseph Smith was able to accomplish so much in such a short amount of time, and with so many personal weaknesses, then I know I can accomplish my work too.

Julia says

Longest good reads review ever coming up...

A very good and honest look at the life of Joseph Smith. The author refers to it as a cultural biography in that it gives a clearer picture to Joseph Smith's actions, teachings, etc. by highlighting the culture of Americans in the early 1800s.

I had marked it as a book that I wanted to read based on the lds topics articles that can be found on LDS.org that discuss some of the churches more controversial teachings (some that were lived historically and some that are lived today) such as polygamy, Heavenly Mother, seer stones, priesthood restrictions, etc. No matter the topic, this book would come up as a reference and so when I was at BYU in early May I went ahead and picked up a copy at the campus bookstore.

I honestly would recommend this to anyone (member or not) who is interested in knowing about the roots of Mormonism. I feel like the author did a pretty good job of presenting the material in a neutral way. In fact, he even dedicates most of the preface to the book explaining why and how he tries to present it in a historically factual yet neutral way. And I felt like it made the book easier to read coming from that perspective. I thought this book would answer a lot of questions for me. And it did. However, it also left me with a whole new (and possibly bigger) crop of questions to be answered in the future. It was definitely not a light read and left my poor husband as the recipient of most of my late night questions and discussions.

I find it funny that sometimes other members of the church will view historical books about the church as anti-mormon literature. Despite having purchased this book at the BYU bookstore I was told by someone that I shouldn't be reading it. I understand that not everyone wants or needs to know about the early church. For me, I feel like if I can only accept the easy parts, and never look at some of the dark or hard to understand parts of church history, can I really claim to have a strong testimony?

After finishing this book I would say that my testimony has definitely been affected. I wouldn't really say that it's been strengthened or lessened, but it has me seeing things a lot differently than I did before. I think we get a very limited number of stories from church history that make up the bulk of what we've been taught in Sunday school and we start to think that everything was the way that those few stories portray it to be. Taking a step back and looking at the entire life of Joseph Smith and the other founding members of the early church helps to make the picture a little less picturesque and little more diverse. These were real people, with real struggles, making good and bad decisions, making mistakes, helping others, fighting,

forgiving, etc. That might be hard for some to accept, but for me it makes it more believable and relatable. If God loved these imperfect people maybe he loves me.

So, here are some of the topics this book covers:

Seer Stones/Translation-

I've made my peace long ago with seer stones and the Book of Mormon translation process. Being a bit of mystic myself and knowing what I do about the religious culture of the time I really don't have a problem with Joseph Smith looking for treasure, helping people find lost items, or translating plates by looking into a stone. Do I think that is how God usually talks to people...no. But maybe sometimes he lets people use tools that are comfortable for them. I guess if I believe that Moses talked to Him in a burning bush, I can believe Joseph Smith saw the word of God in a stone. The part that is hard for me to understand is why more members don't know more about this part of Joseph's history or how the Book of Mormon was translated. However, I'm excited that the church's website is starting to address these issues and the church just announced a new extensive church history that will be published in several volumes over the next few years and no doubt added to the Sunday school resources.

First Vision (and the differences in written accounts)-

I'm still good with the first vision. I'm even fine with each of the accounts being different. I don't really feel like any of them contradict one another. Some are more elaborate than others, some focus more on particular aspect, but for the most part tell the same story (even though they may be used to emphasize different points). I know from some of my behavioral science classes when I was becoming a teacher that when a kid tells the same story over and over the same exact way it often means it's an altered story (either covering up details, fabricated by them, or memorized from an adult). Had Joseph Smith told the story word for word the same way each time throughout his life I'd probably be more inclined to think it was made up. But maybe that's just me. An interesting thing to note about that time in American history is that there were tons of people claiming to see Christ and Heavenly Father. And his account really isn't that uncommon when compared with stories being told by others at the time. I guess for some that would make them inclined to think he was telling the truth, and for others probably that they were all lying. I enjoyed reading more thorough accounts of others who also had first vision stories.

