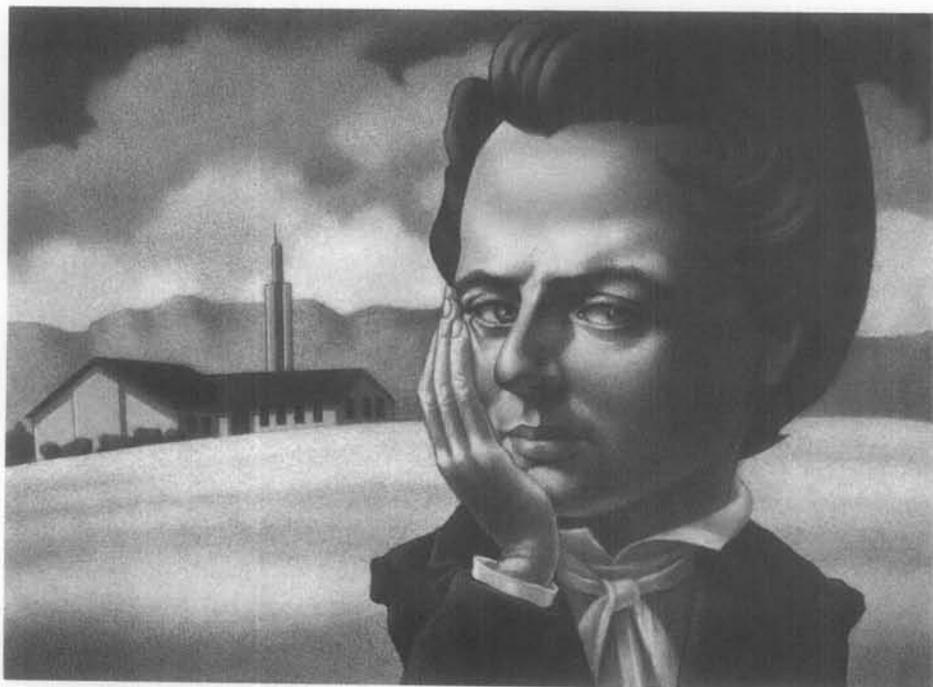


LIGHTER MINDS

JOSEPH SMITH VISITS REDWOOD CITY FIRST WARD

By Samuel W. Taylor



I thought I'd drop down and see how things are going these days.

Mormonism . . . has experienced a social and intellectual transformation of such magnitude that a resurrected Joseph Smith, returning to earth today, might well wonder if this was indeed the same church he had founded.

—KEITH A. NORMAN¹

I BACKED OUT of the garage Sunday morning and was surprised by the guy alongside the car. He was tall, husky, with a strong face, prominent nose, a good smile. "I'm looking for Sam Taylor."

"Look no farther."

SAMUEL W. TAYLOR is an author living in Redwood City, California.

be an experience, Sam, attending your ward."

"Better buckle up, Joe."

"Buckle what up?"

"The seat belt." He didn't seem to understand, so I reached across and fastened it for him.

"What on earth is this for?"

"Where you from, Joe?"

"I'm a native of Vermont."

"Born Mormon?"

"Convert, you might say."

"Still in Vermont?"

"I'm now in another land. Another world, really."

"They don't have seat belts there?"

"No; nor vehicles like this one."

"Does Detroit know about this?"

"Who is Detroit?"

As I swung into the highway he clutched the arm rest. "Say! No wonder you buckle up! I've never gone this fast before, not even with a runaway."

"I'm only doing thirty-five, Joe."

"Thirty-five what?"

I eased down to about twenty-five. He said, "I'm glad to find you still at Stockbridge Avenue. It's been a while since your mother gave me your address."

The guy had a memory. My mother had passed on a quarter century ago. "It's your nickel, Joe."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You said you wanted to talk with me."

"Yes, of course. I'm told you're an author and have researched Church history. So I thought I'd drop down and see how things are going these days."

"You're leaning on a frail reed, Joe. Salt Lake is the place to go, not Redwood City, not me."

"I want a grass roots reaction, not an official statement. There can be a difference, you know."

"I certainly do know, only too well."

"Where are the Twelve Traveling Councilors these days?"

"Twelve who?"

"The Twelve Apostles."

"Why, they are in Salt Lake, of course. Where else?"

"Is there some emergency which recalled them?"

"No."

"Then why aren't they traveling, special witnesses to Christ in all the world—different from other officers in the Church in the duties of their calling?"

"Joe, you should know very well that they don't have time to be on the go, traveling around."

