

GENIUS OR SEER?

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I.

Since there can be no reasonable doubt that, humanly speaking, Joseph Smith was the founder of "Mormonism," and since men are to be estimated by what they say and what they do, it follows that this man was either a great, original genius or a heaven-inspired seer. Let us view Joseph Smith in the light reflected by his work—"Mormonism,"—but only, however, so far as will enable us to ascertain the extent to which he possessed originality; that is, the power of invention.

It is a common belief in the world that the "Mormon" prophet was a plagiarist; in other words, that the Church he founded is not an original contribution to religion. The *American Encyclopedia*, for example, asserts that, "to make up the religion of the 'Mormons,' Hebraism, Persian dualism, Brahminism, Buddhistic apotheosis of saints; Christianity, both in its orthodoxy and heterodoxy; Mohammedanism, Druidism, Mesmerism, and Spirit-rapping have all contributed something." Admitting, for the sake of argument, not indeed this shallow and self-contradictory statement, but such a modification of it as would appear reasonably true, let us see what light this would throw on the character of the Prophet Joseph.

Two things, though, must be made clear, before we may safely draw a conclusion from premises viewed from this standpoint.

The first one is, that whatever the source of the separate

parts of this religion may be, the resulting whole—"Mormonism"—is a remarkable unit. This is admitted by everyone who is familiar with it, and who has viewed it through glasses uncolored by prejudice. "The organization of the 'Mormons,'" declares Professor Ely, "is the most nearly perfect piece of social mechanism with which I have, in any way, come in contact, excepting alone the German army." This remark, of course, is the result of observation from the view point of the political economist. But it would be equally true if made concerning the religious or the philosophical aspect of "Mormonism." From whatever side it is looked at, this religious organization appears perfectly homogeneous.

The other point that we must speak of before casting up results is, that greatness does not consist alone in the power to create, as this word is commonly understood, but extends also to the power to organize the material already at hand. Indeed, it is doubtful whether any great man is original, "if we require," in Emerson's phrase, "the originality which consists in weaving, like a spider, his web from his own bowels; in finding clay, and making bricks, and building the house." He profits by the labors of others; he brings to bear upon the results of their toil an insight that can see to make improvement. "The hero is in the press of knights, and the thick of events, and, seeing what men want, and sharing their desire, he adds the needful length of sight and of arm, to come at the desired point. *The greatest genius is the most indebted man.*" How much did Moses owe to "the learning of the Egyptians?" Darwin and Spencer to their predecessors? Shakespeare to the story-tellers that went before him? And our modern inventors to the toil of others? There is little enough that is new under the sun. Every age is mostly a reproduction of the preceding one. All the literature of the world, if we avoid repetition, might be put into a dozen quartos.

An instance or two will make our meaning clear. We English speaking people are fond of pointing to Shakespeare as the supreme master in literature, the prince of poets. This is perfectly proper, and every civilized nation joins us in assigning him the first place in the literary Hall of Fame. But an examination of his plays will reveal the fact that, so far as matter is concerned, he probably owes more to his fellow-workmen, than does any other

great writer. Hamlet's philosophy is in Montaigne's *Essays*, and most of the material and much of the phraseology of *Henry VIII* can be found in the *Chronicles* of Hollinshead. In the last play, for instance, according to Malone, "out of six thousand and forty-three lines, seventeen hundred and seventy-one were written by some author preceding Shakespeare; two thousand three hundred and seventy-three by him, on the foundation laid by his predecessors, and only one thousand eight hundred and ninety-nine were entirely his own." This investigation of Malone's hardly leaves a single drama of Shakespeare's absolute invention. Professor Wendell of Harvard University is wont to say that the great dramatist's only original play, in the sense for which we are contending, is his worst—the *Merry Wives of Windsor*. Milton was no less dependent upon others for his material for *Paradise Lost*. The American Constitution, to go into another department of thought for an illustration, has little new in it, if we except the idea which places in the hands of the Supreme Court of the United States the power to nullify an act of Congress and that which provides for the enforcing of the laws of the United States in the various states by the general government. And so we could multiply instances, but space forbids even our entering into the details of the cases cited.

In view, therefore, of these two facts—that "Mormonism" is admittedly an almost perfect organization, and that individual greatness does not consist alone in the creative imagination—it ought to be clear that the cry of plagiarist does not deprive the "Mormon" Prophet of the claim to first-rate ability. The charge is a mere bagatelle raised by those who either cannot find any serious objection against the Church, or wish to provide a popular slogan. If all the constituents of this religion were separately traceable to sources outside of Joseph Smith, still the wonderful compound resulting from these would entitle this man to the quality of greatness. As well might we refuse to call Shakespeare great because the material of his dramas can be traced to other sources than himself; or to Milton, because his marvelous epic can be found, in substance, in a few verses of Genesis and the Apocalypse; or to the framers of our Constitution, because this instrument is made up almost wholly of old ideas.

