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The Character of Joseph Smith: Insights from His Holographs

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What kind of a man was Joseph Smith? His high calling as a prophet intensifies our curiosity about him as a person, but at the same time obscures him from view. As with so many public figures, the official stands in the way of the personal. We can picture him revealing the Lord's will, preaching to the Saints, and sitting in counsel, but we are also interested in him as a father, a friend, a husband, and a man.

It is all the more difficult to reach him because so much of what is attributed to him is recorded in other men's journals and letters, filtered through their minds, sometimes many years after the event. We hardly know what to trust. Joseph Smith dictated the bulk of the material we have directly from him, and there is always a question of its perfect accuracy. Some entries in his journal, which we now know as the *History of the Church*, were composed by clerks and merely approved by him. We need not therefore repudiate the journal, but fortunately there are, in addition, a few pages that we know came from the Prophet's mind because they came from his hand.

Included among the manuscripts written personally by the Prophet—known as holographs—are a brief diary for the years 1832-34, another from 1835-36, written in part by him, and twenty-two letters. The diary entries were not a chronicle of events meant to become the history of the Church, as later journals were, but brief irregular jottings put down most likely at the end of a day or in a quiet moment. Like the letters, they are open and candid and catch the Prophet unconsciously drawing an informal portrait of himself.¹

The picture of the Prophet in the holographs does not reveal anything startling, but it does bring out qualities easily neglected when we see him only in the midst of public business. Since Joseph's religion so much of the time was prophetic and ecclesiastical, we do not think of him seeking salvation for himself. He revealed truth, exhorted, and administered, but did he pray to be forgiven, or for peace of mind, or for help in overcoming weakness? The brief prayers the Prophet often included in his diary at the end of a day's entry are evidence that he did. In them he used words much like the prayers of Latter-day Saints who are not presidents of the Church: "Oh may God grant that I may be directed in all my thoughts" (Nov. 27, 1832-Dec. 5, 1834, diary, p. 1), or "Lord bless my family and preserve them" (p. 8). Often the prayers are related to the events of the day; some are quite urgent. "A great congregation paid good attention. Oh God Seal our testimony to their hearts Amen." (P. 6) "Oh God establish thy word among this people." (P. 14) "Oh Lord deliver the servant out of temptations and fill his heart with wisdom and understanding." (P. 4) Like all men, the Prophet Joseph had to work out his salvation in prayerful struggle.

We sometimes forget that the spiritually powerful men and women of the earth must face all the

temptations and discouragements of ordinary people. The Prophet Joseph was usually so confident, we are surprised to find that he was not always serene. In the diaries we catch glimpses of him in the midst of the struggle, rejoicing when the Spirit of the Lord returned after moments of spiritual aridity. "This Evening my mind is calm and serene for which I thank the Lord." (P. 2) "This Evening feel better in my mind than I have for a few days back." (P. 4) The Prophet passed through cycles of uneasiness and serenity on the way to achieving that radiant forcefulness so characteristic of him.

Joseph's quest for salvation, according to the newly discovered accounts of the First Vision, began while he was still a boy. In the 1832 account, Joseph tells us that it was "the all important concerns for the welfare of my immortal Soul which led me to searching the scriptures" (p. 2) prior to his first attempt at vocal prayer. The first words he heard from the Lord in the First Vision were "Joseph my Son thy Sins are forgiven thee. Go thy way walk in my statutes and keep my commandments." (Pp. 2, 3)

After the vision, even small transgressions were "a wound upon my soul," and that deep regret over personal failings lingered with him as he strove to make himself perfectly worthy. (P. 4) "I have visited a grove which is just back of the town almost every day," he wrote Emma in June of 1832. There "I can be Secluded from the eyes of any mortal and there give vent to all the feelings of my heart in meditation and prayer. I have called to mind all the past moments of my life and am left to mourn and Shed tears of sorrow for my folly in suffering the adversary of my Soul to have so much power over me as he has had in times past." (June 6, 1832) He never doubted his calling or the validity of the revelations; his confidence in the truth of the cause was perfect. His personal effort, more than for most of us, had to be concentrated not on testimony but on living worthy of all he knew. Chafing at his long confinement in Liberty Jail, he wrote Emma in the spring of 1839 that "the salvation of my soul is of the most importance to me. Forasmuch as I know for a certainty of Eternal things, if the heavens linger it is nothing to me; I must steer my bark safe." (March 21, 1839) Even when the Church seemed near to capsizing in that dreary season, the Prophet remembered that he had to sail his own ship safely home too.