"John Taylor had time. Brigham Young

had time. All of them had time in the early days—Heber C. Kimball, Orson Hyde, Parley Pratt, William Smith, Orson Pratt, Wilford Woodruff, George A. Smith, Willard Richards, Lyman Wight, Amasa Lyman.”

“That was a long time ago, Joe. They’re not called the Twelve Traveling Councilors any more. And if they were out preaching all over the world, who would stay home and tend the store?”

“Why, the teachers would, of course. Just as they’re supposed to do.”

“The teachers? Joe, you’ve got to be kidding.”

“The duty of the Teachers is to watch over the Church always and be with and strengthen them. And see there is no iniquity in the Church, neither hardness with each other, neither lying, backbiting, nor evil speaking. And see the Church meet together often, and also see that all members do their duty. And a teacher is to take the lead in meetings in the absence of an elder or priest. . . .”

“Hold it, Joe. I expect you’ll be telling me next that even deacons do that sort of thing.”

“Of course they do! The teacher is to be assisted always, in all his duties in the Church, by the deacons, as occasion requires.”

“You don’t say so. Just about no limit to their authority, I suppose.”

“Indeed there is. Neither teachers nor deacons have authority to baptize, administer the sacrament, or lay on hands.”

“Well, it’s a relief to know that much, anyhow.”

“They are, however, to warn, expound, exhort, and teach, and invite all to come to Christ.”

“You’re quoting from the Doctrine and Covenants, Joe.”

“Of course. What’s wrong with that?”

“Tell the truth, Joe, there have been a few changes made.”

“How can you say that, Sam? I had it from good authority that a fellow named Hugh Nibley, a recognized authority on Church history and doctrine, said that if Joseph Smith walked into a conference of the Mormon church today he’d find himself completely at home; and if he addressed the congregation they wouldn’t detect the least bit strange, unfamiliar, or old-fashioned ideas in his teaching. He said the Mormon gospel sprang full-blown from the words of Joseph Smith, and has never been worked over or touched up in any way, and it’s free of revisions and alterations.”

“Well, Joe, you’ve hit the jackpot. It’s ward conference today. See for yourself.”

As we parked at the chapel, he said, “What a magnificent building! Is this your temple?”

“No, that’s in Oakland. This is the chapel. Three wards meet here.”

“Looks brand new.”

“It’s not very old.” I indicated the parking area. “Our old chapel was over there. They tore it down because it was twenty years old.”

“You must be joking.”

“It was no joke, believe me.”

“Why was it demolished?”

“I couldn’t say. Maybe it wasn’t elegant enough.”

As I unbuckled the seat belts, he said, “Say, before we go in. . . .” He lowered his voice. “Are you living the New and Everlasting Covenant?”

“If you mean what I think you do—”

“How many wives do you have?”

“One.”

“I understand.” He winked. “But just between you and me.”

“Surely you know about the Manifestos? The first one in 1890, then a dozen more before the final one in 1933.”

“That’s for the world. It’s okay, Sam. I do understand. You’re a good man. But from the example of your grandfathers and your father, don’t tell me you’re not living the Principle.”

“You know what they say about that, these days, Joe? A guy named Elden J. Watson did a paper on it, proving that the New and Everlasting Covenant meant baptism, not plural marriage.”

“Baptism? That’s the ranting of an apostate!”

“No more, Joe. It’s the new interpretation. We’re doing our best to sweep the Principle under the rug.”

“But it’s essential to the celestial glory!”

“It’s just incidental, these days.”

“Sam, are you crazy or am I?”

WE went in. At the elders presidency meeting he met Tom, Bill, and Ron. As executive secretary I reported home teaching statistics for the month; then we discussed the problem of inactive members and do-not-calls. I reported that we had forty elders in the ward, and we saw about one-third of them. Just nine had recommends. There were eighty “prospective elders,” and we saw none of them.

“What’s a prospective elder?” Joe asked.

Tom gave him a curious look. I explained, “Joe’s from another country.”

“Well, Joe,” Tom said, “a prospective elder is a member who’s only maybe a deacon, teacher, or priest.”

“Well, and what’s wrong with that?”

“As adults, they should be elders.”

“Nonsense!” Joe said. “In pioneer days plenty of good men were deacons, teachers, and priests, all of their lives.”

“Joe, today a kid of twelve is ordained a deacon. He becomes a teacher at fourteen or fifteen, a priest at seventeen. Then at nineteen—”

“I never heard anything so crazy in my born life! How long has this been going on?”