The fact of the matter is, pressed to its ultimate analysis, that this power of organizing and recasting material at hand is itself a species of creation, since the product is something that did not exist before. Thus, not to vary our examples, *Paradise Lost*, though its germs lie in the Bible and probably in Caedmon's *Paraphrases*, is nevertheless something distinctly new; the plays of Shakespeare are undoubted products of a wonderful creative power, notwithstanding this, that and the other idea can be traced to more or less definite sources; for, under the spell of this mighty magician those heaps of dead, chaotic material in Hollinshed and the rest, suddenly sprang up into living persons as real as any that you shake hands with in the world; and the American Document of Freedom still remains, in the words of Gladstone, the most wonderful thing ever struck off at a given time by the brain and purpose of man. So it is with "Mormonism." If it were possible to say that this principle was taken from this source, and that doctrine from that source, the fact would still remain that the result of this combination is something entirely new in the world—it did not exist in its present form before. The separate elements would have lost their former identity, and taken on a new shape; Joseph Smith's organizing genius would have wrought upon these constituent parts till he had produced a distinctly new religion. And the sum total of results is scarcely less original than it would be if the various elements of which his product is composed were absolutely new, and "Mormonism," in this sense, becomes an original contribution to religion.

II.

But we do not wish to press this conclusion. There is another answer to the charge of plagiarism, and that is to deny it in the meaning which it is generally made to bear. We might, for instance, suggest a doubt that a young man in the frontier district, in the early nineteenth century, without either book-learning or the opportunity of acquiring it, could know well enough the history of religion, Heathen and Christian, to cull from each faith whatever ideas might produce, when arranged by him, such a religion as "Mormonism," not to speak of his anticipating cults that did not arise till after his day. We may safely leave this for the

more important and practical business of calling attention to ideas which, so far as his generation is concerned, originated in Joseph Smith.

Beyond all cavil, the biggest conception in "Mormonism"—its working hypothesis—is what is known among us as the eternal progression of man. This idea, briefly explained, is: Man, as to his spiritual essence, is an eternal being, capable of continuous and infinite progression; that is, he had no beginning, neither will he have an end. "The mind or the intelligence which man possesses is co-equal with God." In other words, "man exists upon the same principle" as does Deity. Moreover, "God himself was once, as we are now, and is an exalted man." The principle of eternal life, therefore—in so far as it is synonymous with "knowing God"—lies in "going from one small degree to another; from a small capacity to a great; from grace to grace; from exaltation to exaltation, until man attains to the resurrection of the dead, and is able to dwell in everlasting burnings, and to sit in glory, as do those who are enthroned in everlasting power." This means, of course, that man may go on increasing indefinitely in all those attributes which in this life we have learned to look upon as noble and permanently good, that he may continue the development of intellectual, moral, and spiritual power; that, in a word, he may become a God.

In what a dignity does this conception apparel man! He is not, like the Chinaman, a stone in the civic wall; or a member of a non-transcendent caste, as in ancient Egypt and India; or a child of the state, like an enlightened Spartan of the time of Pericles; nor something better than the worm, "totally depraved," though "a little lower than the angels," of our good neighbors who scout the idea of "Mormonism"—he is nothing less than a God in embryo! It would be interesting to pause here long enough to point out the difference between individuals and peoples who hold high notions concerning man, and individuals and peoples who do not. But this matter lies beyond our province in this article.

Where did this idea come from? It certainly did not reach us through the channel of Heathenism. Did it come from any or all of the "Christian" sects by which Joseph Smith was surrounded? Ask those who to this very day turn away from the bare thought

as the acme of blasphemy, whose God becomes each year more ethereal and impersonal, and whose most blissful anticipations respecting the hereafter are, to become a kind of celestial song bird. At all events, they could never, in the world or out of it, become like their God, for their God is bodiless and passionless, with a center nowhere, and a circumference everywhere. That we are not dealing humorously or flippantly with matter, (for indeed it is difficult to speak reverently of such a notion) is evident when one considers the views of God held by a man like Lyman Abbot, who is universally looked upon as one of the first "Christian" ministers of America. Surely, then, Joseph Smith did not levy any tax on Heathenism nor on modern Christianity for his ideas of man and God, and of the relationship which each sustains to the other.

Take another principal idea in "Mormonism," or rather a group of ideas that cluster very closely around this notion of man. According to Joseph Smith, this earth did not come into existence by reason of any accident, but its creation was part of Jehovah's fixed and definite plan for man's exaltation. It is only by being placed in these mortal and very material conditions that his progress and unfolding will be insured. In other words, this earth is man's probation sphere, where he can be tried and perfected for a higher stage. Nor will the earth pass away as such. There is to be a resurrection of the body, very literal, as in the case of Jesus; after which our little planet will be made a fit habitation for immortal man. *This earth is to be literally the inheritance of the meek*; and here, after the resurrection, shall men increase in knowledge and power and dominion and glory forever. But this higher stage is not to be reached without effort on the part of man, is not to be enjoyed merely through the free grace of Christ; but it is necessary, after receiving this grace, to conform to every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God. Man, in other words, must live *every day* the life of a child of God on his way to exaltation. Such, very imperfectly expressed, are the objects which every good Latter-day Saint sets before him, and which are as real as anything he expects next year.

