

Learning About the Founding of Mormonism from Jon Krakauer (And Other Fallacies)

July 30, 2012 by [Stephen Smoot](#)

I like to consider myself a fairly open-minded guy. After all, I am studying history (particularly religious history) as my college major, which has exposed me a plethora of divergent world views. I know what it feels like to be an outsider of a religion looking in, so I often cut people slack when they approach Mormonism from perhaps not the greatest vantage.

That said, I have some serious misgivings when someone begins [an article](#) on the history of Mormonism like this:

“
And how did Mormonism come to be, anyway? Wasn't it founded only a relatively little while ago by some dude in upstate New York? (Upstate New York?!)

I didn't know the answer to any of these questions.

So, I've begun searching for answers.

My first stop, which which all the information below comes from, was John Krakauer's 2003 book [Under The Banner Of Heaven: A Story Of Violent Faith](#).

Yikes! There's a big red flag right there. Allow me to explain. Jon Krakauer has penned a popular, yet highly questionable book on Mormonism. The punchline to Krakauer's book is something along the lines of: "Mormonism, an inherently violent faith, is a shining example of how religious fundamentalism is dangerous, and will lead to killing people."

There are so many problems with Krakauer's book that to enumerate them here would take some considerable time. So instead I would direct the reader to this useful [review](#) of Krakauer's book by Craig Foster. (Also don't forget the Church's [posted review](#) on the LDS Newsroom website.)

But enough about Krakauer. Let's take a look at what our friend Henry Blodget has written. His comments will be quoted, followed by my own thoughts interspersed.

“ The guy who founded Mormonism, Joseph Smith, was a 24-year self-professed psychic who lived in Palmyra, in upstate New York.

Contrary to popular belief, prophets are not mind-readers. Furthermore, I am unaware of any place where Joseph Smith professed himself to be a “psychic”. He did proclaim himself to a prophet, seer, revelator, and an apostle of Jesus Christ. If Mr. Blodget would be so kind as to provide a source for Joseph Smith's self-profession as a “psychic”, we would be much obliged.

“ In 1826, Smith was convicted of fraud for pretending he could use “seer” stones to figure out where a lost cache of silver was (he didn't)

Actually, Joseph Smith was never “convicted” of anything. The 1826 preliminary “examination” (as the court bill terms it) was to determine if there were grounds

for accusing Smith of defrauding one Josiah Stowell (one of Joseph Smith's earliest followers, who, incidentally, testified on Joseph Smith's behalf at the examination). And far from conviction, historian Gordon Madsen, after an exhaustive evaluation of the incident, concludes that "the evidence thus far available about the 1826 trial before Justice Neely leads to the inescapable conclusion that Joseph Smith was acquitted." (See [here](#) for more details.)

" As Smith and his followers later described it, in 1823, when Smith was 17, a few years before the fraud conviction, he was visited by an angel named Moroni, who had quite a story to tell.

Again, there was never any "fraud conviction".

" Smith had already met Hale (and, Krakauer implies, taken a liking to her). Smith asked Hale's father repeatedly to let her marry him. The father refused—on account of Smith having been convicted of fraud. Smith persuaded Emma to elope with him.

Again with the "fraud conviction" claim. And Isaac Hale's refusal to allow Joseph to marry Emma was not because of a non-existent "fraud conviction" but because of his disbelief in Joseph's supernatural claims to seeing angels, being given golden plates, and using a seer stone.

" Several of Smith's followers later said they saw and held the plates, which had "Egyptian" characters on them. The plates have since disappeared.

If we are going for accuracy here, as implied by Mr. Blodgett's quotation marks, then we must insist that the plates contained "reformed Egyptian", as per the Book of Mormon's own claims (Mormon 9:32).

" Smith said the angel, Moroni, had also given him special glasses that

allowed him to “read” the characters on the plates. Using these magic “interpreters,” he transcribed 116 pages of the story they told. Then, a neighbor whose wife was skeptical that Smith was actually “translating” anything borrowed the manuscript to persuade her. The manuscript disappeared. The prevailing theory is that the neighbor’s wife, furious that her husband was being taken in by a con man, destroyed it.

Reading this passage reminds me of the wonderful [“Blog” of “Unnecessary” Quotation Marks](#). Why the quotation marks over “read”? Yes, Joseph Smith did in fact claim to be able to “read” the characters on the plates. Why the quotation marks around “translating”, when Joseph Smith plainly said he was doing such. And it is unnecessary to put quotation marks around “interpreters” when the Book of Mormon matter-of-factly describes them as such (e.g. Mosiah 8:13, 19; Mosiah 28:20). There is nothing mysterious or esoteric about these things. Perhaps Mr. Blodget is engaging in the old [“scare quote”](#) tactic. We can only surmise.

“*Smith prayed. The angel gave him another chance. The following year, 1828, Moroni gave him the plates back—but not the magic glasses. So, this time, Smith used one of his favorite “seer” stones.*

The one place where it would have been good for Mr. Blodget to use quotation marks would have been “magic glasses”, since neither Joseph Smith nor anyone else associated with the coming forth of the Book of Mormon ever identifies the instrument used by the Prophet with such a deliberately dismissive and derisive description. It is strictly made up by second hand commentators (usually hostile or skeptical) who want to cast mockery or suspicion upon the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. (The German magazine *Der Spiegel* at least had the decency to use quotation marks around “Propheten-Brille”, or “Prophet-Glasses”, when it recently described the instrument used by Joseph Smith, the proper name of which, according to Joseph Smith’s autobiographical account of the recovery of the Book of Mormon, is the *Urim and Thummim*.)