“You *must* be from a country far away, Joe. Don’t you get the priesthood manuals there?”

“Manuals? Never saw one.”

“And the conference talks on TV?”

“What’s TV?”

“There’s the *Ensign* and *Church News*, there’s *Sunstone* and *Dialogue* and *Utah Historical Quarterly*.”

“We don’t see any of that stuff.”

“Surely you read books by the general authorities?”

“No printing press in my land.”

“But you speak English.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Joe was born in Vermont,” I said.

“You must have been away a long time, Joe,” Tom said.

Through the partition came music, the congregation singing. Our meeting broke up.

Praise to the man who communed
with Jehovah!

Jesus anointed that Prophet and
Seer.

Blessed to open the last dispensa-
tion,

Kings shall extol him, and nations
revere.

Seated in the chapel as the song continued, Joe whispered, “We sing it to another tune, ‘Star in the East.’” Then as I opened the song book: “Say, that’s a good idea, having the music together with the words.”

“What do you mean?”

“Our song book is vest-pocket size. It has only the words.” Then his voice rose. “That’s not true! W. W. Phelps didn’t compose the verses! Eliza R. Snow did!”

“Shh!” came from behind.

Praise to his mem’ry, he died as a
martyr;

Honored and blest be his ever great
name;

Long shall his blood, which was
shed by assassins,

Plead unto heav’n while the earth
lauds his fame.

“It’s not ‘Plead unto Heaven,’” Joe said, “it’s ‘Stain Illinois, while the earth lauds his fame.’”

“Shh!”

As the deacons began passing the sacrament, Joe whispered, “Why no music?”

“It isn’t reverent to have music.”

"Used to be. And is it more reverent to listen to babies whimpering, people coughing—somebody is blowing his nose—mothers shushing kids?"

"Shh!"

Joe beamed as the sacrament tray was passed along the row. "Good idea, little paper cups for the wine. We used to—"

"No, no, Joe," I whispered, "take it with your right hand."

"Huh?"

"The right hand is the hand of righteousness."

He gave me a scornful glance, took a cup with his left hand, drank, then grimaced. "It's water!"

"Of course."

"It's supposed to be pure wine of our own make. Don't you make wine in California?"

"Shh!"

After the sacrament, the bishop arose. "I see we have a visitor. Would you like to introduce yourself?"

"I'm Joseph Smith, from the Celestial First Ward, Kolob Stake. Just dropped in to visit you good people."

"We're happy to have you with us, Brother Smith." The bishop then began the formality of sustaining the Church authorities, beginning with the First Presidency. "All who approve, manifest by the uplifted hand. . . . All opposed by the same sign, and now, do you sustain the members of—"

"Hold your horses, Bishop!" It was Joe, hand high in the air. "I opposed, and you never even looked up!"

"What?" the bishop said, startled and amazed. "You *opposed*?"

"Yes, I did."

"You opposed sustaining the *First Presidency*?"

"No, I opposed voting until we had discussed the issue."

"But, Brother Smith, there's nothing to discuss."

"Always used to be plenty to argue about, at Kirtland, in Missouri, at Nauvoo. Before we sustained anybody, we discussed if he was worthy of the office. Apostle Parley Pratt was challenged at conference, some folks claiming he was in darkness. Sidney Rigdon of the First Presidency was accused of treachery, until investigation proved the charges false. At Kolob Stake we have a lively discussion before we sustain anybody."

"Brother Smith, I will speak to you in my office after services. And now, I will ask the ward members, do you sustain—"

"Joe," I whispered, "the quickest way to land on the carpet is to refuse to sustain the authorities."

"Then there's *never* any discussion before the vote?"

"Never. And it isn't a vote; we just sustain."

"Then it means nothing."

"What it means is that the thinking has been done."

In conducting ward business, the bishop announced that Jack Snyder had been called on a mission to Germany. When the meeting adjourned, we shook hands with the boy's grandmother. Sister Snyder was bent with age, her hands gnarled iron claws from arthritis. "Sister Snyder, was your husband's grandfather Carl Snyder from Munich?"

"Yes, Brother; he arrived at Nauvoo as a boy. I'm so happy that Jack will be serving in Germany, maybe even in Munich."

"He will," Joe said, "and the Lord will bless and heal you, Sister."

As we left the chapel room I said, "Sister Snyder will need all the help she can get. Jack's parents were killed in a car accident, and it will be tough, him away on a foreign mission. The ward will help, of course, but I wonder if she'll have to mortgage her house?"