Now where do these ideas come from? "From Heathenism," says the etherializing "Christian;" "and such a crass materialism could have come only from the lowest forms of Heathenism!" But

this statement shows how shallow are the investigations of those who make it, not only of "Mormonism," but also of non-Christian religions; and it proves nothing respecting the origin of these doctrines, except, indeed, that they did not originate in modern Christianity. If we asked our critics to point out specifically which idea was derived from what creed, they would indicate Mohammed's faith as the source of Joseph Smith's "material heaven." That there is a faint suggestion of the former in the latter, is undeniable. But any one who is familiar with both conceptions of the hereafter will readily admit that there is little similarity, if any, between them; not to speak of the one originating in the other—which is our point here. Besides, there is not the remotest indication that the Prophet Joseph knew anything about Mohammedism at the time he first advanced these ideas. On the contrary, the notion that he did is irreconcilable with what we know of his life. Incidentally, we might call attention to the very bold departure of Joseph Smith's ideas in general, and this one in particular, from those that prevailed in the region where he lived—from those, therefore, with which he was most familiar.

One other idea we must speak of—that, namely, which is known among us as salvation for the dead. The Saints, in common with the Christian world, recognize the fact that only through the name of Jesus can salvation be obtained, that salvation is free to all of God's children, but that, *to all appearances*, only a comparatively few of them will secure that boon. Nevertheless, "Mormonism" is not driven to the position where it must impeach the Divine Wisdom for creating man, and then of allowing him to overturn His purposes respecting man's well-being, which results in the damnation of the great majority of the human race, or, at least in their non-salvation. According to the "Mormon" doctrine, as announced by its first Prophet, all men, from Adam to the last, will have the opportunity of hearing the gospel and obeying it, if not "in the flesh," yet in the spirit world. At death, according to this idea, the spirit of man—the part of him that thinks and feels, that receives or rejects, that hears and sees and wills—goes to the world of spirits where Christ is preached, and where every individual spirit has the power to obey or to disobey Him. But since baptism and other ordinances of the gospel, which cannot be per-

formed there, are necessary to salvation or eternal progress, these are performed by those still in the flesh for those who have passed away without them—just as Jesus died for man because man was without the power to die efficaciously for himself. In this way will every soul have the opportunity of exercising his agency in the matter of the laws of eternal progress.

Where did this idea come from? Not surely from any Heathen religion, and not from the narrow and imperfect dogmas of modern Christianity. So far as this generation is concerned, it originated with the Prophet Joseph Smith. Till Joseph Smith came, the world had no answer to the average Christian's frightful commentary on the wisdom of Jehovah in devising a plan of salvation that would save only a handful of His children.

We have preferred not to discuss the question whether these ideas we have mentioned are true. The only matter that we are concerned with here is, Where did the "Mormon" Prophet get them? Clearly, if there has been any plagiarism, it has been only in the smaller and less important ideas, not in the big, central ones. But it is clear that, even if these latter were adopted, the fact that they have been combined into a viril faith like "Mormonism" places the founder of the religion in the realm of actual creation. This is the only conclusion that can be drawn from a close comparison of "Mormonism" with other faiths, Pagan and Christian. Joseph Smith, therefore, becomes one of the great religious reformers of the world. This conclusion would astonish our critics very much. But as long as these hiss out, in one breath, the vilest epithets in the language to the effect that the "Mormon" Prophet was a depraved and ignorant impostor, and then, in the next breath, construct an argument that actually presupposes in him a scholarly discrimination and a wide range of historical information, so long may we be at liberty to leave them to their own devices in the way of extricating themselves from a very queer dilemma.

III.

But Joseph Smith and his people do not ask the world to believe him a great genius. All they require is the admission that he was inspired of heaven, in the same sense that the ancient seers

were inspired. It is true that the Hebrew Scriptures teach the doctrine that man may become like God, as, for example, when the apostle declares that "when He comes we shall be like Him," and the injunction of Jesus for men to become perfect like the Father; these holy writings make God a personal being, after whose image man was created, that the earth shall be man's permanent home, and that the "dead" have the gospel preached to them. But without extraordinary genius, or, what would prove equivalent, the gift of divine inspiration, Joseph Smith would not be any more likely to discover and elaborate these beautiful truths than any other person. It is probable that, like the rest of religious teachers, he would have eagerly snatched at the Psalmist's "a little lower than the angels" as the highest conception of man, utterly ignoring, like them, the infinitely nobler idea of man's unlimited progress; that he would have chosen the psalm-singing, harp-twanging idea of heaven rather than the sensible picture given in the phrase, "The meek shall inherit the earth;" that, finally, he would have preferred to leave his followers with the preposterous notion that God could not devise a plan sufficiently comprehensive to save even the majority of his creatures, to the marvelously simple idea that men may be "saviors on Mount Zion."

But this last thought we need not follow further. It is perfectly clear that Joseph Smith was a great original genius, or one of the greatest of inspired Seers. The Saints prefer the simpler explanation—that he was and is a Seer.

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