Prophecy

Now this was one of the topics that I feel like I was not very well-read about. I think sometimes the way we think about prophecy is very old testament in nature...God just comes down and states in plain words exactly what his people should do. While Joseph sometimes claims to receive his prophecy this way it's often received more as impressions and in very vague terms. I was also interested in the many accounts of him being "caught up in the spirit" where he would collapse or shake or have to be carried around from place to place while semi-conscious. Again, historically this is something that a lot of denominations at the time were doing but we always hear so much about him trying to distance the early saints from the Shakers and others that it was interesting how many of those practices he participated in himself.

Also, because so many of his prophecies were indirect or vague. We have to look at his interpretations of prophecy. Sometimes he would publish them directly or give them in front of large groups. Other times he would write them down and then draft and redraft them until he felt like he had it right. A pattern that seems to emerge for me is that Joseph Smith had a tendency to take things overly literal. Or another way of saying that would be that he sometimes took eternal principals and tried to make them fit into the physical mortal

world at the time. He hears treasure in Salem and he's thinking it's gold when it's really converts. He hears Kingdom of God and he sets up a secret council of fifty and appoints himself king. He hears that we need to seal the human race together in the Kingdom of God and he starts marrying multiple women and sealing men to one another as father and son for dynastic reasons. He hears Zion and he immediately thinks it's a specific place- Missouri, Kirtland, eventually Utah. He hears second coming and he thinks it's happening next week. This isn't to say he didn't receive these revelations just that sometimes his interpretation about how it should be handled or how literal it is seems off. I know I sound like I'm trying to rationalize some of the more difficult decisions he made. This is just my own opinion on things. I think the church clarifies some of these and some have just kind of been dropped. We now believe that Zion has many stakes all over the world. That the kingdom of God is an eternal organization rather than a physical government. But when it comes to polygamy, it's just kind of this gray blob out there that no one really knows about. Was it commanded of God? Why? If so, was it lived in the correct way? Etc etc etc. But we'll get there later on in my polygamy sections.

Word of Wisdom

So some interesting history here about when it was actually enforced. When received Joseph regarded it as a "good thing to try" but not a commandment as serious as say polygamy. I found it interesting that Joseph continued to drink and occasionally smoke the rest of his life. And that sacraments and temple ordinances were all performed with alcohol for many years even after his death. He even gets drunk on occasion and has a fist fight with one of his brothers. I think sometimes we hear the story about him being a young man and needing surgery on his leg and he refuses to drink and says that he'll be fine if his dad just holds him and we think that indicates he never drank. I don't fault that church or teachers or anyone for that, it's just my own incorrect assumption that I made when I was younger.

Mob violence:

There's no question that Joseph Smith and the early saints had some terrible, violent and unjust acts perpetrated against them. Including theft, tar and feathering, rape, murder, and more. In some cases these things were even made lawful to do to Mormons. However, I always assumed that these acts were all perpetrated by people who didn't know much about the Mormons or hated them for being different. When in fact many of these stories were carried out by disaffected ex-mormons or even splintering groups within the church itself. For instance the Kirtland temple is taken over by several recently excommunicated members of the quorum of the twelve. It was also unfortunate to read about many instances where church members were found stealing, destroying, burning printing presses etc. of non Mormons either in retaliation or under orders from superiors within the church. Very sad treatment of many people on both sides who did not deserve it.

Polygamy

This one is hard guys. This one is seriously hard for me. I just have a really hard time reconciling polygamy and my belief that God values women equally with men. I just don't see how they can go together. And I guess I always just put this on the shelf before and said "I'm never going to understand that one so I'm just not going to think about it". But after reading this book and realizing how important Joseph Smith regarded this practice it's hard to put it on the shelf and consider myself a well informed saint. Joseph Smith has several quotes referring to polygamy as his crowning doctrine. The doctrine that all other doctrines pointed toward. It's often suggested that it was just a test of the obedience but that's not what Joseph Smith taught. He believed it was a necessary ordinance of exaltation...just like baptism or marriage. So, I guess I have to take a closer look at it.

Upon closer inspection, however, you find some hard stories. Already married women who are sealed to Joseph Smith instead of their husbands. Sexual relations with younger women, older women and the already married women. Joseph actively telling people to keep it secret from Emma (his first wife) and telling women when it's safe to come over to avoid Emma. Emma threatening to leave him. In fact, as he begins to extend the practice of polygamy to other men he tells those men that part of the doctrine of polygamy is that they must keep it secret from their first wives also. How could a loving God require that of women or men? It's a lot to take in.

