The puzzle at the heart of Mormonism

Historian Richard Lyman Bushman investigates his own tradition’s most mysterious miracle.

by Grant Wacker in the September 2024 issue
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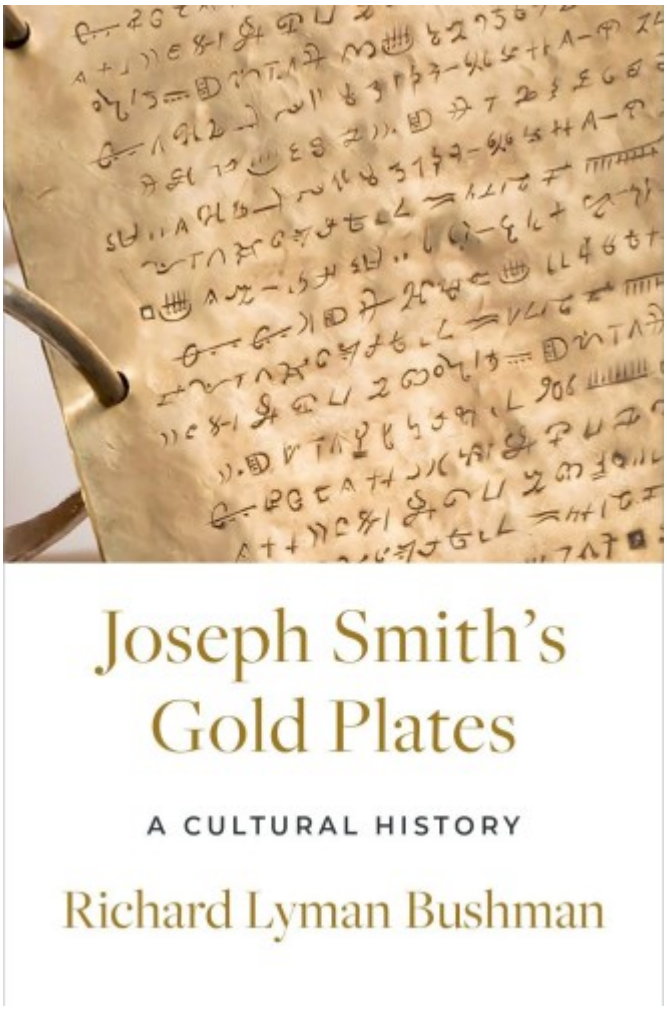

Joseph Smith’s Gold Plates

A Cultural History

By Richard Lyman Bushman
Oxford University Press
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Most creation stories are shrouded in mists of ambiguity and sometimes bitter controversy. Not this one. With remarkable unanimity, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints trace their origin to a cluster of supernatural events that took place in the 1820s in or near Palmyra, New York. Today, just two centuries later, they claim 7 million followers in the United States and Canada, another 10 million around the world, and 100,000 short- and long-term missionaries everywhere.

Figuring out how and why this movement, once fiercely countercultural, grew so fast and spread so widely invites multiple explanations. But one of them is believers' unwavering conviction that divine interventions manifested themselves right from the start. Richard Lyman Bushman, a Latter-day Saint and professor emeritus of history at Columbia University, tells this story with both the warm heart of an insider and the cool eye of an outsider. Putting the two perspectives together, as he does, is a remarkable feat, brilliantly executed.

Insiders' creation narrative runs like this: in the spring of 1820, in the "First Vision," God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son informed 14-year-old Joseph Smith Jr. that all existing sects were wrong. He should join none and await further instructions. Those came soon enough.

Sometime during the night of September 21–22, 1823, the angel Moroni appeared to the now 17-year-old Smith in his parents' crowded cabin. Moroni instructed him to hike a couple of miles to a grassy knob, where a stack of golden plates—eight inches long, six inches wide, and several inches thick—was buried. The following morning, Smith located the plates but couldn't pry them out of the ground. He later learned that Moroni had thwarted him because he viewed the "Golden Bible" as an artifact with monetary rather than spiritual value.

Four years later, Moroni enabled Smith to retrieve the plates. Smith found that they were covered with illegible engravings, but spectacles that had been buried with the plates empowered him to translate the characters into English. Moroni instructed Smith to complete the translation.

The text that resulted detailed the story of the tradition's birth in ancient Israel, migration across the ocean, flourishing in the New World for centuries, and, finally, self-destruction in intramural violence in the fourth century. Smith completed the work in a scant 18 months. In 1830, the text was published in a 584-page volume called the Book of Mormon.

