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Forging the Mormon Myth

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Under the pretense of rare document collecting Mark Hofmann sold hundreds of forged documents to the Mormon Church and other private collectors for hundreds of thousands of dollars. His documents not only fooled world-class collectors and authenticators, they fit neatly into Mormon history. Though much of the information presented in them was falsified, his convincing handwriting, inclusion of meticulously researched historical minutiae, and ability to capture the voice of early Church members ensured that no one could believe they were fakes. A handful of key forgeries raised suspicions about Mormon origins and the historical tradition in which they had been retold earlier in the twentieth century. Hofmann's criminal exploits ended with him setting off three bombs resulting in two fatalities and injury to himself. As the motive for murder was analyzed, his counterfeiting scheme was unravelled. In the process, his false identity as a dutiful Mormon was revealed as the ultimate fraud.¹

Hofmann's forgeries and the effect they had on the Church provide a window which frames a tension within the modern Mormon Church: a tension between history and myth, contemporary vitality and historic legitimacy. Hofmann's forgeries exploited the weaknesses in the Mormon myth, revealing its failings as an inclusive picture of Mormonism's complexities. Naturally, the Church sought to minimize the exposure these documents received. After the scandal had passed, the Church sought to protect the myth from further exploitation. Scholars posed the greatest threat to the endurance and credence of the myth, and it was their voices that the Church attempted to curtail.

¹ Sillitoe, Linda, and Allen D. Roberts. *Salamander: The Story of the Mormon Forgery Murders*. (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1988). Turley, Richard E. *Victims: The LDS Church and the Mark Hofmann Case*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992). Worrall, Simon. *The Poet and the Murderer: A True Story of Literary Crime and the Art of Forgery*. (New York: Dutton, 2002).

Scholarship had become problematic for the Church by the mid twentieth century when a new Mormon historiography emerged. The “New Mormon History” controversially sought to revise oversimplified historical accounts that were written earlier in the twentieth century.² Hofmann began selling forgeries in 1980, when animosity toward historians was on the rise. Ill-will toward scholars intensified with Hofmann’s conviction in 1987 and climaxed in the nineties when formal action was taken to exclude this style of scholarship.

Scholars were quick to engage the contentious content that Hofmann’s forgeries presented. When the forgeries were found to be inauthentic, scholars seemed to be at fault for furthering Hofmann’s agenda. Scholars were given much of the blame as the Church attempted to repair its image in Hofmann’s wake. The Church’s subsequent treatment of scholars further displays its disquiet regarding its internal struggle between history and myth.

The Church’s concern for its historiography can be seen more clearly by examining changes that the Church made around the turn of the century when transition was necessary to maintain the Church’s vitality. The content of Hofmann’s forgeries questioned the history and theology that the Church had altered during this period. The way the Church handled these contentious documents displayed a possessiveness over its historical image. This extended into the eighties and nineties when scholars faced formal disciplinary action from the Church.

² Flanders, Robert. “Some Reflections on the New Mormon History.” (*Dialogue* 9 no. 1 (1974): 34-41). Shipps, Jan. *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985). Arrington, Leonard J. “The Search for Truth and Meaning in Mormon History.” In *The New Mormon History: Revisionist Essays on the Past*, edited by D. Michael Quinn. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992). Quinn, D. Michael. “On Being a Mormon Historian (And Its Aftermath).” In *Faithful History: Essays on Writing Mormon History*, edited by George D. Smith. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992). Quinn, D. Michael. *The New Mormon History: Revisionist Essays on the Past*. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992). Dobay, Clara V. “Intellect and Faith: The Controversy Over Revisionist Mormon History.” (*Dialogue* 27, no. 1 (1994): 91-104). Alexander, Thomas G. “Historiography and the New Mormon History: A Historian’s Perspective.” (*Dialogue*: 25-49).

Mark Hofmann was made by the Mormon Church. He found himself interested in the historical richness of the Church which was concealed by its myth. With no acceptable way to get at the truth of its history, Hofmann used subversive means to reveal what he saw as its shortcomings. Replacing history with myth obscures the richness that Mormonism holds. When attempts to reconcile myth with history lead to futility, individuals become disillusioned. Disillusionment encourages dissent, and in the case of Mark Hofmann, fraud.³

Mormonism's Changing Historiography

The Mormon Church had always intended to keep an accurate record of its history. Many obstacles, however, thwarted this goal, resulting in a fragmentary record. The foundational years of the Church were particularly obscure.⁴ There were myriad reasons for the incomplete nature of early Mormon history: oppression from outsiders, the arduous trek across the American West, and an unsuccessful attempt to build God's earthly kingdom. These are the same reasons such an account is essential today. Once the Church had stabilized itself in the West and Utah was admitted into the union, a complete history was approached. Though this goal was never accomplished, many books with accounts of important periods and events in Mormon history were written. For decades, this was done in the style of the "Old Mormon historians."⁵ These histories displayed a great number of faults and did not conform to accepted standards of

³ Roberts, Allen D. "'The Truth is the Most Important Thing': The New Mormon History According to Mark Hofmann." *Dialogue* 20, no. 4 (1987): 87-96. "Hofmann Parole Letter." Mark W. Hofmann to Parole Board. 1988. Utah State Prison, Draper, Utah. Howard, Richard P. "Why Were We Misled? What Can We Learn from This?." *Dialogue* 21, no. 2 (1988): 146-148. Roberts, Allen D. "Profile of Apostasy: Who are the Bad Guys Really?" *Dialogue* 31, no. 4 (1998): 143-162. Lindholm, Philip. *Latter-day Dissent: At the Crossroads of Intellectual Inquiry and Ecclesiastical Authority*. (Sandy: Greg Kofford Books, 2011).

⁴ Arrington, 1.

⁵ Shipps, 89.

historiography. They used citations sparingly, if at all. They excluded women from the record and depicted male leaders as “theological marionettes”-- God’s terrestrial puppets-- pioneers incapable of anything but physical labor. This erroneously made Church innovations appear cohesive, always beginning at the top and trickling down to individual members. Members were presented as obedient pawns and aspects depicting dissent and diversity were omitted.⁶ All of this was done to create a God-centered historical perspective. Facts that did not fit into this image were simply not included. The overall result was that these records read more like a defense of Mormonism than history. Often these histories were intended to counter anti-Mormon publications. Rather than engage the evidence from which enemies of the Church drew their conclusions, the Old History denied any credence to the evidence provided by the opposition. Old Mormon Historians were committed to ensuring all accounts were “faith-promoting” for members and potential members.⁷

Beginning in the mid to late 1940s, practitioners of a new style of history began to revise the records by writing academic works on Mormons and Mormonism. Scholars of what was termed the “New Mormon History,” fought past assumptions and intended not simply to defend Mormonism, but provide new perspectives in the search for a comprehensive understanding of the Church.⁸ The earliest example of a stark change in the historiography of Mormonism was Fawn Brodie’s 1945 biography of founder and prophet, Joseph Smith.⁹ In contrast to Old History accounts, Brodie depicted Smith as a conniving, power-hungry fraud, while the Book of Mormon was relegated to a piece of “frontier fiction.” Her method contrasted with the simplistic accounts

⁶ Arrington, 3.

⁷ Shipps, 107-111.

⁸ Shipps, 107.

⁹ Brodie, Fawn M. *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet*. (New York: Knopf, 1971).

that had before been written. These depicted Smith as a hero never outside of the graces of God, painting a myth of Smith which refrained from even mentioning unsavory facts. Brodie scoured Church archives to employ a wealth of sources to make her case. Such a comprehensive history of Smith had never before been attempted, and its implications diametrically opposed all Church-approved publications. Its comprehensive scope and academic nature are what made Brodie's work so devastating to the Church. Brodie's view that religious experience could be accounted for by understanding the historical circumstances resulted in her excommunication and extensive criticism from its members.¹⁰

Just five years later Juanita Brooks drew conclusions in her seminal work, *Mountain Meadows Massacre*, that despite their controversial nature did not result in her excommunication.¹¹ While her work implicated local LDS leaders for the slaughter of more than one hundred innocent victims and found Church Prophet, Brigham Young, complicit for the crime, she attempted also to humanize the culprits by establishing their motives.¹² According to Michael Quinn:

[Brooks] avoided seven deadly sins of traditional Mormon history. She did not shrink from analyzing a controversial topic. She did not conceal sensitive or contradictory evidence. She did not hesitate follow the evidence to 'revisionist' interpretations that ran counter to 'traditional' assumptions. She did not cater to public relations preferences. Finally she did not use an 'academic' work to proselytize for religious preferences.¹³

¹⁰ Alexander, 31. Perhaps the most famous critic of Brodie's was prominent Mormon theologian, Hugh Nibley, who critiqued her methodology and character in an essay entitled "No Ma'am That's Not History." Ironically, while Nibley so harshly criticizes Brodie for what he believes is shoddy academic work, he is most famous for speculative archaeological work which he claims helps prove that the Book of Mormon is true. His work has been heavily criticized by outsiders for its own broad claims. See Nibley, Hugh. "No Ma'am, That's Not History." Volume 11 in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 3-52.

¹¹ In 1857, a southern Utah Mormon settlement attacked a wagon train passing through Mountain Meadows. The Mormons likely attacked because of paranoia from tensions with both the federal government (The Utah War) and Native Americans (pre-Black Hawk War skirmishes). Brooks, Juanita. *Mountain Meadows Massacre*. (University of Oklahoma, 1963).

¹² Alexander, 29.

¹³ *Revisionist Essays*, viii.

By addressing a dark spot on the Mormon record with professionalism, Brooks provided a landmark example for later historians to imitate. The New Mormon Historian countered the old tradition of Mormon history by seeking to explain and understand rather than prove and defend Mormon beliefs.