It's also interesting to note that so many men left the religion because they refused to live polygamy. Oliver Cowdery, Orson Hyde, and more. Eventually some come back and do live polygamy but many others don't. It's often suggested that these men left because they wanted more power within the church or wanted to be prophet. That may have been true too but we have to acknowledge that on some level a lot of these men leave over polygamy.

I mentioned before that it is kind of ambiguous why the church stopped that practice. Certainly a partial reason is to gain statehood. Many of the early saints and prophets of the restoration have multiple quotes about polygamy being superior to monogamy and that polygamy will never be taken from the earth again. Yet it is. So if they were wrong about it never being stopped, is it possible they were wrong about starting it up in the first place? Or is it a case like when they started to practice the law of consecration and they failed at it so God stepped it back a bit. And if they were practicing polygamy wrong, in what ways was it wrong? Should it not have just been men with multiple spouses? Maybe it was more of an eternal principal and they didn't need to have marriages in the mortal or sexual sense? Maybe it was supposed to be a financial or protective joining rather than a physical one? Again, these are the questions I have. I'm not trying to give anyone any answers.

And lastly, the reason that this topic is so hard for me to put on a shelf- the fact that it is still in some form practiced today. As Mormons, we claim all the time that the practice was ended a hundred years ago. And while that's physically true we still practice spiritual polygamy all the time through temple sealings. If a man divorces or becomes a widower he can be sealed to a new spouse at the same time while a woman may only be sealed to one man. I know that several years ago, it was changed so that a deceased woman can now be sealed to more than one man, but that is much less common than the other. So it's not really that we aren't practicing polygamy we've just postponed it for the next life.

There's approximately 1 million more things I could say about this topic but since the book I'm currently reading is a biography of women who lived polygamy I'll save the rest for that book review.

Women and the Gospel

This is the last topic I'll hit, even though there are more that I'd love to discuss. It's hard to be a religious woman because we are told over and over again that we should find ourselves in the scriptures and learn about our divine potential from our heavenly parents. But all of the writers of scripture are men and 98% of the stories are about men. And we know tons about our Heavenly Father but very little of our Heavenly Mother. I feel like church leaders today are good and they are careful to add women into the scriptures. When a scripture says the word man you might often hear them add "and women" when reading it aloud. But given the cultural background and attitudes toward women at the time when the doctrine and covenants or bible was written it's not very likely that the original authors thought it included women. It's kind of like when the Founding fathers wrote "All men are created equal" they didn't mean women or other races, they meant all white men are created equal. When Joseph Smith hears "This is my work and my Glory- to bring to pass the immortality and Eternal life of man" he is thinking of it in the same way- Man, not woman.

One clear place we can see this is in temple practices that are different for men and for women based on Eve's choice. So even though one of the articles of Faith written by Joseph Smith says Men won't be punished for Adam's transgression the follow up to that is that Women will be punished for Eve's. This shows me that when Joseph Smith wrote man in this context, he meant just that, man.

The church organization from the beginning has men at the lead with women at home taking care of the family and property. I'm not saying I want the priesthood or anything. I just mean that reading this helped me empathize with early latter-day saint women. For months at a time the men are in the school of the prophets or in the temple learning and being edified while the women are left at home doing all their own chores, and their husbands chores, and taking care of the children (many of whom die in their arms.) While things aren't quite as bleak for me today. It's still very hard in church culture when my husband is called into so many meetings and receives so much training and I'm often left at home taking care of all the other things. Or I'm left at church taking care of all the kids and can't hear any of the spiritual messages. It's hard to feel like my bucket is getting filled at all.

I also was under the impression that men and women received the endowment at the same time. When in fact it was actually a few years in between the first endowment of the male leadership and the endowments given to women. Part of this has to do with the fact that the first endowment didn't resemble our current endowment in any way. When it was revisited a few years later, and given more structure, it was then made available to women for the purpose of them being able to enter into polygamy. It was also interesting to note that there was an ordinance called a "second anointing" that was given after the endowment to people as a gift for helping Joseph marry additional wives or for entering into polygamy themselves. When I tried to look this up on LDS.org the only reference was in a Sunday school lesson that said "Do not try to discuss or answer any questions about the second anointing"- which kind of gave me a sinking feeling.

