

A PATHWAY TO PROPHETHOOD: JOSEPH SMITH JUNIOR
AS RODSMAN, VILLAGE SEER, AND
JUDEO-CHRISTIAN PROPHET

by

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ABSTRACT

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Joseph Smith Junior, founder of the Mormon faith, presented himself to America and the world as a prophet with the same powers as the widely known prophetic figures of the Bible. Like Moses and Elijah, he made God's will known to humankind. Before assuming this role, Smith had used divining rods and then seer stones to find underground water, buried treasure, lost items, and stray livestock. This thesis charts Joseph Smith's progression from rodsman to seer to prophet.

For the most part, I present Joseph Smith's divinatory development as he himself experienced it. Dowsing with a rod, seeing things in stones, and receiving heavenly revelations were as real to Smith as harvesting wheat. In order to understand his progression from rodsman to seer to prophet, one must first understand his worldview. The mental universe of early American

water witches and village seers forms one of the historical and cultural contexts in which Joseph Smith developed his divinatory abilities.

(397 pages)

The thesis that Joseph Smith progressed from rodsman to seer to prophet does not depend on the view one takes of him. Those who accept him as conduit for God's word will see his development in terms of providence and divine revelation. Those who accept Joseph as a deluded but sincere religious leader will see his development in terms of a progression that made sense to him within his culture and personal belief system. Those who consider Joseph a fraud—whether pious or conniving—will see his progression as a series of logical moves in a hidden agenda. And, finally, that class of evangelistic Christians who prefer to view Mormonism as a Satanic dispensation may view Joseph's divinatory development as an objective reality by substituting Satan for God as the dispenser of Joseph's gifts. Regardless of one's viewpoint, the central thesis holds.

Joseph would continued to grow in prophetic power. He claimed that on 3 April 1836, in connection with the dedication of the Kirtland temple, the prophet Elijah appeared and gave Joseph special "keys" by which he could "ask the Lord and receive an answer."¹⁶ With the ability to receive revelation at any time, Joseph had perfected prophecy. Toward the end of his life, he would progress through another series of roles. In July of 1843 he announced, "I will advance from prophet to priest & then to King."¹⁷ Two months later, Joseph was anointed

¹⁶ HC, 4:404; Ehat and Cook, comps. and eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 53-54n19.

¹⁷ See the accounts of this statement given in Ehat and Cook, comps. and eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 233-34. See also Melodie Moench Charles, "Joseph Smith: Prophet, Priest, and King," *Task Papers in LDS History*, no. 25 (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Historical Department, History Division, 1978).