A later example is Thomas F. O’Dea’s 1957 volume, *The Mormons*.¹⁴ As a Catholic sociology professor, O’Dea was not interested in following the patterns of Mormon history. In the preface of the book, he indicates the difficulty of studying Mormonism, particularly for those outside of the faith: an intimate portrait of Mormonism for non-Mormons his goal. He stated clearly that he intended “throughout to combine intellectual objectivity with intelligent human sympathy.”¹⁵ Again, this conveys some of the goals of the new history: to shift its audience to make the histories accessible to both members and non-members alike as well as to represent the Church with a critical, but nonetheless, equitable, eye. Though the emerging work was still primarily written by Mormons, O’Dea’s work is an example of how the new history began to branch into other disciplines, engaging new, and often non-Mormon, audiences.

Brooks, Brodie, and O’Dea opened a transitional period of history where aspects of both new and old history could be seen.¹⁶ In 1972, Leonard J. Arrington, prominent figure of the newly established Mormon History Society, was given the responsibility of official historian for the Mormon Church. In this new role, he made the bulk of the Church archives under his control available to scholars. Accessibility opened the door to interested scholars, and their growing number provided a community of support. With an adequate and engaged audience, academic

¹⁴ O’Dea, Thomas F. *The Mormons*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963).

¹⁵ O’Dea, vii.

¹⁶ Dobay, 92.

journals dealing with Mormon history and thought began to appear.¹⁷ The research of scholars like Michael Quinn, Jan Shipps, Linda Sillitoe, and Juanita Brooks took the main stage.¹⁸

But this golden era of plentiful and open Church scholarship was short-lived. Arrington only filled the position for a decade. Even while he held the position there was opposition to his practices. When he was replaced from the office the archives were once again closed, along with the tolerance to open-minded scholarship. Dobay states that he and the New Mormon Historians “had fallen victim to the antipathy orthodox Mormons felt toward naturalistic versions of their religion's past.” Due to mounting tension, by “the 1980s [scholars] began turning to independent and secular publishers as outlets for their work.”¹⁹ This resentment continued to fester through the eighties creating “a climate...conducive to the kind of extremism exemplified by Mark Hofmann's career...[and] fueled a conservative backlash against the new history.”²⁰ Quinn adds that “A new generation of anti-Mormon writers has turned from doctrinal diatribe to the polemical use of elements from the Mormon past to discredit the LDS church today.”²¹ It is easy to see why fingers may be pointed at historians for making this information available, even if it is engaged in a fair way.

Two Church authorities in particular, Ezra Taft Benson and Boyd K. Packer spoke out publicly against Mormon intellectualism during this era. They warned members that secular

¹⁷ Dobay, 91-92. Journals notably include *Sunstone Magazine* and *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*.

¹⁸ Some of their most influential publications during this era include Arrington, Leonard J. *Great Basin Kingdom: An Economic History of the Latter-Day Saints, 1830-1900*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958). Richard P. Howard, *Restoration Scriptures: A Study of Their Textual Development* (Independence, Missouri: Herald Publishing House, 1969). Brooks, Juanita. *On the ragged edge: The life and times of Dudley Leavitt*. (Salt Lake City, Utah: Utah State Historical Society, 1973). Arrington, Leonard J. and Davis Bitton. *The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979). Quinn, D. Michael. *J. Reuben Clark, The Church Years*. (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1983).

¹⁹ Dobay, 100.

²⁰ Dobay, 101-102.

²¹ *Faithful History*, 281.

histories of sacred events could be dangerous.²² Benson gave two talks about the conflation of the spiritual and secular in an LDS Conference.²³ In one, he berated historians for providing alternative, environmental explanations for events and church doctrines that are considered by Mormons to be sacred. In a similar address, Elder Boyd K. Packer criticized scholars for publishing controversial material, even if it had been published by the Church before. He also condemned anything with the mark of “the unworthy, the unsavory, or the sensational” and expressed contempt for “exaggerated loyalty to the theory that everything must be told.”²⁴ His statements mark a clear deviation from the historians’ point of view who feel they have a professional obligation to tell the truth rather than simply document the advent of miracles, prophetic inspiration, and the glory of God.

Over the following decade, the Church would place enormous pressure on Mormon scholars, extending Benson and Packer’s warnings by making clear their disapproval toward the revisionist movement. Official disciplinary action was taken against many Mormon scholars. “The church has moved,” Jan Shipps explains, “not necessarily to disapprove of Mormon history written in the ‘coolness’ of the modern professional mode, but to distance itself from history which fails openly and deliberately to place God at the center of the action.”²⁵ Resentment culminated in the infamous 1993 disciplinary action of the September Six, a group of six outspoken figures of the movement.²⁶

²² Shipps, 116.

²³ The Church holds biannual international broadcasts called “General Conference,” in which authorities address members and members sustain the authorities.

²⁴ *Faithful History*, 282.

²⁵ Shipps, 107.

²⁶ Of the September Six, Lynne Kanavel Whitesides was disfellowshipped, while Avraham Gileadi (shortly thereafter, Gileadi was reinstated a member), Paul Toscano, Maxine Hanks (rebaptized in 2012), Lavina Fielding Anderson, and D. Michael Quinn were excommunicated.

The Church's insistence upon quarantining its historical image can be understood more thoroughly in terms of changes that were deemed necessary to the Church's survival as it faced dangers on multiple fronts. While a history complementary to these changes is essential to the Church's longevity, it also invited difficulties resulting from what must be a limited and incomplete history. The richness of the history and theology is lost. This loss then becomes contemptible for many members and potential members. Contempt makes the Church vulnerable to exploitation not only by anti-Mormon "enemies," but worse, by its members.

Mormonism in Transition

National pressure to abolish polygamy coupled with a strong desire among Mormons to join the American union led the Church president, Wilford Woodruff, to repeal the doctrine of plural marriage in the late 1800s. Utah had been denied statehood multiple times because of its practice of polygamy. More recently, specific legislation had been approved that would allow the federal government to lawfully interfere.²⁷ Following federal mandates, many Mormon pluralists had already been fined and many were in hiding. The federal government would likely have seized Mormon resources if Woodruff had not instituted the ban. Secret marriages continued for quite some time. Many occurred in Mexico, outside the jurisdiction of US law. It took another fourteen years for the Church to enforce the ban. This occurred when officials, once again, faced political pressure because of their lack of stringency. With 1890's "Second Manifesto," Church

²⁷ These were consequences of the Edmunds-Tucker Act of 1887, which allowed the government to seize Mormon assets. Likely, church leaders were especially fearful because of the damage the "Utah War" had wreaked decades earlier when the U.S. government sent military troops to Utah to make the Mormons subordinate to US law. The Mountain Meadows Massacre is usually attributed to the paranoia that this action instilled.

officials made it clear that not only was polygamy no longer to be practiced, it was to be punished.

With more settlers moving west, Mormon communities became safe havens in its untamed wilds, and with Utah territory now a state, the area was more promising than ever. No longer a distinct and independent segment of society, there were no official barriers separating Mormons and non-Mormons. Jan Shipps says this lack of distinction was problematic: “Without boundaries to set them apart... a chosen people cannot exist; their very identity depends on their perception of their specialness, and that specialness, in turn depends on their being separated in some way from that part of the population which is not special.”²⁸ Mormons now lacked the barriers of township, political distinction, economic distinction, and familial structural distinction. They were ordinary people who belonged to a slightly strange religion.

Integration into a rapidly modernizing American society provided further challenges for the Mormons. Many criticized Mormonism in the first half of the twentieth century claiming that it no longer fulfilled the needs of the modern man. The Old History provided the past generation “with meaningful and challenging ideals that inspired their undoubted heroism,” giving them the courage to endure extreme hardship and build new communities from the ground up. But now that Mormons had become part of a powerful developing nation, it appeared that Mormonism lagged behind as “an elaborate pioneering mechanism, a vast sociological apparatus, nicely modeled for tasks now finished, leaving it functionless.”²⁹

O’Dea explains that the Church had always prided itself in offering precise spiritual guidance at a time of great confusion: “The explicitness of the new Mormon revelation addressed

²⁸ Shipps, 116.

²⁹ O’Dea, 258.

itself to the very points about which contemporary religious thinking puzzled without conclusion.”³⁰ The tradition of literal guidance remained intact with the Church’s shift from group to individual responsibility. Individual members would be required “to develop patterns of behavior with which they, as individuals, could keep themselves unspotted from the world.”³¹ A period of transition requiring a dissolution of old doctrinal priorities and an emphasis on new ones was inevitable. The diaspora of the Mormon Church, which rapidly began to lose its secular communityship, required revised doctrine that would suit this new model. The changes may be seen as an attempt to dissolve what was seen as atavistic about the Church.

Two controversial doctrines initiated by Joseph Smith and taught by Brigham Young were dropped during the period. For many years, Young taught that Heavenly Father was literally Adam. This view was fraught metaphysical with difficulties and internal inconsistencies, seeming incredible for most believers.³² Another theological nuance of Young was the idea of blood atonement, which held that certain heinous sins had not been atoned for by Christ, requiring the sinner to pay for the crime with his own blood. Joseph Smith, too, had pushed an agenda that conservative members balked at. For instance, after his death, the Church staunchly denied that Smith ever gave Mormon women the priesthood.³³ His experimentation with polygamy, by far his most disputed doctrine, was utterly discontinued with the Second Manifesto, while the denial of occult beliefs and practices was necessary to match the growing

³⁰ O’Dea, 226.

³¹ Shipps, 116.

³² Brooke, John L. *The Refiner’s Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644-1844*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 276. For Brooke, this is the “logical conclusion” for the hermeticist following through with his or her conclusions. “Adam was both a god and the progenitor of the human race, and as such was a sufficient divinity to head the Mormon pantheon ... In later versions, Young suggested that Adam-Michael was the son and grandson of higher gods, Elohim and Jehovah, each presumably with many wives or ‘queens.’”

³³ Lindholm, 117. D. Michael Quinn’s research shows however, that in 1843, Joseph bestowed the Melchizedek priesthood power upon all women of the Church.

emphasis on the scientific.³⁴ The new men who were being included in Church leadership positions, “had more in common with denominational Christianity than with the folk religion of many first generation Mormons.”³⁵

The new, more “mainstream” Church was in need of a history that would complement these changes to their doctrine. This was the function of the old Mormon history. The twentieth century Church constructed a palatable and succinct history that was non-controversial and abbreviated, highlighting the spiritual events that supported doctrinal changes. The new Church had to accommodate a rapidly growing and increasingly diverse body of converts, both from the United States and abroad. The absence of a singular, unified Mormon community underlined these obstacles which were continually heightened by a rapidly modernizing society.