So, I'm not apostate. I'm just making sense of things. I guess a huge takeaway for me is that God uses imperfect people. And that maybe he doesn't reveal all of his purposes even to his most elect because we are all here to make decisions and be tried. Even with all the questions I have I'm able to see Joseph Smith as a prophet. But not infallible. I know that we all make mistakes and that he made mistakes. But, sometimes it would be nice to know which things were mistakes and which weren't. For each person that line is going to be different...obviously some people think it was all a mistake or lie, others think none of it was a mistake and it was all done perfectly, for me the truth seems to be somewhere in the middle. Like I said before-sometimes the church clarifies and sometimes they don't. Are they holding things back? Are we just not ready? Are some things just unknowable? Anyway, all of you people who are smarter than I am, read this book and give me some answers! Please! ;)

Dallin says

The definitive biography on Joseph Smith (so I've heard--I haven't read any other). Bushman goes to great lengths to try and be objective as possible, and while he doesn't always succeed (I doubt that such success is impossible), you can tell you've gotten a fairly clear image of Smith--warts and all--by the end. The book also helps give the LDS church's history a narrative arc, helping me organize the many scrambled events I had heard about. Bushman tended to think that at times, outside influences shaped Smith's understanding of theology or the revelations he received--ie, confronting his father's alcoholism, trying to decide what type of role his father would play, led to a revelation about patriarchs. Some people really didn't like this, but I imagine that, like it is for us, many revelations came as quotidian matters pushed him to thinking and wondering. Plus, there is enough that is starkly radical in Smith's teachings to refute any naturalist who

thinks Smith picked it all up from the world around him.

Also, Bushman's writing and research is unmatched. He spent over 10 years on this project, having even written a similar book before about the church's origins, so it is definitely thorough. I recommend it to any member and to people outside the church.

Brien says

Great book, though it's pretty dense. I started it a couple of years ago and let it drop after 100 pages or so. I started over a few months ago, and stuck it through. For some reason, I was much more interested the second-go.

Most Mormons will be familiar with a lot of the history in the book, but not all of it. In fact, I expect that lots of them will be upset or bothered by some of the things they read in this book about Joseph Smith (written by an active Mormon). For example, demanding that things go his way...hitting one of the Apostles in the face for asking too many questions, or throwing the bugle at a man during an argument with Zion's Camp. It's too bad that the official Church history isn't complete; but also understandable that the Church would choose to present Joseph in the best light possible.

In addition to the history, the author spends considerable time writing about some of the doctrines that Joseph revealed and taught. His view on them was interesting and not incorrect, I think. But again, they are taken to a deeper level than most Mormons are accustomed to taking their doctrine. This might make some uncomfortable, or even lead them to disagree with the author because they won't or can't "think the doctrine" all the way to the logical end.

Either way, a great book for those interested in some new ideas worth pondering over, Mormon or not.

Bronson says

I just finished this the other night and I'm still trying to figure out if I liked it or not. It is very detailed and academic - you can tell it was written by a professor. There is a ton of information in it but for a fiction reader like myself I had to work hard to get through it.

As far as a biography of Joseph Smith I learned a ton! Some things I am really glad I learned other not so much. I don't know if I would recommend this to my LDS friends, I can see it helping some with their belief in Joseph Smith as a prophet but if you have holes in your testimony you'll find information here that may be troubling to you. It is an amazing story about an amazing man who founded a powerful world wide organization. I think that's what struck me most as I read it, there were so many stumbling blocks and pitfalls in the early days of the church I am amazed that it survived and flourished after learning so much about the early history.

Kelly says

This book is very enlightening if you're wanting to get into a good discussion about the Prophet Joseph Smith's background and character. There is a lot of context around some of the early doctrines of the church and a pretty good attempt is made to cross-reference worldly explanations for how the doctrine could have

come to be. That being said, all of the worldly explanations tend to get shot down in a pretty methodical way. This book is not for the faint of heart. You'll learn positives and negatives about Joseph's character and his past. While the book is mostly positive and let's the reader decide for himself from the facts, you'll find your appreciation of the things that Joseph and his family went through increase dramatically while reading this book. Good for anyone wanting to increase their knowledge of early church history. It's a good introduction to some of the other early church opponents and leaders.

