
Redemption: The Treasure Quest and the Wandering Soul

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Introduction

THE HISTORY OF the Latter Day Saint movement is haunted by a specter that refuses to rest in peace: Joseph Smith's involvement in hunting for buried treasure. The treasure quest is partially responsible for the "prophet paradox" as Jan Shipps described it: two completely different versions of Joseph Smith in the historical record: first, a con-man and diabolical necromancer deeply engaged in folk-magic, and second, a religious genius believed by millions to be a prophet of God who was only marginally influenced by folk-magic in his youth.¹ A contributing factor to this problem is that, for two centuries, we have accepted these as the only available options for the role that the treasure quest may have played in this religious leader's life. Thus, Mormon studies have been trapped in a dichotomy. Recent research has shown that among Europe's treasure hunters, there was a spiritual motivation for participating in the treasure quest: that of an act of Christian charity on behalf of souls trapped in purgatory by economic sins committed in life. According to this belief, a person who acquired wealth through sinful means or used it uncharitably in life could be trapped in a purgatorial state after death. The living could help God redeem this soul from purgatory by locating the wealth the condemned soul had misused and sequestered in life. This allowed the dead to engage posthumously in charity and enabled the treasure hunter to use the wealth in the manner that the wandering soul should have used it during mortality.

This article is an ethnographic analysis describing how various groups viewed and described the treasure hunt across ethnic and religious boundaries. Among the Teutonic settlers of early America, the religiously optimistic and spiritual German and Dutch Pietists as well as some early Evangelical Christians saw the treasure quest as a form of mutual charity between the poor and wandering souls trapped in a purgatorial state by economic sins. In contrast, the religiously orthodox and spiritu-

1. Jan Shipps, "The Prophet Puzzle," *The New Mormon History: Revisionist Essays on the Past*, ed. by Michael Quinn, (Salt Lake City, Utah: Signature Books, 1992), 53-74.

ally pessimistic paradigm descending from Puritanism saw it as witchcraft, while the more skeptically minded saw it as fraud. By using the New Englanders' representations of the treasure quest, it is possible to demonstrate how they misdescribed that which they did not observe by imagining the activities of treasure hunters through the labels of witchcraft and fraud. The article also discusses some obvious parallels between the Smith family's tradition of treasure hunting and how it was practiced among those who saw it as a form of folk-Christianity. By comparing descriptions of the Smith treasure quest to that of religiously motivated treasure quests, it is possible to demonstrate that this tradition likely impacted the Smith family's folk-Christianity and spirituality and calls into question the reliability of accounts that include witchcraft allegations.

The Treasure Quest: The Redemption for the Wandering Soul

Ronald W. Walker and Alan Taylor first proposed the idea that the treasure quests might have been a form of folk-Christianity as early as 1984.² This idea has recently received renewed attention from the German researcher Johannes Dillinger, who focuses on the treasure quest as part of his research on magic, witchcraft and religion.³ Dillinger ultimately decided that whether or not Smith was a treasure-con or a prankster was "of no importance," as Smith ultimately took the treasure quest back to its spiritual roots.⁴ Dillinger's writings have allowed scholars to develop an understanding of how many treasure hunters viewed themselves, allowing historians to be less reliant on the perspectives of hostile outsiders who viewed the practice as demonic necromancy and fraud.

Many elements of treasure hunting suggest that the early modern treasure quest developed out of a folk-adaption of the relic-quest of Christian saints and martyrs. In this relic-quest, the hunters searched the Holy Land for the remains and relics of martyrs and saints of the early church, guided by signs like the characteristic blue flames emanating from the treasure.⁵ Dillinger tells us that, according to tradition,

2. Alan Taylor, "Rediscovering the Context of Joseph Smith's Treasure Seeking," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 19, no. 4 (1986); Alan Taylor, "The Early Republic's Supernatural Economy," 22-5; Ronald W. Walker, "The Persisting Idea of American Treasure Hunting," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 24, no. 4 (1984): 451-2, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol24/iss4/4>.

3. For example, Johannes Dillinger, "Treasure Hunters Magic," in *Magical Treasure Hunting in Europe and North America: A History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Johannes Dillinger, "The Good Magicians: Treasure Hunting in Early Modern Germany," in *Everyday Magic in Early Modern Europe* (Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2015); Johannes Dillinger, "The Divining Rod: Origins, Explanations, and Uses in the Thirteenth to Eighteenth Centuries," in *Contesting Orthodoxy in Medieval and Modern Europe: Heresy, Magic and Witchcraft*, ed. by Luise Nyholm Kallestrup & Raisa Maria Toivo. (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

4. Dillinger, *Magical Treasure Hunting in Europe and North America*, 178.

5. Dillinger, 50.

that untold sums of gold had been hidden in the earth by some extinct tribes of Indians or highwaymen.²¹²

In this description of Stowell's involvement in the treasure quest is seen the association between treasure hunting and the original Dutch stock exchange in New York that may also be found in Hawthorne's and Irving's tales. The editor of the *Bainbridge Republican* has also slipped in details relevant to the treasure hunt. The fact that the treasure was buried by Indians (non-Christians) or highwaymen (thieves), people who would need redemption according to the folk-Christian worldview. The editor has also slipped in the fact that treasure hunting was a faith as well as a (spiritual) practice and goes on to accuse Stowell of participating in an animal sacrifice with Joseph Smith and praying to demons. The editor has demonized Stowell's treasure hunt the same way that authors like Hawthorne, Thompson, Irving, and others have done toward Teutonic-Americans. The psychological process of projecting religious fears and paranoias onto unorthodox religious practices is the same in both examples. It is the process utilized centuries before by Heinrich Kramer when he first introduced the concept of the diabolical witch.

