

Joseph Smith Through the Eyes of Those Who Knew Him Best



Truman & Ann Madsen

Latter-Day Saint Scholar and Author & BYU Professor of Ancient Scripture

Joseph Smith Lecture

November 13, 2003

Sister Madsen: In Isaiah 43:10, the Lord admonishes us, "Ye are my witnesses."

One day during Truman's first year in graduate school, I came home to our little apartment in Cambridge, Massachusetts to find him sitting on the back steps studying, not Kierkegaard and philosophy, but Joseph Smith. It was not the first time! I'd like to say that I gently said, "Why are you studying Joseph Smith when you have a test on Kierkegaard tomorrow?" but that would be a lie. I think it went more like this, "What in the world are you doing? You can study Joseph Smith later!" I remember his reply to this moment. "Ann, I need to know what Joseph said about the issues I'm studying." Happily, he has never stopped.

Our family feels profound love for the Prophet Joseph Smith because of Truman. For a half century, we have lived with the kind of accounts we will share with you today, it was our dinner table conversation. I will speak for the women, Truman the men.

Brother Madsen: All these first hand witnesses came to life spiritually because Joseph Smith taught them the way to the living Christ.

None of our great leaders and teachers reached heights of influence and joy, even in the midst of affliction, without sharing a dual testimony: (1) that Christ was manifesting himself anew, and (2) that he had raised up Joseph Smith as his restorer, revelator and prophet. Our focus today will be mostly on those who knew him hour by hour for a lifetime, those who were family or like family to him. They knew his foibles, watched his growth, and in the most intimate ways, came to know his mind and his heart.

Sister Madsen: First, Catherine Smith Salisbury, the Prophet's sister.

She told her granddaughter that she was present at home when her brother, Joseph Smith, came in nearly exhausted carrying the package of gold plates from which the Book of Mormon was translated. He was carrying the package clasped to his side with his left hand and arm, and his right hand was badly bruised from knocking down at least three men who had leaped at him from behind bushes or fences as he ran until out of breath. She said he entered the house panting from his extraordinary exertion. "She told me Joseph allowed her to heft the package but not to see the gold, as the angel had forbidden to show them at that period. She said they were very heavy.

She told me her brother Joseph was six feet tall, athletic and fair and loved to wrestle. She said that he was not in the least snobbish but treated all he met with kindness, consideration, and respect; she said that on her rare visits to Nauvoo, the Prophet treated her and her family with great generosity and sent her home laden with food, money, and clothing.

Brother Madsen: As the Church grew, Joseph and Emma, and their immediate family moved, it is estimated, 16 times in 15 years. If anything, these drivings bonded them closer. And Joseph's own father and mother became his first and lasting witnesses. "Do not be disobedient to the heavenly vision," his father said, who was to become Church patriarch. And when he, Joseph Sr., blessed Joseph Jr., he told him that it had been made known that he, Joseph, was a descendent of, and had inherited the mantle of, and was fulfilling the prayers of the ancient Joseph. And he told him, that after his ministry, his memory would be as sweet as the first cluster of the choice ripe grapes.

William said of Joseph's work, and William had his ups and downs in the Church, Joseph was a truthful boy. Why would he be untruthful about the book?

Each of the family spoke of the Book of Mormon. Alvin's last words on his death bed were "be faithful to obtain the record." Hyrum testified to the end of his life that the book was a mirror of the Bible, and a window into heaven. His brother Samuel, who carried the knapsack with the first copies of the book on the first mission, wrote in his journal Book. "How could I doubt what I knew to be true?"

Sister Madsen: His mother, Lucy Mack Smith, spoke often of him, wrote a book about him.

There was a tender concern to share spiritual experiences with each other among the Smiths. The Prophet's mother, reports one instance, "After Joseph returned to Kirtland from his mission to the east, he established a school for the Elders called the school of the prophets and it was kept in an upper room of the house in which Joseph resided [the Whitney store]. The brethren gathered together to witness the manifestations of the power of God. At that time, I was on the farm a short distance from the place where the meeting was held, and my children [meaning her sons, Joseph and Hyrum], being anxious that I should enjoy the meeting, sent a messenger in great haste for me. I went without delay, and shared with the rest the most glorious outpouring of the Spirit that had ever before taken place in the Church. We felt that we had gained a decided victory over the Adversary.

Brother Madsen: Those in that school and in the Hebrew school were being prepared for the huge undertaking of the Kirtland Temple, and its promised outpourings. They speak of the process of covenant-making and of partaking of the sacrament in the pattern of Christ, how the Prophet would lead the discussion, and how each had equal opportunity to speak in turn. Many of them also speak of the trials they were undergoing, and some of those trials Joseph Smith himself imposed on them. For example, Heber C. Kimball records that once they were coming along in a team. And he, Joseph, said, "Drive the team through those two trees." Brother Kimball said there was only room for one team, if that, to go through. He stared at Joseph and Joseph stared back.