Joseph's efforts were rewarded as his confidence grew through the passing years. Even as a young man, it was not his nature to brood. His own description of his "native cheery temperament" seems to have held throughout his life. But the occasional evidence of personal misgiving in these papers shows us that Joseph Smith did not glide effortlessly into perfection. His remarkable personal strengths were the outcome of battles with temptation and persistence through discouragement

and occasional setbacks.

The one enduring quality that emerges most strongly from these writings is his unquenchable yearning for the companionship of family and friends. His standard word for the miseries of jail or enforced seclusion was "lonesome." After five months in jail, he dolefully wrote to Emma of life "within the walls, grates, and screeking iron doors, of a lonesome, dark, dirty prison." A few lines previously he described himself peeking through "the grates of this lonesome prison." (Apr. 4, 1839)³ He longed not just for the comforts and peace of home but for the chance to see and touch and talk to his children. Shortly after the separation at Far West in 1838, he wrote, "Oh God grant that I may have the privilege of seeing once more my lovely Family, in the enjoyment of the sweets of liberty, and social life. To press them to my bosom and kiss their lovely cheeks would fill my heart with unspeakable gratitude." (Nov. 12, 1838) In their absence he devoured Emma's letters. "I received your letter which

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Oh may God bless you all."**

I read over and over again. It was a sweet morsel to me." (Nov. 12, 1838)⁴

There was nothing devious about this need of the Prophet's. He did not disguise his feelings or wheedle or whine. He longed for his companions and candidly told them of his love without embarrassment or subterfuge. He often asked Emma to write and only once scolded her for failing to send a few lines. (June 6, 1832)⁵ Hidden away outside Nauvoo to escape the Missouri officials, he pled with the Whitneys to visit him. "The time of my absence from you seems too long, and dreary, that it seems, as if I could not live long in this way: and if you three would come and see me in this my lonely retreat, it would afford me great relief, of mind." (Aug. 18, 1842) With such strong and direct feelings so close to the surface of his personality, Joseph Smith must have struck people as an immensely warm and engaging man.

The Prophet's love, concern, and anxiety for his family's welfare are apparent in his diary and letters. "I want you should not let those little fellows forget me," he wrote of his children, rather plain-

tively, after five months' imprisonment. "Tell them Father loves them with a perfect love, and he is doing all he can to get away from the mob to come to them." (Apr. 4, 1839) He declared that "those little children are subjects of my meditation continually," and he yielded to the impulse of an absent father to advise his wife on the best methods of dealing with the children. "Do teach them all you can, that they may have good minds. Be tender and kind to them. Don't be fractious to them, but listen to their wants." (Apr. 4, 1839) Although Emma may have arched her back a little at that, she could not gainsay her husband's interest in her and the children. He turned them over one by one in his mind as he sat in jail and formed a wish for each. "Tell little Joseph, he must be a good boy. Father loves him with a perfect love. He is the Eldest [and] must not hurt those that are smaller than him, but comfort them. Tell little Frederick, Father, loves him, with all his heart. He is a lovely boy. Julia is a lovely little girl. Love her also. She is a promising child. Tell her Father wants her to remember him and be a good girl." (Nov. 12, 1838) And for his wife: "Oh my affectionate Emma, I want you to remember that I am a true and faithful friend, to you and the children, forever. My heart is intertwined around you forever and ever. Oh may God bless you all." (Nov. 12, 1838)

That river of affection ran as an undercurrent even in unlikely places. Not long after he was torn from his family at Far West and chained with other Church leaders in the jail at Richmond, Joseph inadvertently disclosed to Emma how bonds of affection reached out to encircle his brethren even behind the grates of a lonesome prison. "Brother Robison is chained next to me, he that has a true heart and a firm mind. Brother Wight is next. Brother Rigdon next, Hyrum next, Parley next. Amasa next, and thus we are bound together in chains as well as the cords of everlasting love. We are in good spirits and rejoice that we are counted worthy to be persecuted for Christ's sake." (Nov. 12, 1838) The closeness of his brethren, their unity in affliction, and their love combined to lift Joseph's spirits.