Unwilling to explain how the gold-digger turned polygamist-frontiersman Joseph Smith might now be viewed, his story became streamlined and “sealed” by his “First Vision” and martyrdom. This, too, transpired “When the first generation of leadership died off, leaving the community to be guided mainly by men who had not known Smith, the First Vision emerged as a symbol that could keep the slain Mormon leader at center stage.”³⁶

Early in the twentieth century the Church sought to counter the influx of secular influence, specifically for the Church’s youth. As the Church emerged from its rural roots, Mormon settlements became more advanced and urbanized. It soon became apparent that a

³⁴ Alexander, Thomas G. “The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine: From Joseph Smith to Progressive Theology.” (*Sunstone* 5, no. 4 (1980): 1-11).

³⁵ *Magic World View*, 203.

³⁶ Shipps, 32. The First Vision supposedly occurred when Smith was fifteen year old. He went to a quiet grove of trees near his family’s farm to inquire of God which of the many Christian sects that had sprung up during the Second Great Awakening, was correct. Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ appeared to him and told him to join none of the churches, and that instead, he to establish his own, true church. The Church released this version of events in *Joseph Smith History*, which was written by Smith until more than eighteen years after he claimed the event occurred. See Smith, Joseph. *Joseph Smith History*. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1989).

formal, secular education was a danger to the faith of these young, impressionable members, which was “bound to bring religious crisis.”³⁷ The Church advocated a lifestyle of divine proscription “especially through close adherence to the Word of Wisdom, tithing in a manner that makes it seem a bit like paying taxes, and careful compliance with a clearly articulated behavioral code.”³⁸ Though Smith had long ago enacted the Word of Wisdom, a revelation exhorting a conservative lifestyle that included abstaining from alcoholic beverages, tea, coffee, and tobacco, it was not strictly enforced in the nineteenth century (Smith himself was known to drink wine). In the twentieth century, heeding the Word of Wisdom became mandatory to be worthy of entering Mormon temples.³⁹ Paying a full ten percent tithe on all income also became mandatory. To enforce a behavioral code, the Church created numerous educational programs for youth. These not only provided a spiritual education, but served to create a religious counterpart to the secular. Additional programs designed specifically for children, teenagers, young single adults, missionaries, young married couples, families with children, empty-nesters, and missionary couples slowly came into existence.

For an orthodox Mormon, especially in Utah, there came to be little to no difference between secular life and religious life, or between principles of God and principles of man. The micromanagement of individual’s lives relied almost entirely on the Church’s authoritarian structure. For the focus of the Church to continue magnifying specific and individual patterns of action, it has continually reinforced the importance of individual obedience while diminishing the importance of systematic theology.

³⁷ O’Dea, 227.

³⁸ Shipps, 128.

³⁹ Regular temple is a crucial component of Mormon life. Only members that are interviewed by local Church authorities and found worthy are permitted to enter these “houses of God” and partake in the rituals that are performed there.

An emphasis on involvement in these groups and on temple and Church attendance emerged, including the institution of attendance sheets for Sunday School. The success of this model is due to the organizational structure of the Church, in which unpaid members serve in various ecclesiastical and organizational positions at a local level. Though this structure ultimately allowed for enormous growth of a refurbished Mormonism, it reveals what perhaps is also the Church's most glaring weakness, that "In terms of theology, the church is governed not only by laymen but also by amateurs."⁴⁰

Scholarship, by contrast, threatened the history that had been crafted to support the Church's agenda of drawing new distinctions between Mormons and non-Mormons. This was particularly the case with the revisions of old Mormon history that the new Mormon historians sought. O'Dea explains the difficulty that arises for Mormons when the spiritual meets the secular, and the individual faces the institution. Though a perennial concern is that "As creator and preserver, the intellectual is esteemed; as critic and questioner, he is suspect," the Mormon scholar takes on the additional responsibility of subsuming the church's agenda, challenges, and hierarchical structure in her research.⁴¹

Understanding the Church's wariness requires a knowledge of its broader presence during this era. Mauss identifies some of the most pressing challenges the Church has faced in the second half of the twentieth century. He first notes the expeditious growth of membership. Though this has been a trend since the Church's inception, growth was even more pronounced since the 1940s, doubling about every fifteen years from a million members at the end of World

⁴⁰ O'Dea, 230.

⁴¹ O'Dea, 223-24.

War II, to about 9 million in the early 1990s.⁴² The Church similarly enjoyed material gain as an institution, especially since midcentury. Early in the sixties the Church was in debt, but by the time of Mauss' study, its assets were counted in the billions.⁴³ American Mormons are today one of the most prosperous religious demographics in terms of education, occupational prestige, and income.⁴⁴

Mormonism had risen from a bleak turn of the century status to make itself relevant once again. By continuing its theme of pushing for both literal and fundamentalist doctrines, it had retained its unique personality. This was achieved by careful decisions about reverting back to certain idiosyncratic Mormon tradition and theology, and simultaneously highlighting secularly relevant notions while dropping antiquated ones, effectively creating a space in which the modern religious person could thrive. Essentially, this was achieved via “the increased bureaucratization, standardization, and centralized control, not only over the organization per se, but also over religious discourse.”⁴⁵ The threat that scholarship held was not merely the suggestion of doctrinal or historical ambiguity, it was a direct threat to the vitality of the Church. It had survived, presumably by meticulously controlling its message. Probably due to vastly increasing wealth, different members were called upon to head an institution that now looked more like a Fortune 500 corporation than a home-grown religion. “This change in recruitment base probably reflects changes in occupations of Mormons generally, as well as the need for expertise in business and in law for overseeing the church's enterprises.”⁴⁶ Now they needed

⁴² Mauss, Armand L. “The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation and Identity: Trends and Developments since Midcentury.” (*Dialogue* 27, no. 1 (1994): 129-149), 129.

⁴³ Mauss, 130.

⁴⁴ Mauss, 130.

⁴⁵ Mauss, 148.

⁴⁶ Mauss, 143.

individuals with experience in business, management, and law, rather than science, the humanities, or going further back, agriculture and homesteading.

Likely, the effect of the opinions of Benson and Packer was exacerbated by this lack of diversity. “Without the liberal sprinkling of scholars and scientists [in the upper-most ranks of church hierarchy] that we once saw in the likes of Widtsoe, Talmage, and Merrill,” as a counterbalance.⁴⁷ Lacking healthy opposition to these staunch positions, general sentiment toward scholarships was negative. Perhaps the construction of what ex-Mormon scholar, Lynne Whitesides, describes as “a Gestapo-like group which press-clipped everything anyone said who might be considered an enemy of the Church, meaning one who disagrees with Church policy,” shouldn’t be surprising.⁴⁸ Created in 1985, the Strengthening Church Members Committee is composed of church authorities that collect published material on the church, combing its contents for what they consider compromising information or perspectives. The committee then forwards such material to the local Church authorities of the involved members, sometimes with a recommendation of charges of apostasy being held against the member.⁴⁹

It was material forwarded by the committee that sparked several of the the September Six disciplinary actions in 1993. The figures in question were not only prominent and trusted Mormon scholars, all associated with Church-funded Brigham Young University, but these individuals shared their work with a larger audience. Many participated in unofficial meetings and forums, and it was once they voiced their doubts, questions and beliefs publicly that they

⁴⁷ Shipps, 114.

⁴⁸ Lindholm, 6. Ironically, Whitesides’ discipline was most likely enacted because of a presentation she gave at a 1992 Sunstone Symposium in which she discussed the Strengthening Church Members Committee.

⁴⁹ Quinn, D. Michael. *The Mormon Hierarchy: Extensions of Power*. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books in Association with Smith Research Associates, 1997), 311.

were castigated.⁵⁰ While the disciplinary action of these six is best known, many are unaware that by the mid nineties, formal disciplinary action had taken against more than 135 scholars, in what Allen Dale Roberts calls “a purge.”⁵¹

Roberts’ idea supports Philip Lindholm’s research which suggests that the September Six and others like them were disciplined harshly to push for the end the New Mormon history. In its place it seemed the Church hoped to proliferate what is called “faith-promoting” accounts of Church history, which are written and distributed under the auspices of the Church. These publications perfunctorily address Mormon history, and if discussed at all, controversies are glossed over. This is done despite the fact that scholars engaged in what has been termed “faithful history” are not insensitive to the way their work reflects on the Church. They intend to both provide a truthful analysis while still ensuring that the sacred aspects are not slighted. Maxine Hanks, helps illuminate this position in her description of the position of Mormon scholars in an interview:

Scholarship isn’t binding on Church members... [and] has no religious authority. It’s secular discourse. So refuting or punishing scholars is unnecessary. Unfortunately, the Church excommunicated scholars with specific skills for complex Mormon historical, theological, and gender topics.⁵²

⁵⁰ The arrival of the online Mormon community in the 2000s has shifted focus from scholarship to blogging dissenters and grassroots movements to change Mormon policy, such as “Letter to a CES Director” <http://cesletter.com/>, “(Gay) Mormon Guy” <http://gaymormonguy.blogspot.com/>, and “Ordain Women” <http://ordainwomen.org/>.

⁵¹ Roberts, 146. While it is estimated that 61% of Joseph Smith’s “most trusted” were at some point excommunicated, Roberts’ research points out that excommunication then was more personal and the vast majority of members were soon allowed to return, whereas the formal discipline of the 80s and 90s had a tone of finality, and did not carry the personal touch of readmission by the Prophet himself.

⁵² Lindholm, 59. Lavina Fielding draws comparable conclusions to Lindholm’s, observing that an events similar to the September Six can be seen with a group called the Godbeites in 1867 and the general church policy change in the 1920s, when the church was trying to make itself more appealing to mainstream America by painting itself as a more typical Christian religion. The Godbeite excommunications, too, “were politically charged and took a theological form. It was a power play where the force of good ideas could not win out against sheer power.”