And the plates? In 1829, after Smith finished the translation, Moroni took them back, never to be seen again by Smith or any other mortal eye. But the story does not end there. Bushman argues that in LDS culture, the absent plates functioned very much as the resurrection did for Protestants and the Eucharist for Catholics: a presupposition of daily life as well as the life of the church.

Besides the plates' powerful role in LDS experience, they figured prominently in popular culture too. Responses ranged from reverence to respect to amusement to fear to derision. Bushman surveys this gamut of reactions as they unfolded in a variety of settings and media forms—including attacks, defenses, poetry, drama, fiction, sculpture, and science. Even cartoons make the cut.

With meticulous documentation in primary and secondary sources, Bushman projects several themes. One is the power of personal testimony. Just as many Christians found apologetic ammunition in the affirmations of the witnesses at the tomb, Latter-day Saints found it in the affirmations of three men who saw the plates in a visionary experience, and another eight who later "hefted" them. Though some of the witnesses later wavered in their allegiance to Smith or to the church, none ever backtracked about the reality of the plates. Experience counted.

A second theme is how the plates offered a means for navigating between sharply different registers of authority. One was the authority of the natural, symbolized by Charles Darwin and biblical higher critics. The other was the authority of the supernatural, symbolized by Dwight L. Moody and biblical fundamentalists. The plates were not quite earthly, yet not quite heavenly either. The label "Golden Bible" says it all: *golden* denotes the culture's formula for getting rich with little work, while *Bible* denotes things everlasting.

Third, Bushman emphasizes Smith's uniqueness as the only prophet who claimed to translate revealed words from one medium to another—in this case, from golden plates to the printed page. That peculiarity set him "apart from the other prophetic voices of his time," Bushman argues. "Ann Lee, Nat Turner, Orestes Brownson,

Charles Finney, and Ralph Emerson called on the nation through sermons, orations, essays, and revelations. Not so for Smith." He alone claimed to retrieve his message from the ground and use supernatural tools to translate it into the parlance of the pews.

Yet direct revelation, however acquired, often came with a price. Lee gave up sex and family, Turner took sword in hand, and Finney swapped the courtroom for the sanctuary when the Holy Spirit convulsed his body with what he later described as "waves and waves of liquid love." For Brownson and Emerson, the messaging was more subtle but no less compelling. It fired their energies for new causes that altered the course of their lives. For Smith, the price was even higher. In 1844, a mob, fearful of Latter-day Saints' growing power, murdered him in cold blood.

Finally, Bushman raises the question of origins. How did the tradition (or legend, to outsiders) of the plates emerge? Why did it persist? What functions did it fill? Bushman affirms that Smith had no frame of reference for understanding what they really were. The idea of buried gold plates that conveyed supernatural revelation was not paralleled anywhere in the surrounding culture. So, where did Smith get it?

Bushman deftly uses the work of religious studies scholars such as Sonia Hazard, Robert Orsi, and Ann Taves to help explain the plates' persistence and functions, but not their origin. He finds very rough parallels in other cultures and religions, but Smith, a comparatively unschooled and untraveled man, knew nothing about those parallels. As a Latter-day Saint, Bushman has to believe that the hand of God served a role, but he resolutely plays by the professional rules of the historian and leaves the question open. The book's final line is telling: "And so their story begins and ends in a puzzle."

Joseph Smith's Gold Plates is not a one-off book. Rather it ranks as a crowning achievement of Bushman's luminous career not only in Latter-day Saint studies but also in the bare-knuckle ring of the secular academy. Now 93 and long retired, Bushman has authored a host of prize-winning works in economic, social, religious, and agricultural history, including the definitive biography *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling.*

Yet Bushman's most enduring legacy for historians who hold religious convictions may lie in his unwavering commitment to his faith tradition alongside his commitment to critical historical inquiry. He reflects:

> A logical path for a Latter-day Saint growing up in the modern world, especially one who became a historian, would be to grow out of my childhood beliefs. The plates would be spiritualized and their meaning made allegorical. But my life did not follow that course. The plates have continued to have a hold on me, and the same is true for other Mormons. . . . The plates imply a world where God is an active agent in human affairs in opposition to the skepticism that has eroded religion for the past two hundred years.

For historians who try to couple the faith commitments of their subjects, as well as themselves, with the critical methods of the academy, Bushman's life and work have modeled a compelling way to do things. We all see through a glass darkly, but for many of us, Mormon and non-Mormon alike, he has helped make that glass more transparent.