"If the ward helps her, why will she have to?"

"It costs \$1,000 a month to support a missionary in the German mission."

"What do you mean, support *him*? He goes without purse or scrip."

"Sure he does, but Sister Snyder and the ward will have to send him that grand every month."

"I don't understand, Sam. Traveling without purse or scrip has been the Lord's method of missionary work since Biblical times. 'And he said unto them,' Luke recorded, 'Take nothing for your journey, neither staves, nor scrip, neither bread, neither money; neither have two coats apiece.' And Matthew echoed this. The Doctrine and Covenants instructs the Elders 'not to have purse or scrip, neither two coats,' with the promise that with faith any man 'shall not be weary in mind, neither darkened, neither in body, limb, nor joint. . . . And they shall not go hungry, neither athirst. Therefore, take ye no thought for the morrow, for what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink, or wherewithal ye shall be clothed.'"

"I'm afraid it's cash on the barrelhead these days, Joe."

Lowering his voice, he said, "Before we meet with the bishop, where's the outhouse?"

"Outhouse? Oh, you mean—?" I pointed through the cultural hall. Straight ahead, take a left, and the door says 'Men.'"

"What? Your outhouse is *inside*?"

"Progress, Joe."

As he hurried away, I wondered where this character came from? Or was he playing some

elaborate practical joke?

"Oh, Brother Taylor," Sister Snyder said, limping up. "When Brother Smith held my hands, it was just—I can't describe it—but I seemed bathed in the golden warmth of his spirit."

I made a soothing reply. The old girl was of the gushy type.

When Joe returned he was beaming. "Sam, that's a most remarkable facility you have here, I must say."

"Comes in handy, especially in stormy weather."

On a table were several copies of the Book of Mormon, with a sign, "GIVE ONE TO A FRIEND." "A splendid idea," Joe said, picking one up. "I like this edition; good printing, flexible binding. As a missionary tool—hey, what's this?"

"What's what?"

"This passage is incorrect. And here on the next page is another mistake!"

"Well, Joe, over the years there have been several corrections."

"Corrections? It's the most correct book on earth! And what are you grinning at? Who changed it? And how much was changed? Do you know?"

"If you really want to know, Joe, there have been 3,913 changes. I have a book at home with all the corrections marked, if you care to give it a gander."

"But, Sam, why?"

"For example, we no longer promise that the Lamanites will become 'a white and delightsome people,' because that's racist. And being racist these days is worse than having a black telephone. So now it's 'a pure and delightsome people.'"

"By what authority were the changes made?"

"By the same authority that we got the book in the first place."

He grinned. "Yes, of course. What would be the point of continual revelation if there was nothing new to reveal?"

"And Joseph Smith himself corrected the Bible with his inspired version."

"True enough, Sam."

We turned as a woman began sobbing. It was Amy Jacobs; and her husband, Emil, seemed about ready to follow suit, as people shook hands with the couple and wished them good luck.

"They're moving to Phoenix," I explained to Joe. "Fine people; they've been in the ward more than twenty years."

"Retiring?"

"Well, they just can't stay here and face it, Joe. Nobody blames them, but—it's their son. He was recently sent home from his mission in disgrace."

"Oh, my, those poor parents. What did the boy do?"

"He was serving in England, and he fell in love with a girl from Liverpool. They married secretly, but it was discovered when she became pregnant."

Joe frowned. "I guess I don't understand, Sam. Just what did the boy do *wrong*?"

"Missionaries aren't allowed to date girls, let alone marry them."

"Stuff and nonsense! Apostle Willard Richards married a girl while on a mission to England. Plenty of missionaries brought home a wife."

"John Taylor brought home a bride who became my grandmother," I agreed. "But things are different now."

WE went to the bishop's office. After shaking hands, the bishop said, "Brother Smith, I wouldn't want to report to your home ward that you refused to sustain the authorities."

"Bishop, I simply said that it was customary to discuss matters before voting. We do that in my stake."

"Hmm. Which ward and stake was it? Tell me again."

"Celestial First Ward, Kolob Stake."

The bishop made a note of it. "And how long do you plan to be here, Brother Smith?"

"I intended to return today, but it was announced that priesthood holders were to meet at your home tomorrow morning at five o'clock to go the Oakland Temple. So I'll stay for that."

"Good. Glad to have you along. Of course you have a recommend."

"Have a what?"

"A temple recommend."

"Never heard of it. What does it do?"