Ultimately, she maintains that Mormon scholars are professionals in various fields, and though they incorporate Mormonism, they must remain devout not only to their religion, but their profession. Quinn adds that “No reputable historian...excludes consideration of the spiritual dimension in writing about people like Joseph Smith.” Shipps contributes to the defense by emphasizing the durability of testimony. Joseph Smith, she advocates, will not be forgotten, because “His testimony remains.” His testimony as a link between the transcendental world of gods and angels and the world of man has been believed by millions, despite being continually shrouded in various controversies over the course of nearly two centuries. There is an innate power to his claims that has withstood the test of time and will continue to do so, regardless of questions that may arise in scholarship.

O’Dea adds to the case by insisting that the Church requires scholars “not only to man the church’s education institutions but, perhaps more important, to prevent the kind of open rift between the Mormon church and modern learning and higher education that would involve intellectual embarrassment and loss of respectability.”⁵³ Though they revised Old Mormon History, the New Mormon Historians sought to avoid humiliation of the Church, instead focusing on providing more truthful accounts that corrected misconceptions and hasty conclusions from both sides. Because the Church had eliminated so many elements of its history, this presented a dilemma. O’Dea explains that within this climate “the liberal can choose only between submission and personal disquietude or apostasy and suffering the guilt of deserting the tradition in which he has been reared and to which he feels great attachment.”⁵⁴ In other words,

⁵³ O’Dea, 231.

⁵⁴ O’Dea, 234.

O’Dea here prophesies that a history which analyzed what the Church considered sacred would never be tolerated.

O’Dea’s insights into the scholar’s precarious position within the Church helps illuminate what Roberts means when he says that “A church creates apostates. It will necessarily create some, but they are made at the hand of a church’s sins, errors, and oversights.”⁵⁵ His data reveals that excommunication is fluid and depends on attitudes of the time. “Regardless of the written definition, recent events have shown that apostasy is often whatever a church leader thinks it is at any given moment.”⁵⁶ For the Church in the eighties and nineties, very little deviance from promotional history was required for dissent. Perhaps that is why Mark Homann voiced his concerns about Mormonism surreptitiously.

Mark Hofmann

By 1980, a young Hofmann had long abandoned his faith in Mormonism. He put his extensive knowledge about the religion and its history to use by creating convincing forgeries pertaining to Mormonism. Hofmann forged more than eighty-six different signatures, the first printed document in America, and numerous antique currencies in addition to his better known Mormon historical documents. His forgeries have been numbered in the hundreds, but it is uncertain just how many forgeries he created. Likely, there are still more to be found. In the process of preparing his most ambitious collection of forgeries, Hofmann found himself in a financial bind. Unable to repay his various creditors, he felt pressured to buy time while he waited on pending payments. Out of options and limited by his own web of lies, Hofmann

⁵⁵ “Apostates,” 165.

⁵⁶ Roberts, 145.

constructed and set three bombs as a desperate attempt to relieve himself of indomitable demands.

Hofmann was “hopelessly isolated among family and friends, driven by despair and disillusionment over faith and history which cannot fit together.”⁵⁷ In an unsent letter to his mother, he describes the difficulty of an inquiring mind within the Church:

Personal doubts and uncertainties are seen as temptations rather than as challenges to be explored and worked through. The individual’s conscience and the weight of authority or public opinion are thus pitted against each other so that the individual either denies them to himself at the expense of personal honesty or hides them from others and lives in two worlds.”⁵⁸

As part of his plea bargain, he sat with investigators to answer questions about his crimes. He admitted that he had been interested in “rewriting” Mormon history, confessing clearly that he felt his forgeries “could have been” true events.⁵⁹ This was particularly true for the Church because it was an institution under which he felt subjugated. He declared that tricking them made him feel validated.⁶⁰

He never denied, however, that making money had been an intention once he began selling fakes for profit. The large sums of money he could earn allowed him to make a living exclusively off of document dealing and forging. Impressing important Church members with his earliest forgeries secured him a position as one of the Church’s most trusted dealers. He quickly

⁵⁷ Howard, 148.

⁵⁸ Sillitoe and Roberts, 229-30.

⁵⁹ Turley, 316.

⁶⁰ Turley, 317. Though the questioning session yielded a manuscript more than 500 pages long, it was never concluded. After several days of questioning, Hofmann refused to cooperate and the project was abandoned. The prosecuting team additionally noted that Hofmann’s responses were not only internally inconsistent, but contradicted his testimony on earlier records.

became a regular in the Church Archives and became a semi-official document dealer for the Church.⁶¹

During the lengthy investigation of Hofmann's forged documents, he was termed by authenticators, "The greatest forger ever caught." He was given this title first for his wide range of techniques and second for his uncanny ability to capture the language particular to the historical period as well as the idiosyncrasies of individuals' voices. Starting from a very young age, Hofmann learned to make alterations to collector's coins, imbuing them with rare qualities. In his twenties he began forging LDS-related documents and Americana. He created a homemade ink that passed authenticator's "aging" tests and developed a technique for making paper look old.⁶²

Not only could he reproduce the poor grammar of a young Joseph Smith, he mimicked the tone of Emily Dickinson so well that two of his forgeries were ratified as "new" poems by leading scholars on the literary celebrity. Each counterfeit seemed to neatly fit into the canon. It was surely impossible that the same man who wrote in untamed chicken scratch, often in all caps, could have duplicated flowing cursive from elegant hands with all their minute nuances. On at least one occasion, he reported ripping blank pages from old books at a library for his work.⁶³ It was this shrewdness and cleverness that fooled not only renowned authenticators, but won him friends, admirers, and customers.

Fooling authenticators was only one piece of the ploy. To persuade potential buyers that a document was genuine, Hofmann needed to create credible provenance. He would tell

⁶¹ The Church almost hired him to be an official document seeker. Though this proposal was eventually turned down, in a five year period, Hofmann sold several hundreds of documents to the Church.

⁶² Worrall, 101.

⁶³ Sillitoe and Roberts, 256.

complicated tales of secretive dealers and half-forgotten collections in attics. Sometimes, he would decline to provide provenance, claiming that he had promised to protect a source. He once convinced an elderly woman, Dorothy Dean, that an old bible he had in his possession had once belonged to her grandmother to complete an authorized record of provenance to make the item sellable.⁶⁴ No one could believe that reserved, professional, Mark Hofmann, could have been fabricating these accounts.

Initially, Hofmann was arrested for his connection to the three bombings. As questions arose about what linked the three bombs together, investigators looked to the relationship between Hofmann and Steve Christensen. Christensen was both a document dealing associate and Hofmann's first bomb victim. This connection suggested that there was something wrong with the documents Hofmann had sold. The exchange that Christensen had been helping him negotiate at the time was especially dubious. Though many of Hofmann's documents had already been authenticated by foremost experts, samples were sent to authorities for verification. The FBI examined a Hofmann forgery, purportedly in the hand of Martin Harris, by comparing it to seventeen other documents with Harris' writing. Based on the comparison, they determined that the forgery was authentic. They would later discover that of the seventeen samples, fourteen had been Hofmann forgeries.⁶⁵ It was not until a local, seasoned authenticator George Throckmorton was consulted that headway was made on the case. Throckmorton identified two peculiarities that appeared under UV lighting in the documents that were traced back to Hofmann. First, they were characterized by ink that looked "cracked" with intense magnification under the lighting. Second, Throckmorton noticed signs of running ink that was uniform in Hofmann's documents.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Worrall, 102-103.

⁶⁵ Worrall, 146.

⁶⁶ As it turns out, Hofmann was actually aware of these defects but had not yet discovered a way to counteract them.

Throckmorton was eventually able to peg these peculiarities to Hofmann's drying technique and ink recipe. Once he could forge the work of the forger, it was safely announced that the documents in question had been falsified.⁶⁷

Hofmann's Mormon forgeries are said to have shaken the Mormon Church because they reemphasized the sorest spots in the history of the Church.⁶⁸ The Josiah Stowell and Martin Harris Letters reinforced the devastating influence of magic on early Mormonism. The Anthon Transcript, Spalding-Rigdon land deed, and Lucy Mack Smith letter questioned the origins and divinity of the Book of Mormon. The Joseph Smith III Blessing brought to light the problematic nature of prophetic succession. Smith's letters to General Dunham and the Lawrence sisters introduced doubts about his leadership and motives. And the Second Anointing Blessing revealed the strange nature of temple practice and its secular roots.

Overall, these forgeries yielded two seemingly disparate ideas about Mormon history. First, they revealed how fragile the Church's history is. Second, while scholars were initially seen as crucial aids to ameliorate the destructive effects of the forgeries, a tightening of security occurred in Hofmann's wake. He created distrust among Church officials toward anyone who had something less than a faith-promoting account of Mormon history to contribute.

Josiah Stowell Letter. 1825.

Hofmann forged a letter written from Joseph Smith to Josiah Stowell, the brief employer of Smith and his father when Smith was a young man. At the time, Smith was a treasure finding expert that Stowell hired in hopes that Smith would be able to make him rich. The Church's

⁶⁷ Sillitoe and Roberts 530-536.

⁶⁸ Nelson, Bryce. "The Forgeries that Shook the Mormon Church." *Washington Post*, October 9, 1988.

faith-promotional account presented Smith as a young man performing farm work for the gracious Stowell, who needed extra hands. In reality, Smith worked for the express purpose of locating treasures on Stowell's property. Records verify that Smith was brought before a judge for his activity under the employment of Stowell as a "disorderly person and imposter." Though Stowell himself did not want to press charges, a relation of his was adamant about bringing Smith before a court.⁶⁹

The letter refers very specifically to Smith's treasure-finding activities. In a poor hand, riddled with the grammatical and spelling errors indicative of Smith's style, the letter describes a mine that he and Stowell had specifically discussed before. Smith advises Stowell to pursue the treasure by taking "a hasel Stick one yard long being new but and cleave it Just in the middle and lay it asunder on the mine so that both inner parts of the stick may look one right against the other one inch distant and if there is treasure after a while you shall See them draw and Join together again of themselves," because it is "guarded by Some clever Spirit."⁷⁰

Because the letter was purportedly written in Smith's hand, it gave direct credence to his treasure-finding activities. This letter corroborated the influence of magic on the early Church that had been suppressed for decades. With a foundation in occult practice and folk magic, Mormonism echoes the hermetic idea that magic can permeate the kingdom of heaven unconventionally.⁷¹ While both Catholics and Protestants denounced this possibility, occult practices maintained that their practitioners could seize divine power, offering an alternative key to the glory of the cosmos.⁷² This is not to suggest that the practices of Smith and those like him

⁶⁹ Wagoner and Walker, 8-9. The actual proceedings and outcomes of the trial are unclear as competing accounts differ greatly.