Gary Preston says

I am reading it currently so it is hard to give it a complete review. It is a biography. It is not to be thought of as a spiritual book. It is well written and for the most part well researched. I like the idea of getting better acquainted with the culture of the era and the book does that well enough. I am getting a better understanding of how the restoration took place and the challenges it faced. It is nice to see the 'little by little' part. Nothing happened quickly as it seems to be portrayed at times by other sources, rather it came along slowly and with a steep learning curve but it did move forward. I find the process fascinating.

Tracy says

As many Church History classes as I've sat through, I didn't expect this stuff to feel fresh and fascinating. It was so interesting, and strange, and sad. I got bored once or twice, and annoyed too, but it's a mostly very easily accessible and engaging history.

Joy says

Comprehensive thorough biography of Joseph Smith and touches upon the basic tenets of Mormonism. I appreciated how the book put doctrine J.Smith taught into a context I hadn't thought of before. I also liked the way the author laid out the life story of J.Smith. Fascinating book-doesn't gloss over the controversial parts of J.Smith's life, but is somewhat sympathetic. In my opinion, it's impossible to be completely objective when talking about J.Smith.

Jamie says

I read most of this book several years ago (before my goodreads days) but then just finished re-reading a lot of it in conjunction with reading Fawn Brodie's "No Man Knows my History" another biography of Joseph Smith. So . . . my review of this book will mostly be a compare / contrast of the 2 books.

This book is long, tedious, and very academic in its style. While the writing is well done it just does not translate into the most enjoyable read-- Very interesting to read but by no means a page turner.

To contrast, I must say that Brodie's book was very much written in a more novel style -- if that is a style. It read quickly and fluidly and often I didn't want to put it down.

Bushman is an active member of the LDS faith and therefore tells the story of Joseph Smith's life and visions and revelation as a believer.

While Brodie was raised in an LDS home (she was in fact the granddaughter of David O. McKay), she was not a practicing member of the church when she wrote the book. Because of her book she was excommunicated. For this reason (and probably this reason alone) her work was labeled in the church as very anti-mormon.

However, I think that had Bushman written his book when she did, he might have been excommunicated as well. The Mormon church has become a lot more open about things.

Despite their 2 perspectives, they really tell the same story. One as a believer and one a non-believer. Their facts do not differ, but their explanations of Joseph's motives and inner thoughts do.

I was initially quite surprised while reading Brodie's book to find her tone extremely respectful and very much in admiration of Joseph Smith as an individual and all that he accomplished. She just simply doesn't believe that he had a relationship with God and therefore has to explain the origins of all his ideas and his motives. Interestingly, in some ways -- because she sees Joseph Smith as just a man -- not a prophet -- she is far more willing to put his flaws into perspective with the times and focus on his accomplishments.

On the flip side, because Bushman believes Joseph Smith did indeed have a prophetic calling, he spends a lot of time trying to explain the doctrines and justifying how a prophet of God could be so misled in financial and personal issues. It reads often in a very apologetic tone.

They both do a lot of explaining -- but about different things and from opposite perspectives.

I truly can't say I liked one book more than the other. I enjoyed comparing them. I really feel like both authors tried their best to present the facts of Joseph's life and then they both explained them through their own shades of glasses.

I found so much about Joseph Smith's life fascinating and some of it quite frankly revolting.

So where do I stand?? I hesitate to state my opinion -- but I really fall somewhere in between the two. I believe that God calls prophets, but I also believe that they are just men. I think there are times that Joseph truly acted in the name of God and there are many times he acted according to his own will. Like the prophets in the Bible, (Moses and David come to mind) God at times directs their paths but often they are left to their own talents and abilities -- and as men make mistakes and also have great triumphs -- all on their own.

I am perfectly comfortable having a very imperfect founder of the church I belong to, because I have always relied on my own spiritual experiences and promptings. Unfortunately, I think many LDS people would find either book quite a challenge to their own faith. That said, part of me loves that Joseph Smith was so imperfect -- because (especially today in the LDS church) the "desire to appear perfect" often runs amok in people's lives and perceptions. As I believe that each of us can have a personal relationship with God and Jesus Christ, I feel strongly that perfection in any aspect of our life is not a pre-requisite to spiritual experience. Far too many people spend too much of their time feeling unworthy of such things.

Edit for 2015 -- "As the Joseph Smith papers project has continued to fill in more gaps and as I have studied Joseph's Smith's polygamy more, I am less and less comfortable with him. Recommended reads -- Todd