“

The words that Joseph Smith dictated while staring at a rock in a hat became "The Book Of Mormon," which Smith immediately self-published.

Besides the two obvious facts that the Book of Mormon was published almost 9 months after the translation was complete, and was published by local printer E. B. Grandin, and not Joseph Smith himself, I don't see much to object to in this statement.

" Smith was broke and couldn't pay the \$3,000 printing tab—so he told his neighbor that God ordered the neighbor to pay the bill. This neighbor was the one whose wife had freaked out about the original manuscript (she had since grown so exasperated that she had divorced him). Smith told the neighbor that God had threatened the neighbor with "misery," including the "destruction of thyself and property" if the neighbor refused. The neighbor sold his farm and paid the bill.

This neighbor happens to have a name, namely, Martin Harris, who not only testified to his dying day that he had seen the plates and was visited by the angel Moroni, but was one of Joseph Smith's earliest and most dedicated followers. Even when he was excommunicated from the Church for a while, and had serious disagreements with Joseph Smith on a number of matters, Harris continued to maintain his testimony of the authenticity of the Book of Mormon. Mr. Blodget would like his readers to get the impression that Harris was something of a sorry victim to Smith's fraud, when in fact Harris was anything but.

" First, although one's first instinct is obviously to howl with laughter at the fact that an entire religion is based on a book written by a self-professed psychic staring into a hat, this "genesis" story probably isn't all that much more ridiculous than the stories and texts involved in the founding of many other religions.

We again ask where Joseph Smith ever professed himself to be a "psychic".

“
Third, Joseph Smith would later be called a “religious genius,” and if the history of Mormonism reveals anything it’s that the religion would never have had a leg to stand on if it weren’t for his vast powers of persuasion and promotion.

Now here is a claim we can directly test. It is common to attribute Mormonism’s early success to the charisma and charm of Joseph Smith. Entire biographies of Smith have been written with that very assumption in mind. Unfortunately, however, this claim breaks down really fast. It is true that Joseph Smith was by all accounts charismatic and a powerful leader. The problem, however, is that most converts of Mormonism in the early years of the Church did not witness that charisma until *after* their conversion. Thousands upon thousands of Mormon converts came into Mormonism from Great Britain, Canada, and vast reaches of the eastern United States based not on their exposure to Joseph Smith’s “power of persuasion and promotion”, but rather on a conviction of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon after having read the book for themselves. Joseph Smith himself did precious little missionary work. Instead, he sent forth missionaries armed with his new book of scripture and implored objective and sincere seekers of truth to read the book for themselves (something which a part of me doubts Mr. Blodget has bothered to do) and seek confirmation from God as to its divinity. The case of early Mormon leader Parley P. Pratt is instructive, who recounts in his autobiography how he converted to Mormonism after an intensive reading of the Book of Mormon. It would be several weeks after his conversion until he would meet Joseph Smith for himself. Pratt’s account is typical for most early converts to Mormonism. As such, can we really pin the success of early Mormonism on Joseph Smith’s salesmanship abilities? The weight of historical evidence strongly suggests that we cannot.

After all of this, Mr. Blodget concludes his article with a brusque: “So that’s how Mormonism began.”.

Well, not really. Besides the information he has omitted, such as the events surrounding the restoration of the Priesthood and the experience of the

witnesses of the Book of Mormon, as we have seen, Krakauer (from whom Mr. Blodget takes his information) is a notoriously unreliable source to draw from. This account of the founding of Mormonism from Mr. Blodget is highly garbled and unnecessarily negative. We would hope that Mr. Blodget does not continue this methodology for his next installment on the history of the Book of Mormon.

(A quick tip for Mr. Blodget would be to actually “read” the Book of Mormon itself, if he has not already done so, before he commits to providing a commentary on its contents.)

Addendum:

Since Mr. Blodget asks if there “is there an important other side to these stories” and “what should people know about Mormons and Mormonism?”, I humbly submit the following.

1. To get a more balanced view (or, as Mr. Blodget describes it, the “other side”) of the history of Mormonism from someone other than an agnostic/atheist critic of religion (Krakauer), I would suggest the minimum are necessary sources:

Matthew Bowman, *The Mormon People: The Making of an American Faith* (New York, NY: Random House, 2012)

Richard Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005)

Terryl Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002)

That should give plenty of stuff for Mr. Blodget to work with. Of course, if Mr. Blodget is feeling especially bold, he can even go directly to the primary sources surrounding the founding of Mormonism themselves, and not have to rely on secondary commentary. For example, he could examine the handy *Joseph Smith Papers Project*, located [online](#) and in print. There is also a very helpful collection of primary documents related to the rise of early Mormonism as collected in the

volume *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestation, 1820-1844*, ed. John W. Welch (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2005). And let's not forget the Church's own unique scriptures, including the [Book of Mormon](#), the [Doctrine and Covenants](#), and the [Pearl of Great Price](#), all of which contain the essential information on the theology and history of early Mormonism. But wait, there's more! The hefty historical material found in both the multi-volume *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* and accompanying multi-volume *Comprehensive History of the Church* is essential reading on the history of Mormonism. Add to that the scores of both primary documents and secondary commentary published by [BYU Studies](#), the [Journal of Mormon History](#), and [Dialogue](#), to name just a few.

2. The most straightforward answer to Mr. Blodget's second question would be to direct his attention to [Mormon.org](#), where scores of Mormons tell, in their own words, "what should people know about Mormons and Mormonism". How could he go wrong? Who better to answer this question than, ya know, *actual Mormons*?

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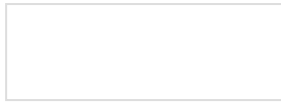
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