⁷⁰ Turley, 74.

⁷¹ Brooke, 6.

⁷² Brooke, 12.

were attempting to pursue these traditions outright. Likely, these ideas trickled down into the crevices of nineteenth century New England from various texts, tall tales, and rumors of ancient secrets and truths. Occult beliefs and practices were pervasive at this time. Smith and many others “were drawn from a peculiarly prepared people, families that often had long stood outside the mainstream of New England orthodoxy,” and stood rooted firmly, though not directly inside hermetic tradition.⁷³ These beliefs were especially strong in this area of the country because of “Protestant sectarianism, the general lack of church membership, and an indifference to the priorities of the educated elite.”⁷⁴ There are numerous examples of the overlap of the visible, physical and invisible, spiritual worlds in the money-digging life of Smith and many of his early disciples. And it was precisely this connection, which the Church had been so eager to obscure, that the letter revealed in full.

Instead of taking the letter to the Mormon Historical Department as he did with most of his merchandise, Hofmann went directly to Elder Gordon B. Hinckley. Hofmann and Hinckley had done business numerous time before and had cultivated a personal and professional association. Hofmann had anticipated that the Church would want to quell any stir that the document might create if released. His suspicions were correct and upon examination, Hinckley promptly bought the document for \$25,000 and deposited it directly in the First Presidency’s vault, a chamber containing valuable artifacts, accessible only to top-ranking Church officials.⁷⁵ “Though faithful church members might see Joseph Smith’s involvement in such activity as no more harmful than someone in the 1980s carrying a rabbit’s foot, other persons would undoubtedly capitalize on the letter to revive and enhance the money-digging allegations Smith

⁷³ Brooke, 65.

⁷⁴ *Magic World View*, 11.

⁷⁵ Turley, 75.

battled in his lifetime.”⁷⁶ In the face of this dilemma, the Church chose to conceal the information to avoid faith-demotion. The secretive pretenses under which this exchange occurred would prove very embarrassing while their attempt to protect the faith of members actually did much more to damage it.

Letter from Martin Harris to W.W. Phelps, “The Salamander Letter.” 1825.

Martin Harris was an early Mormon convert with a hefty fortune. Hofmann forged a letter purportedly written by Harris to another convert, W.W. Phelps. The letter provides a description of Smith’s first encounter with a spirit which would eventually lead to his obtainment of the Golden Plates:

the old spirit come to me 3 times in the same dream & says dig up the gold but when I take it up the next morning the spirit transfigures himself from a white salamander in the bottom of the hole & struck me 3 times & held the treasure & would not let me have it...Joseph says when can I have it the spirit says one year from to day if you obey me...⁷⁷

At first glance, the letter may seem only to provide further confirmation of occult belief within the Church’s beginnings. However, this particular letter became the most sensational document Hofmann ever produced. Coined, “The Salamander Letter,” the emergence of this document sparked headlines in nationally circulated publications, most notably, *Time Magazine*, whose headline read, “Challenging Mormonism’s Roots.”⁷⁸ Though the Church refused to purchase the document when a friend of Hofmann offered it to them, they were far from being immune to its contents. Hofmann instead sold it to private collector, Steve Christensen, whose

⁷⁶ Turley, 74-75.

⁷⁷ Sillitoe and Roberts, 274.

⁷⁸ Turley, 102.

grand plan was to have it expertly authenticated, provide to top scholars for analysis, and eventually donate it to the Church.

Many felt that it was too similar to the incredible anti-Mormon text, *Mormonism Unveiled*, which depicted Smith's divine messenger as a toad.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, the document passed inspection by leading experts. Kenneth Rendell, the authenticator who discredited the Hitler diaries, was heavily involved in this process. With his stamp of approval, the document demanded an explanation as it seemed nonintegrable into modern Mormon myth.

As with the Stowell letter, the Church was forced to confront magic as an activity and influence for early Mormons and founders. The document gave further proof that Smith was involved in occult activity. It also showed that other prominent members were not only aware of Smith's identity as a treasure seeker, but suggested that they were also involved in the occult. This document gave greater credence to evidence that the three witnesses to Book of Mormon were practitioners of folk magic and most of the Eight Witnesses. Oliver Cowdery was allegedly a rodsman; David Whitmer revered seer stones; and Hiram Page had a stone of his own. The majority of Smith's twelve apostles had similar magic beliefs and influences.⁸⁰ Brigham Young was a lifelong believer and practitioner of occult magic who was known to possess amulets with healing powers and proclaimed often the existence of treasures hidden in the earth, perhaps protected by God.⁸¹ In fact, Quinn would later state that "Belief and practice of the folk-magic treasure quest continued in Mormonism throughout the balance of the nineteenth century."⁸²

⁷⁹ Howe, E.D. *Mormonism Unveiled Or, A Faithful Account of that Singular Imposition and Delusion, from its Rise to its Present Time*. Painesville: Printed and Published by the Author, 1834. Released in 1834 by a resident of Smith's hometown, Eber Howe, this first anti-Mormon text challenged both the genesis and contents of the Book of Mormon.

⁸⁰ *Magic World View*, 194-5.

⁸¹ *Magic World View*, 207, 214.

⁸² *Magic World View*, 210.

Unlike the Stowell letter, in which magic could fairly easily be tossed aside as an adolescent fancy, the Harris letter sewed magic directly into Smith's religious world. The replacement of a salamander instead of an angelic messenger was a disgruntling alternation which threw into question the divinity of the record. Moreover, it presented a dilemma for the Church regarding their history of this imperative encounter. Either the Prophet Joseph Smith had lied when he wrote his history or the Church altered the details of the history to purge it of any magical connotations. In either case, it was a significant amendment to both the foundation of the Church and the foundation of individualistic faith. Depicting Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon as products of superstition and wealth-seeking tarnished their images with a detestable brand of secularism.⁸³

The Anthon Transcript. 1828.

Once Smith had received the ancient Book of Mormon plates, he needed support and financial backing to translate the book. He had already drawn upon the hospitality of the wealthy Martin Harris. Though Harris already believed that Smith was a gifted treasure-seeker, he wanted further confirmation that the plates were genuine. At Harris' request, Smith copied characters from the plates and gave them to Harris to have them verified by a scholar. In New York City, Martin found Professor Charles Anthon at Columbia College to inspect the copy.

Harris claimed that Anthon provided a certificate of authenticity. Unfortunately, Anthon tore up the certificate when it was explained to him that the plates were of a religious nature and that they were to be translated by a young man through the power of God. Anthon denied Harris'

⁸³ Turley, 98.

account of the meeting. Anthon did describe the document in an affidavit. It ““consisted of all kinds of crooked characters disposed in columns...Greek and Hebrew letter, crosses and flourishes, Roman letters inverted or placed sideways, were arranged in perpendicular columns, the whole ended in a rude delineation of a circle divided into various compartments.””⁸⁴ Before Hofmann presented his forgery, a document which listed a mix of English, Latin, Hebrew, and unidentifiable letters under the heading “Characters” in horizontal lines was thought to be the copy Smith gave to Harris. Hofmann’s version fit Anthon’s description more closely than the Harris’ copy because the letters were listed in vertical columns and featured the circle that Anthon mentioned in his affidavit.

According to Smith’s scribes, Smith used both his seer stone and the Urim and Thummin, sacred stones given to him along with the plates, for translation. He placed the stones in a hat then would put his face in the hat and in the artificial darkness he would see the corresponding translation to the letters on the plates. There is never mention of any sort of key used for translation; the best inference from the material available is that Smith continued this painstaking process throughout the duration of the translation process.⁸⁵ When it was discovered to be a forgery, the Church’s enthusiasm for the transcript was nothing short of embarrassing. Criticisms of the document that was originally believed to fit Anthon’s description was now forced to withstand criticisms that been given, comparing it to Hofmann’s version.

*Solomon Spalding and Sidney Rigdon Land Deed. 1822.*⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Worrall, 93.

⁸⁵ Wagoner and Walker, 2-8.

⁸⁶ Though Hofmann dated the land deed 1822, Spalding died in 1816. The anachronistic date was perhaps his most obvious mistake. When a potential buyer noticed this discrepancy, Hofmann dropped his asking price significantly.

Another challenge to the authenticity of the Book of Mormon, this forgery provided evidence corroborating a non-mystical theory of the book's origin. An Ohio man by the name of Solomon Spalding had evidently written a frontier romance, perhaps one of the first novels of its kind.⁸⁷ First suggested in *Mormonism Unveiled*, many since have believed that the Book of Mormon is a plagiarism of Spalding's manuscript.

There was already evidence suggesting that Spalding and Sidney Rigdon, one of Smith's closest advisors, had met prior to Rigdon's association with Smith. This document not only verified their acquaintance, but implied a deeper connection between the two, suggesting that even if Sidney Rigdon hadn't adapted the novel itself, he likely knew of its existence and contents. If this were true it seemed likely that Rigdon passed this information on to Smith, who adapted the manuscript's contents to fit in the Book of Mormon context. This recited significant doubts that the Book of Mormon was a divinely inspired document.