Joseph Smith immensely enjoyed meeting in counsel with the brethren. He derived satisfaction not only from the work done, the commitments made, and the presence of the Spirit of the Lord, but also from the sheer pleasure of being together. One senses that kind of pleasure in the description of a commonplace farewell. When three brethren on their way to Missouri stopped to pray with the Prophet, "Brother David Whitmer acted as spokesman. He prayed in the spirit, a glorious time succeeded his prayer, Joy filled our hearts, and we blessed them and bid them God speed and promised them a safe Journey and took them by the hand and bid them farewell for a season. Oh! may God grant them long life and good days." (Diary, Sept. 23, 1835) And the next day when the high

council covenanted to "go next season to live or die in Jackson County," and "to struggle for this thing until death shall dissolve this union," the Prophet's seemingly less-than-sober appraisal of the day was the jubilant comment that "we truly had a good time." (Diary, Sept. 24, 1835) It is not hard to imagine all that fed his happiness on those occasions when he called in the brethren to lay his hands on their heads and bless them.

How could a man so openly dependent on family and friends for affection and companionship defend himself against the wounds he inevitably received? How did he react to the hurt of being rebuffed or betrayed? Joseph Smith recognized the virtues of his associates and valued most the quality of loyalty. He often described his friends as "true": Brother Whitney was "a true Brother to me" (June 6, 1832); Brother Robison, chained beside Joseph at Richmond, had "a true heart and a firm mind" (Nov. 12, 1838). Frederick G. Williams failed in many instances for want of confidence, but he was, Joseph said, "one of those men in whom I place the greatest confidence and trust for I have found him ever full of love and Brotherly kindness. He is not a man of many words but is ever wining because of his constant mind." (1832-34 diary, p. 23)⁶ It was that steady and sure love that the Prophet prized. Sidney Rigdon's virtues were manifest to Joseph: "He is a very great and good man, a man of great power of words and can gain the friendship of his hearers very quick." (P. 21) But the Prophet sorrowed that he lacked one vital quality: he was "not capable of that pure and stedfast love for those who are his benefactors as should possess the breast of a President of the Chuch of Christ." (P. 20)

Joseph Smith was long-suffering with Sidney but admitted that "a man who willfully turneth away from his friend without a cause is not easily forgiven." (P. 22) Against outright traitors, the Prophet's wrath could be as blunt, direct, and unyielding as his love for his friends. Upon the apostate Philastus Hurlburt, Joseph pronounced this curse: "The Lord shall destroy him who has lifted his heel against me even that wicked man Doctor P. Hrlbut. He will deliver him to the [fowls] of heaven and his bones shall be cast to the blast of the wind for he lifted his arm against the Amighty, therefore the Lord shall destroy him." (Pp. 68, 69) By his own definition of friendship, Joseph Smith did not think of the world as being populated by friendly people. "I have learned in my travels that man is trecheous and selfish but few excepted." (P. 20) He was not surprised to be persecuted and betrayed. But how much more he treasured those "few excepted" who were true, who valued his love as he valued theirs, and with whom he could safely enter into that deep personal exchange that brought him his greatest joy among earthly pleasures.

The public life of great men sometimes absorbs all their energies. Their deepest satisfactions come from great events involving masses of people. The

public consumes the private. Joseph Smith obviously loved to preach, to plan, to organize, to command, but that work did not drain his wells of personal affection. To those about him he was always a man, a husband, and a friend as well as a prophet. To the last minutes of his life, the Prophet took pleasure and comfort from his friends and family.

In June of 1844 when Joseph Smith was about to flee with a few friends to the west, his last words were with his family. "In a few minutes afterwards Joseph came from his family. His tears were flowing fast. He held a handkerchief to his face, and followed after Brother Hyrum without uttering a word." When he returned the next evening he contemplated preaching to the Saints by starlight, but his family surrounded him in the Mansion House and he stayed the whole night. It was the appeal of his family and friends, who thought he had deserted them, that brought him back to Illinois and to the mercy of the Hancock County ruffians. Joseph's

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words as he decided to return were more than an observation for that occasion alone. He spoke a simple truth about his deepest feelings: "If my life is of no value to my friends it is of none to myself." (*History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 6:547, 549.) □

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Footnotes

1. Joseph Smith's holographs are being assembled and edited for publication by Dean Jessee of the Church Historical Department. The quotations in this essay are reproduced with Joseph Smith's spelling and punctuation to help retain the flavor of his written expression. Where the original is obscure, however, spelling errors have been corrected. Minimal punctuation has been added where necessary to establish the meaning, and abbreviations have been expanded. Except where indicated, the originals are in the Joseph Smith Collection, Church Archives, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.
2. Original in the Chicago Historical Society Library.
3. Original in the Yale University Library.
4. Original in the archives of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.
5. Cf. Nov. 4, 1832; Nov. 12, 1838; Mar. 21, 1839; Nov. 9, 1839, in the Archives of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.