"It certifies that you are worthy to attend the temple sessions."

"Now, wait a minute. Are you saying that the temple isn't a place of public worship?"

"Of course it isn't. The public is allowed inside before dedication, but not after. Only recommend holders can attend the dedication."

"It wasn't that way at Kirtland. At Nauvoo we—they—sold tickets for a dollar apiece for the dedication of the temple. And at Kolob Stake everybody's welcome."

"I have no information about that, but I'll check."

"And we hold dances in the temple."

"Dances . . . in the . . . temple?" The bishop was shaken.

"Just like the Saints did at Nauvoo. With cakes and wine at intermission, and they danced until two a.m."

"I wonder if the Brethren in Salt Lake know what's going on out there?"

"And I'm sure that when I get back, the people of Kolob Stake will wonder what's going on *here*," Joe said. "Tell me about this recommend business, bishop. What do I have to do to get one?"

"You'd have to strictly observe the Word of Wisdom—"

"But that was given as advice, not by commandment or constraint."

"It's now a commandment. No coffee or tea, no tobacco, no liquor."

"Certainly the excessive use of such things will injure the health. It is wisdom to use moderation in all things. But what does it have to do with spirituality? When the Scribes and Pharisees came to Jesus, Matthew tells us He said, 'Not that which goeth into the mouth defiles a man; but that which cometh out of the mouth. . . . Do ye not understand, that whatever entereth in at the mouth goeth into the belly, and is cast out in the draught? But those things which proceed out of the mouth come forth from the heart; and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies; but to eat with unwashed hands defileth not a man.'"

"Brother Smith, you must understand that we can discuss doctrine, but not debate it."

"All right, Bishop. What else do I have to do to get a recommend?"

"You must pay a full tithing, and that—"

"I must buy my way in?"

"—that you wear the approved garments at all times."

"You must be joking," Joe said. "How would I look going around in my temple robes, even sleeping in them?"

"Brother Smith, I'm speaking of the inner garment."

"You mean the shirt which was set aside and never worn, after being marked and blessed?"

"I mean the inner garment which the prophet Joseph Smith designed and wore."

"What are you talking about? If the inner garment was worn at Nauvoo, do you suppose that the four men in Carthage jail would have left it off when entering that situation of grave danger?"

"They removed their garments because they didn't want them ridiculed by the guards at the jail."

"Better be murdered than ridiculed?"

The bishop sighed. "Brother Smith, I'm afraid that you simply don't have the right attitude."

We left the bishop's office to find Jack Snyder and his grandmother waiting in the

hallway. "Jack wanted to shake your hand, Brother Smith," Sister Snyder said.

Joe congratulated the new missionary. "When are you going to Germany, Jack?"

"I don't know exactly. I'll have to attend the Missionary Training Center to prepare."

"Training center? What's that?"

"It's at BYU. I studied German at college, but there is so much to learn about missionary work."

"Do you know the gospel is true?"

"Certainly."

"Then what more do you need, Jack? I've baptized many a man, confirmed him a member of the Church and ordained him an elder on the spot, and then called him on a mission. He left while still wet."

"Didn't he have to learn the series of lessons?"

"I told him to preach nothing except repentance; that was sufficient."

"But how did he know what to say?"

"Neither take ye thought beforehand what ye shall say, but treasure up in your mind continually the words of life, and it shall be given you in the very hour that portion that shall be meted out unto every man."

"Well—uh—so good meeting you, Brother Smith."

JOE and I went outside. "Stay here, Joe; I'll bring the car." That took some doing, because our ward was leaving and Redwood Second was arriving. When I pulled up by the entrance, Joe wasn't there. I looked inside, outside, everywhere, even in the inside outhouse. He wasn't around. So I figured he'd caught a ride with someone else.

And that's the last I saw of Joseph Smith. Next week at church old Sister Snyder hurried up to me, walking briskly without a limp. When we shook hands I was startled. The hand was no longer an iron claw, but supple, no lumps at the joints. The brown age spots had vanished. Her eyes sparkled. She looked years younger.

"Oh, how I wish you would thank Brother Smith for me!" she gushed. "The instant he took my hands. . . ."

Take it or leave it. Doctors can't explain spontaneous remission. They call such experiences "anecdotal," without scientific bearing. So there can be no medical verification, no double-blind study. And Sister Snyder is prone to gush. □

1. Keith Norman, "How Long, O Lord? The Delay of Parousia in Mormonism," *SUNSTONE* 8 (January-April 1983): 49-58.