The Spalding-Rigdon deed strongly suggested that the Book of Mormon was simply another Messianic text of the sort that was popular during Smith's time. One of the key premises of the Book of Mormon is that ancient Americans were displaced from the Ten Tribes of Israel and would be reunited at the return of the Savior. Two books on similar themes which Smith

⁸⁷ Finished in 1812, *Manuscript, Found* was never published. Spalding's work was said to offer a story of a lost people. It was written in a scriptural style was said to use a similar antiquated style to the Book of Mormon.

would have had access to were *View of the Hebrews* and *American Antiquities*.⁸⁸ Like the Book of Mormon,

Both books opened with frequent references to the destruction of Jerusalem; both told of the inspired prophets among the ancient Americans; both quotes copiously and almost exclusively from Isaiah; and both delineated the ancient Americans as a highly civilized people. Both held that it was the mission of the American nation in the last days to gather these remnant of the house of Israel and bring them to Christianity, thereby hastening the day of the glorious millennium.⁸⁹

The Book of Mormon differed from these texts by painting an intimate picture of the displaced people, chronicling centuries of their affairs and framed by the appearance of the Savior visiting his “other sheep.”⁹⁰ These key elements were purportedly the same features that defined the Spalding manuscript. Even if the Book of Mormon wasn’t a plagiarism of Spalding’s text, evidence of the meeting suggested that the resemblances were more than coincidental. Alexander Campbell, a religious contemporary of Joseph Smith and the founder of Disciples of Christ, exclaimed that

This prophet Smith, through his stone spectacles, wrote on the plates of Nephi, in his Book of Mormon, every error and almost every truth discussed in New York for the last ten years. He decided all the great controversies: --infant baptism, ordination, the trinity, regeneration, repentance, justification, the fall of man, the atonement, transubstantiation, fasting, penance, church government, religious experience the call to the ministry, the general resurrection, eternal punishment, who may baptize, and even the question of freemasonry, republican government and the rights of man.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Priest, Josiah, and Theodore C. Hailes. *American Antiquities and Discoveries in the West: Being an Exhibition of the Evidence That an Ancient Population of Partially Civilized Nations, Differing Entirely from Those of the Present Indians, Peopled America Many Centuries before the Discovery by Columbus: And Inquiries into Their Origin, with a Copious Description of Many of Their Stupendous Works Now in Ruins, with Conjectures concerning What May Have Become of Them: Compiled from Travels, Authentic Sources, and the Researches of Antiquarian Societies*. Albany: Printed by Hoffman & White, 1833.

Smith, Ethan. *View of the Hebrews Exhibiting the Destruction of Jerusalem; the Certain Restoration of Judah and Israel; the Present State of Judah and Israel; and an Address of the Prophet Isaiah Relative to Their Restoration*. Poultney, (Vt.): Smith & Shute, 1823.

⁸⁹ Brodie, 46-47.

⁹⁰ This favorite Mormon phrase come from biblical scripture, John 10:16, which states in the King James translation (the translation used by Mormons), “And other sheep I have which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd.” Mormons cite this as evidence that Jesus had always intended to visit the people of the Americas after the resurrection.

⁹¹ Brodie, 70.

The Spalding document appeared to validate statements like Campbell's. Moreover, it provided support for Brodie's thesis from nearly forty years earlier that the Book of Mormon was nothing more than "frontier fiction."

Letter from Lucy Mack Smith to Mary Pierce. 1828.

This forgery purported to be a letter that Lucy Mack Smith, Joseph Smith's mother, wrote to her sister to tell her the good news of the translation of the Book of Mormon. After receiving the plates from the ground upon the approval of the spirit Moroni, Smith was called by God to translate the book from reformed Egyptian hieroglyphics, the language adapted by the Jews who migrated to South America. Smith's scribe for the first 116 written pages was Martin Harris. He caused a major setback by displacing these pages. He begged Smith to let him show the manuscript to his wife and others. It is unclear exactly what transpired once Martin was given the manuscript, but it has never been recovered.⁹² This led some to question whether or not the 116 pages had ever existed.

In the Lucy letter, Hofmann planted clues that there were in fact a lost 116 pages. Moreover, the letter gave clues that could help identify the manuscript if it was ever found. The letter mentions details that only would have been known to someone who had seen the pages, details that refer to events accounted for in the published Book of Mormon but with an elaboration of detail that the Book of Mormon lacks.⁹³ This helped Hofmann fuel rumors about the location of an intact collection containing these pages. Many had harbored hope that the pages were still in existence, and after the Lucy letter, Elders in the Church asked for these

⁹² Wagoner and Walker, 3-6.

⁹³ Turley, 64.

documents to found. If Hofmann could find them that would be willing to pay for them. The pages became a favorite discussion topic of Hofmann's, and it is likely that he had plans to recreate the manuscript. This would have been written in Martin Harris' hand of which there are few samples. Indeed, most of the documents in Church possession written by Harris were Hofmann forgeries.⁹⁴ Perhaps the most convincing piece of evidence establishing Hofmann's intentions was that he had been paying an old friend to do a word study on the Book of Mormon. The data from this project would have allowed to him to recreate the language of the Book of Mormon in his own version of the 116 pages.⁹⁵

Letter from Joseph Smith to Maria and Sarah Lawrence. 1844.

In this letter, Smith purportedly asked two of his young wives, Maria and Sarah Lawrence, to meet him while he was away from home. This document struck the very sensitive chord of polygamy, which Joseph demonstrated awareness by advising the girls to "burn this letter as you read it."⁹⁶ He sent a similar letter to another of his wives, and this one was already in Church possession. The Lawrence letter was more explicit in its intimate details.

Joseph Smith wore many hats. He was not only a prophet, but served as Mayor of Nauvoo, Illinois and as commander of the Mormon Legion. He even ran for president of the United States. He was in no way successful in all these endeavors, but overwhelmingly Mormons perceived him as a good man. The one blot on his reputation, which made him detestable in the eyes of some, was his desire to have many women and to ensure the same privilege for his male followers. For many years he kept his desire secret. He covertly introduced the idea of polygamy

⁹⁴ Turley, 344-345.

⁹⁵ Sillitoe and Roberts, 256.

⁹⁶ Sillitoe and Roberts, 265.

only to a few of his closest followers. Meanwhile, he married dozens of women without the consent of his dutiful wife. His wives included women who Smith had limited contact with later on, many of whom already had a husband. He may have had as many as forty-nine wives, but a figure commonly cited is thirty-three and a few count just twenty-five. He married sisters (the Lawrence sisters among these), mother-daughter pairs, a girl of fourteen, a woman of fifty-six, Emma's best friend, and his family's servant girl in New England. These marriages were usually performed in secret and women were instructed to keep silent about them. The clandestine nature of the alliances and their usually brief duration supported allegations that "marriage" was merely an excuse for having multiple sexual partners.

As with many Church members, polygamy touched a personal nerve with Hofmann. His grandmother had been a plural wife of his grandfather. The marriage was not openly discussed in family life, but Hofmann was very curious about the affair. He spent hours perusing the Utah State University archives, hoping for some evidence of the union, which had occurred after polygamy had been officially banned by the church. Hofmann's cousin summarizes the grim options this left:

Grandpa could have been a shyster who lied to Grandma about the marriage being proper; Grandpa could have been duped into thinking his second marriage was sanctioned; or they could have actually been sealed by somebody having the authority to marry them polygamously after the second manifesto, in which case the church had lied in saying that no more marriages were being authorized or performed.⁹⁷

This dilemma was not unique to Hofmann, and many others likely faced a similar, personal pitting of family against church when it came to polygamy, which further intensified the impact of these allegations. The Church's modern views condemn any sex outside of marital bonds.

⁹⁷ Sillitoe and Roberts 209.

Their stringent view induced further anxiety about the polygamist past, and many members who, like Hofmann, had a history of polygamy in their family history, were particularly afflicted.

Joseph Smith III Blessing. 1844.

Joseph Smith promised at least half a dozen of his closest brethren that if they continued to be faithful they would become heir to the prophethood. Consequently, his unexpected death left the Church in chaos. The majority of members followed Brigham Young, a strong leader who assertively pronounced himself not only Smith's desired successor, but the Head of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. Facing further persecution in Nauvoo, these Saints followed Young west to Utah. The remaining Mormons formed splinter groups because of contested claims to succession. Many stayed in the area under the leadership of Joseph Smith's son, Joseph Smith III. This band of believers became known as the RLDS Church (Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints). The case for Smith's young son to lead the Church did not only rest on blood relation. The Prophet evidently gave his son a divine blessing, declaring that he should be his father's successor.

Hofmann created his own version of the blessing purportedly recorded in the hand of Thomas Bullock, a common scribe of Smith's:

The anointing of the progenitor shall be upon the head of my son, and his seed after him, from generation to generation. For he shall be my successor to the Presidency of the high Priesthood: a Seer, and a Revelator, and a Prophet, unto the Church; which appointment belongeth to him by blessing, and also by right.⁹⁸

The Mormon Church believes that certain blessings bestowed by the priesthood are conditional statements. They maintain that promised blessings are contingent upon the recipient remaining

⁹⁸ Turley, 40.

generally faithful and true to any specific caveats that may be given in the blessing. Though this does make Smith's declaration that his son "shall be my successor" slightly less impactful, his desire for his son to take on the Prophethood, and belief that his son would be worthy to do so, is clear.

The document provided a strong case that Joseph Smith III was the rightful heir to the prophethood. The RLDS Church was very interested in purchasing the document. As the LDS Church denied that Smith's son was the divinely intended heir, they naturally wanted to keep the document in their possession. Hofmann had the RLDS and LDS Church fighting for custody of the document.⁹⁹ After some tension, the conflict was resolved civilly, but the air of tension surrounding succession controversy would never fully be dissolved.

The concern over legitimate succession generated by the newly-found blessing intensified when another Hofmann forgery, also written in Bullock's hand appeared. This time the information was presented in the form of a letter, from Bullock to President Brigham Young in 1865. The letter expressed that Bullock felt Young was an adequate successor to Smith, and stated that Joseph Smith III "has forfeited any claim which he ever had to successorship." This suggested that Smith had nonetheless intended for his son to carry on his Prophethood. Bullock felt Young was competent. Yet, he did not agree with Young's attempt "to destroy every remnant of the blessing which he received from his Father," and went on to admonish Young for what he felt would be weighty consequences if this was achieved: "[Because] those promises must be fulfilled by some future generation. I will not, nay I can not, surrender that blessing, knowing what its certain fate will be if returned, even at the peril of my own livelihood and

⁹⁹ Turley, 46.

standing.”¹⁰⁰ From this perspective, we see Brigham Young as a fraud who committed further crime by covering up the existence of a divine blessing issued by God through the hand of Joseph Smith.