The implication this holds for Mormon studies is that descriptions of Joseph Smith's treasure quests need to be reevaluated in accordance with the failure of New Englander chroniclers to accurately describe treasure hunters' activities. Smith's neighbors were likely utilizing the same psychological process to misdescribe what they imagined he did rather than what they saw him do. Even those neighbors, like Willard Chase and William Stafford, who had been involved in treasure hunting, managed to perform this act of mental acrobatics by limiting their descriptions of Smith's allegedly diabolical acts to particular instances when they were not present. As Ann Taves astutely observed, the account of the treasure hunt in the Willard Chase affidavit "is at best third hand."²¹³ It is incriminating that although Willard Chase and William Stafford had hunted treasure, they did not bother to describe incriminating accounts of treasure quests with Joseph Smith that they had participated in. Instead, they described what they imagine happened, or perhaps heard what others claim happened at treasure quests they did not personally witness.

Conclusion

The spiritual practice of the treasure quest brought to early America by Teutonic settlers in the middle colonies clearly impacted the ritual as practiced by Joseph Smith, Jr. It also deeply impacted his religious thought and what he described as his

212. *Bainbridge (NY) Republican*, "Bainbridge (NY) Republican, 23 August 1877," in *Early Mormon Documents*, vol. 4, 138.

213. Ann Taves, *Revelatory Events: The Case Studies of the Emergence of New Spiritual Paths*, (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016), 57.

visionary experiences. In the context of the Second Great Awakening, it is difficult to find an example of a religious community in which he may have been exposed to the idea of proxy ritual on behalf of the dead or the idea of a state between death and judgment. Discussing the fate of the righteous but unbaptized, Smith said, "Is there no chance for escape? Sectarianism answers none!"²¹⁴ In an environment where Catholics were few but treasure hunters many, the folk-Christian practice of redeeming the dead is his most likely initial exposure to the dead and living as a common body, engaged in acts of charity across the divide. His thoughts on the importance of the relationship between the living and the dead seem to reflect this influence, "without us they could not be made perfect nor we without them... This is the spirit of Elijah that we redeem our dead & connect ourselves [to those] which are in heaven."²¹⁵ Additionally the angel Moroni is a clear avatar for the wandering soul, as the ghost/angel of a dead prophet returning to guide Smith to a religious record on golden plates. The primary difference between Moroni and other treasure ghosts is that Moroni's treasure is a doctrinal deposit, allegedly for the redemption of the world, rather than for the salvation of the treasure hunter and the redemption of the wandering soul.²¹⁶ Additionally, Moroni is not described as being in a purgatorial state. Nonetheless, the similarity is striking. This evidence would suggest that Smith's involvement in the treasure quest could have been more complicated than simple material gain. Indeed, if he was a believer in the treasure quest then his involvement was perhaps noble in intent and an act of genuine faith.

This religious motivation for the treasure quest seems to suggest an important missing piece in resolving the prophet paradox. It is clear that unusually gifted Yankees like Washington Irving and Nathaniel Hawthorne misdescribed the motivations and behaviors of treasure hunters, writing about them as witches, necromancers, and frauds. Since these two and others impacted the way most early Yankees thought about treasure hunting, this story of early Mormonism seems to offer a new interpretation: that Joseph Smith's Yankee neighbors were engaged in the same psychological processes that Irving and Hawthorne had used to misdescribe the treasure quest as had been practiced by many early Teutonic-Americans. They placed them instead within their own cultural paradigm's demonization of the treasure quest. Antagonistic sources of information on this aspect of Smith's life are unreliable in terms of ethnographic accuracy. In fact, it might be safe to say that these allegations are constructed through projecting preconceived schemas and paradigms of treasure hunting as witchcraft and fraud onto those who practiced it as a means by which the dead and the living could engage in mutual acts of benevolence. When

214. Quoted in RoseAnn Benson, *Alexander Campbell and Joseph Smith: 19th-Century Restorationists* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2017), 331.

215. Benson, 329.

216. Dillinger, 177.

analyzing this part of Joseph Smith's life, it is crucial to think critically about sources and the cultural baggage that they imposed onto descriptions of others' activities. By evaluating sources critically within a larger cultural environment, the specter of Joseph Smith as the quintessential necromancer might be put to rest. In so doing, the possibility exists of seeing a young man exploring benevolent interaction between the living and the dead through an overlooked and improperly disparaged form of folk-Christianity.

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