Letter from Joseph Smith to General Dunham. 1844.

Dissent arose in Nauvoo when the controversy of polygamy exacerbated tensions between groups. One group opposed Smith’s centralized power, domination of the Mormon Legion, and some of his doctrines. These views were represented in a newspaper unsanctioned by Smith. Smith issued a command to burn the issues and the printing press, which garnered him a place in Carthage County jail on counts of inciting a riot. Smith and his brother, Hyrum, were further detained on charges of treason.

In the *Doctrine and Covenants*, a compilation of Smith’s revelations, considered sacred by Mormons, Smith is said to have declared the following in jail not long before his death:

I am going like a lamb to the slaughter; but I am calm as a summer’s morning; I have a conscience void of offense towards God, and towards all men. I shall die innocent, and it shall be said of me--he was murdered in cold blood.¹⁰¹

Known letters written by Smith in Carthage included two letters to his first wife, Emma, and a letter to a lawyer, Orville Browning. The letter to Dunham would have been the final letter written by Smith. Compare the tone conveyed in the above scriptural verse with the text of the letter Smith addressed to General Dunham, the general of the Nauvoo Legion, the Mormon army:

¹⁰⁰ Turley, 61.

¹⁰¹ *The Doctrine and Covenants*. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), Section 135: 4. While the *Pearl of Great Price* and *Doctrine and Covenants* are considered sacred books of revelation that act as scripture, the *Pearl of Great Price*, serves more as an addendum and revision of the Bible while *Doctrine and Covenants* is more specifically Joseph’s revelations regarding the Mormon Church and its history.

You are hereby ordered to resign the defence of the City of Nauvoo to Captain Singleton and proceed to this place without delay with what ever numbers of the Nauvoo Legion as may safely and immediately come. Let this be done quietly and orderly but with great hast[e] we are in the hands of our sworn enemies.

This final, desperate plea for Dunham to provide any support available to spare Smith from his impending fate stands in stark contrast to the account given in the *Doctrine and Covenants*. It painted Smith as less than a proud martyr. By questioning Smith's attitude toward death, the letter challenged Smith's integrity, and to some degree, his faith. It was Smith's death as a martyr that sealed his fate as a "legend...from which all evidences of deception, ambition, and financial and marital excesses were gradually obliterated, that became the great cohesive force within the church."¹⁰² A demonstration of his vacillation reveals an unsettling disquiet about meeting his maker and could not help but raise doubts about his divine leadership.

Second Anointing Blessing. 1912.

Just two years after the founding of the Church, while the Mormons were in Ohio, Joseph Smith received a revelation regarding the practice of temple ritual. These ordinances, as they came to be called, allowed the Mormons to engage in sacred promises with God. By following additional commandments, they received greater knowledge and the promise of inordinate blessings both on earthly and in heavenly life. While the ordinances of endowment, sealing, and proxy work for the dead have changed very little since their nineteenth century institution, one arcane ritual remains obscure to this day.¹⁰³ Known as the Second Anointing, the ritual was said to guarantee a married couple's entrance into the highest degree of heaven, effectively making

¹⁰² Brodie, 397.

¹⁰³ Current doctrine says the endowment and sealing ordinances are required to achieve the highest degree of godly glory. This is also the case for people who have died, thus Mormons perform proxy ceremonies so those who have died may also share in this glory.

the couple gods equal to Jesus Christ. The ritual was performed often in the nineteenth century, but very rarely in the twentieth century. With the reestablishment of temple work in Utah, there are records of occasional practice, though by the 1920s the ritual was nearly extinct. It is unclear whether or not the blessing may still be practiced surreptitiously today.¹⁰⁴

Hofmann's version of the blessing was the first known print describing the blessing.¹⁰⁵ To this day, the full text of both Hofmann's forgery and the actual temple rite are unknown. The continued lack of transparency regarding both reinforce criticisms of the secretive nature of temple ordinances. His forgery also drew upon critiques of temple ceremonies as secularly influenced since they had been instituted in the early 1830s. Smith is often accused of directly copying from the Masons. Many early Mormon men were also Masons like Smith, particularly during the Kirtland days. Another lodge had to be constructed in the area to accommodate the influx of new members.¹⁰⁶ The main difference between Smith's endowment ceremony and the ancient Masonic ritual was the religious dimension added by Smith. Otherwise the two had near identical subject matter, ceremony, symbol, procedure, and attire. Brooke suggests that to the Smith family Masonry was part of "a history of sacred continuities corrupted with the passage of time, yet still bearing fragmentary elements of the keys to divine perfection once held by Adam."¹⁰⁷ This explains why Masonry was seen so ambiguously by Smith and the early Mormons. To a modern audience, the clandestine nature of both the uncertain origins and the ceremony itself is disturbing, especially since the more modern explication of temple ceremony excludes any relation to secular influences.

¹⁰⁴ Brooke, 256.

¹⁰⁵ Sillitoe and Roberts, 233.

¹⁰⁶ *Magic World View*, 184.

¹⁰⁷ Brooke, 253.

Conclusion

Taken together, Hofmann's forgeries reveal the delicate balance Mormonism strikes between history and myth, spiritual and secular. By causing embarrassment and casting doubt on the truthfulness of modern Mormon myth, Hofmann's forgeries questioned the past and present divine legitimacy of the Church. His work intensified the Church's skepticism toward scholars and scholarship, and in an attempt to repair their damaged image, they cracked down on scholars that they felt portrayed the Church negatively by questioning traditional assumptions. Ultimately, this displays the dangers involved in mythifying and simplifying history while impeding those who seek its truth. They alienate such people and create dissidents.

Mark Hofmann became close to Church leaders and popular among them. Upon the Church's first purchase of a forgery, the Anthon Transcript, a famous photo was taken of the First Presidency and other top ranking officials posed around the document with Hofmann.¹⁰⁸ This first taste of camaraderie was indicative of the relationships that would be built. Prior to his meeting with the elite group, Hofmann had preliminary meetings with historians and members of the academic community, including Dean Jessee (Mormon document and handwriting specialist), Jan Shipps (non-Mormon scholar of Church studies), Leonard Arrington (Mormon scholar and ex director of the LDS Archives), A.J. Simmonds (student of Arrington and archivist at Utah State University), Danel Bachmann (Mormon scholar), Donald Schmidt (director of the Church Archives)¹⁰⁹ The approval and involvement of these individuals with the forgeries likely stoked the backlash that was to come.

¹⁰⁸ Turley, 38.

¹⁰⁹ Turley 24-39.

Likely, the Church was further distraught at the damage that would have incurred had Hofmann not been stopped. The Spalding and the Lucy Letter both contained clues as to what wreckage might have later occurred. The Spalding document was one of the many that allegedly composed the McLellin Collection. Said to be remnants of the Church “traitor” William E. McLellin’s diaries and memorabilia, Hofmann promised his potential buyer and confidants that the collection was composed of material more debilitating to faith than any he had before sold. In fact, the Church already faced a public relations ordeal as a Church authority, Elder Hugh Pinnock, had been helping Hofmann secure a loan to purchase the collection and find a buyer once Hofmann had the collection in his hands. Pinnock, stressed that the buyer be someone from within the church who would keep the documents “safe” and out the public eye. A good home for the documents further insinuated that there was material that would be “damaging.”

Hofmann said that McLellin knew intimate details about the rumored affair between Joseph Smith and his servant (Fanny Alger) and drunken rendezvous with trusted apostles. Hofmann exclaimed that McLellin did not believe in many of Smith’s revelations. Among other things, he claimed that Joseph Smith only pretended to translate papyri facsimiles which he called the Book of Abraham and published with other writings in a book he called the *Pearl of Great Price*.¹¹⁰ Unfortunately, these facsimiles that Smith bought off a peddler and translated had already received extensive modern criticism. When Smith’s remaining bits of papyri were examined, it was declared by experts that they had nothing to do with Joseph’s translation in the *Pearl of Great Price*.¹¹¹ The opportunity for damage to be done here could be clearly seen.

¹¹⁰ Turley, 194.

¹¹¹ Worrall, 192. Released to the entire Mormon community in 1880, the *Pearl of Great Price* is an added elucidation to Mormon scripture, that existed in pieces, originally for members not able to join the migrating mass. The introduction of the book explains that it is, “a selection of choice materials touching many significant aspects of the faith and doctrine...[which] were translated and produced by the Prophet Joseph Smith.” These most notably

The Lucy letter, on the other hand, would have corroborated Hofmann's likely forthcoming forgery of the 116 lost Book of Mormon manuscript pages. The further damage that the Church could have face seemed incredibly imminent. Some of the material that had to be recalled was very embarrassing for the Church. The Lucy letter, for example was initially a cause for jubilation, but when it was confirmed a forgery, it was a particularly devastating loss because the Church had considered it one of the most convincing pieces of empirical evidence for the Book of Mormon and Smith's translating powers. One collector called it "the single most important document external to The Book of Mormon."¹¹² This strong reliance on the letter made it especially embarrassing to those who had so earnestly praised it.

The Church handled many of the sensitive documents secretly. The Stowell letter, Bullock letter, and Dunham letter, for instance, were stowed away in the First Presidency's vault. When these documents were eventually released, it made the Church look like they had hidden secretive information. In bypassing regular Church procedure, officials were endorsing not only its potentially negative impact to typical Church historical dogma, but also provided further substantiation to Bullock's claim that Church leaders suppressed contentious information to promote a particular image. This also spurred negative press attention when the Church was eventually obliged to release them.¹¹³

Disdain toward Church-related Scholarship was seen across multiple fronts. Hofmann was certainly aware of the animosity that Church officials and members had toward scholars. When asked why he thought he was allowed to see the First Presidency's secret vault in an

include Joseph's translation of the book of Genesis, pieces of Joseph's revelations about the biblical Evangelist, Matthew, and translations of the pieces of papyri that Joseph claimed were written by Abraham.

¹¹² Sillitoe and Roberts, 262.

¹¹³ Worrall, 144.

interview, Hofmann said: “I am not a historian. I’m not going to write an expose of Mormonism.”¹¹⁴ Steve Christensen notes the same idea about scholars providing an unattractive view of history when he wrote a letter to Hinckley, explaining that he would protect and justify the Salamander letter, keeping a discerning eye toward what he would allow the scholars to publish. He expressed deep concern about the information being twisted by the Church’s “enemies,” which could include scholars. Hinckley’s response affirmed Christensen’s comment about enemies and added that “The enemies of the Church seem to be having a great time. Their efforts will fade while the work moves forward.”¹¹⁵ While many scholars, such as Jesse and Walker in their work on magic, provided what the Church felt to be proper promotional material, their lack of control over what conclusions were drawn by scholars was disconcerting. Christensen and Hinckley’s comments reveal that both rank-and-file Mormons and Church authorities shared this attitude. Hofmann’s statement, reveals his disillusionment because in his own way, he *was* providing an expose on Mormonism.

Scholars initially seemed to have played an important role in providing a context for the new history that Hofmann provided. Yet, once it was revealed that the controversial documents turned out to be forgeries, scholars seem to reinforce, instead, the dangers of a free rein, because the Church could be hurt by additional embarrassment and deviation from their carefully worded promotional histories. Marvin S. Hill wrote an article in 1985 about the Salamander and Stowell letters, asserting that the Salamander Letter “makes it clear that even among the faithful a money digging interpretation of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon was in vogue and that Smith had “no reluctance to search for gold with his magical powers.”¹¹⁶ The Church was likely less

¹¹⁴ Sillitoe and Roberts, 267-268.

¹¹⁵ Turley, 105.

¹¹⁶ Sillitoe and Roberts, 98.

than impressed with the way the Salamander Letter had been casually and insensitively discussed at a Sunstone Symposium.¹¹⁷ Valeen Tippetts Avery and Linda King Newell were adamant about using the documents related to temple ritual and the Smith family in their biography of Emma Hale Smith, an award-winning work that was not well-received within the Mormon world because of its critical views of both Emma as a wife and Joseph as a husband.¹¹⁸ Thus, the scholarly work that commented on Hofmann's work could be seen to validate the Church's reluctant attitude toward scholarship. The attention on the Church forced them to open up their archives to law enforcement, which ultimately showed that their excitement, justifications, and embarrassments were all based on frauds. This provided yet another reason to keep their archives closed to all but a most discerning handful. To counteract this undesired attention, the Church took action, reinforcing their authoritarian grip on sequestering sensitive information and making Mormon history a closed loop, instead of urging scholarship to continue in order to potentially explain away historical difficulties.

The difficulty of marrying Mormonism and history is exploited carefully in Hofmann's forgeries, which draw upon the most controversial aspects of Mormon history and belief, questioning both the legitimacy of its inception and its modern vitality. Though the documents used relevant events to raise up controversy, the doubt they stirred went far beyond these individual manifestations. The Church is built upon principles of divine prophecy and revelation, and all of the forgeries ultimately attacked this claim to divinity. Attributing what was proclaimed "divine" to merely superstitious or unoriginal was one way to devalue the Church.

¹¹⁷ Sillitoe and Roberts, 93.

¹¹⁸ Newell, Linda King., and Valeen Tippetts, Avery. *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith*. (University of Illinois Press, 1994).

Another was to breed resentment for its spangled demands on members. Yet another was to attack the character of Smith, Young, and other founders who “revealed.”

Seeing sacred temple ordinances as replications of Masonic ritual, seeing Smith’s revelations from an occult-inspired point of view or Young’s prophethood as a fraudulent cover-up, yields a wholly new understanding of Mormonism. For instance, if magic is accepted as a major influence of Mormonism, the doctrine takes on a new dimension and according to Quinn, “This reflected ‘the occult tradition going back to Neo-Platonism ... [that] tended to blur the difference between matter and spirit, making matter spiritual and spirit material. Its emphasis was on a matter almost alive, permeated with the divine, filled with secret sympathies and antipathies’.”¹¹⁹ These implications are difficult for modern Mormons to reconcile to the myth of Mormon origins which the Church has carefully spoon-fed to its members. Rank-and-file members are also dubious of scholarly works that might illuminate the significance of magic to early members because of the intolerance toward scholarship that was articulated by Church authorities.

Furthermore, if the integrity of the revelatory appearance of the angels and inspiration from God could be reduced to treasure-hunting gone awry, or the doctrine of polygamy as necessary to fill a sickening sexual appetite, the whole precipice upon which the Church was built could also be doubted. The Church’s divine authority and authenticity all rest upon key events involving divine sources, such as Smith’s monumental experience with the Angel Moroni. In an subsequent angelic encounter, John the Baptist ordained Smith and the three witnesses with the Aaronic priesthood. In a later visit, Peter, James and John conferred the Melchizedek

¹¹⁹ *Magic World View*, 184.

Priesthood upon them. They were also given the ability to bestow it upon other worthy male members.¹²⁰ Only with this ancient power of God residing within mortal individuals could the other rites be brought forth. The priesthood allowed for the establishment of divine Church hierarchy. The Book of Mormon, on the other hand, provided the theological basis for Mormonism which served to distinguish Mormonism from other sects of Christianity.

If Smith's elemental meeting with Moroni, which led to restoration of the priesthood and Book of Mormon, was in reality a wild goose chase with a salamander, then was his encounter with Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ merely an image he saw in his brown seer stone? Could the conferral of divine priesthood power be reduced to nothing more than a sensation felt in a crystal amulet around his neck some night when the stars aligned? If ancient prophets had not passed on their heavenly power, given by Christ himself, then who had? If Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ hadn't appeared to Smith to proclaim that no church on the earth was correct, then why did Smith create his own radical sect? Altering the details of a history that in Mormon culture, has become nothing less than mythic, seemed to unravel the legitimacy of the main tenets of faith that members daily affirmed to justify their unorthodox lives. Joseph's otherworldly experiences were the crux of their religious system and their personal belief in a loving and involved Godhead.

Mark Hofmann was created by the Mormon Church. Its dishonesty with its origins and early twentieth century attempt to mythify its history created an unresolved tension between

¹²⁰ Brooke, 194. The necessity of the John the Baptist, and Peter, James, and John conferring the priesthoods spoke to the apostasy that corrupted that power in later Christian figures. Those who gave the priesthood to the Mormons represented Christianity and the power of God in its pure form and traced the Mormon priesthood back to its original sources: Christ and Adam, who received their power directly from Heavenly Father.

actual events on record and the narrative told by the Church. This tension was intensified with the rise of the new Mormon history when scholars sought to straighten the record and place it in a larger historical context. Though they hoped to present the evidence in an empathetic and faithful manner, the Church either felt that countering the unambiguous, faith-promoting myth that had stood for decades presented too great a risk of alienating members or thought that the modern Church could not withstand the weight of its past.

Hofmann found himself somewhere inside this ambiguity and was disgruntled by the ignorance, platitudes, and half-truths that shaded Mormon history, further seeping into modern Mormon theology and culture. He resented this mythification and oversimplification of what was in reality a complex theology and history that was just beginning to be explored. As Fielding suggests, it is the controversy and cocktail of influences that plague the inception of Mormonism, though problematic to the modern church's visage, that concurrently serve to make it theologically complex and engaging. Paul Toscano remarks that "Mormonism is a religion full of paradox and of extraordinary riches of the mind and the spirit" that deserve to be indulged and explored.¹²¹ The context in which these were first conceived brings in a new dimension of significance, the conclusion of which, Maxine Hanks notes, have not been fully drawn out. Its theology then, is enticing because of "its complexity and unfinished nature."¹²²

Yet, despite their ongoing emphasis on literal doctrines, the Church is upset when scholars take these riches of spirit into stride. They are dismayed by unorthodox opinions, when work is written to accommodate non-Mormon assumptions, when public statements are given, when spiritual things are reduced to secular things, and when constant defense is not given to

¹²¹ Lindholm, 47.

¹²² Lindholm, 65.

perceived enemies. Yet, protection of the truth has actually resulted in Church officials presenting “a mixture of platitudes, half-truths, omissions, and plausible denials” instead of truth.¹²³ Ironically, this leaves the vitality of Church history in question. Hiding away materials and historical facts that may seem counterproductive to faith, “may actually undermine the faith of Latter-day Saints who eventually learn about the problems from other sources.” Scholarship, on the other hand, could “help Saints understand the vitality of Mormonism from a position of knowledgeable strength.”¹²⁴ Or, as Roberts puts it, can help us “embrace and be embraced by the quest for historical truth, in all its complexity, ambiguity, and anomalous beauty.”¹²⁵ Instead, the Church chose to limit its robust history and alienate its members with both its mythified account and by punishing scholars who sought a more complete record.

Hofmann’s intelligence and Church knowledge equalled or exceeded that of Church historians. Yet, he could see that Church scholarship was a futile attempt. The readership for scholarly publications was already limited. Furthermore, Hofmann knew that scholarly work was negatively perceived from within the Church by both members and leaders, despite its potential for strengthening the Church. To make an impact in his disillusioned state, Hofmann would have to do something both dramatic and subversive. Ironically, instead of making the work done by scholars more relevant, he generated further suspicion toward them.

Hofmann was indeed guilty of fabricating history, but the Church has been guilty of simplifying it. Hiding away history, altering it, streamlining it, indeed serves the purposes of a wealthy Church, but in this case, it has come with the price of a historical paranoia that weakens the intrigue and richness of its doctrine and alienates intellectuals. Consequently, this serves to

¹²³ *Faithful History*, 285.

¹²⁴ *Faithful History*, 284.

¹²⁵ Howard, 148.

harm the Church in the long run. With Hofmann, we see the hazard in the Church's attempt to reconcile the literal to the symbolic, the historic to the mythic. By emphasizing the literal in a mythic system only when convenient, the Church has created a space for disillusioned members to become dissidents, and for resentment to transform itself into revenge. It is here we find Mark Hofmann, and it is here where others will be forged as long as this contradiction lives.

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