"Drive through!" He jerked his reins, popped the whip, and Joseph said, "There, that will do. I only wanted to see you try." [Statement, John Brown, Autobiography of Pioneer John Brown, 1820-1896, John Zimmerman Brown (Salt Lake City: John Z. Brown, 1941), 76.]

Heber C. Kimball, Joseph once said, "This is the man who spoke of humility and obedience as like clay to the hands of the potter." Joseph said, "

He is to me what John was to Jesus. He is my beloved disciple."

Sister Madsen: Emmeline B. Wells, a convert who later married Daniel H. Wells, describes the Prophet as she knew him.

"In his manner he was gentle and kindly, and he was always affectionate to his friends, and at times demonstrative. He was strong and ardent in his nature and valued highly the quality of sincerity in friendship. He was manly to an unusual degree, yet tender-hearted as a woman on occasions. In his tastes, he was literary as well as spiritual, fond of the drama, of music and of poetry. A very dear friend of mine who knew the Prophet intimately . . . [said] that she had known him to shed tears when hearing some specially fine vocal music, particularly old-fashioned songs and ballads. With such noble characteristics it is not strange that he was so intensely beloved."

Brother Madsen: Howard Coray, one of Joseph's faithful scribes, speaks of how Joseph responded to the great and small who approached him. "Stephen A Douglass [the man who aspired to be president of the country] called to see him and ask him some questions. One thing he desired to know, was how he managed to govern a people so diverse, coming from so many different countries with their peculiar manners and customs. 'Well,' said Joseph, 'I simply teach them the truth, and they govern themselves.'

"Among other great men who called to see him was Cyrus Walker, a lawyer of much note; he tried to sound the Prophet, and see how deep he was. [p. 4] Well, it was with Walker, as it had been with all the others, he soon got enough, found Joseph too deep for his lead and line, and gave up the enterprise. Thus it was in every instance that came under my observation: how could we expect it to be otherwise, for any man who had never peered into heaven and seen heavenly things, be a match for one who had had a half a score or more heavenly messengers for teachers?"

Sister Madsen: Eunice Billings Snow knew the Prophet when as a young girl. "During the times of the persecution of the Prophet, . . . he would request my father and mother to come to sing for him." I thought that was interesting, because it wasn't a new thing for him to ask John Taylor to sing to him in Carthage. "They would take me with them and when Joseph found that I could sing a part alone he requested them to bring me. We would sing his favorite hymns, 'When Joseph His Brethren Beheld,' 'Redeemer of Israel,' 'The Spirit of God,' and several others. He would have me sit close to him and laying his hands on my head would say, 'My little sister, you will be able to sing the songs of Zion as long as you desire.'

"I was always very much affected by the spirit, which he manifested. At first I did not know what it was, but my mother told me it was the power which Joseph possessed."

Brother Madsen: Those who clustered around Joseph learned that he was a prophet, but also he taught that nothing had been made known unto him, but what would be made known all saints of the last days, even the least saint as soon as they were prepared to receive. They learned from him some of the modes of inspiration and revelation. Many had come into the Church because of prior religious impressions, but now Joseph taught them that their lives must become fully approved of God, and that each was to receive guidance from Christ himself.

Orson Pratt remembers that the prophet said that by the end of his translations, meaning both the Book of Mormon and the Joseph Smith Translation, he no longer needed the Urim and Thummim. Why? The prophet explained, because by then, he had received the priesthood.

Parley P. Pratt was in the room on several occasions with him as he was dictating revelations and noted that rarely did he backtrack. When he asked about how the Prophet knew he was inspired, he said, "I pray and in due time there comes into my mind such a logical flow of ideas, accompanied by such a burning in my bosom, that I

know they are of God and I dictate them to my secretary." Joseph had been promised that he would be mighty in testimony, and he was.

Sister Madsen: Mary Isabella Horne is one who observed this. A convert from Canada who joined the church there at the same time as John Taylor, she recorded: "the Prophet said that a good and pure woman was a fit companion for angels, and her influence over her associates was unbounded." She testified of the following occurrence which happened in Canada, at the home of a Mrs. Walton, near Toronto.

". . .The Prophet related with great force and power the circumstances connected with the first vision of the Father and the Son and the bringing forth of the Book of Mormon. His face and whole body seemed full of light."

Brother Madsen: Many describe the prophet's trust in children and youth. To Bathsheba Smith, he once said, "Children are the glory, honor and diadem royal of woman." On the one hand he identified with them in their activities and games; so much so that Hyrum sometimes remonstrated with him that it was beneath his dignity. On record, we read about sleigh riding, snowball fights, baseball, footraces, and checkers, games with words, and so on. On the other hand, he taught them the most sacred of Gospel truths and sent them on crucial and sometimes life-threatening missions.

"Leave the boys alone," he would say, when older men wanted to put them out of meetings. "Some of them may give their lives in the cause of Christ."

Sister Madsen: Mercy R. Thompson, the wife of Robert B. Thompson, one of the prophet's hard-working secretaries reports:

"I saw him by the bedside of Emma, his wife, in sickness, exhibiting all the solicitude and sympathy possible for the tenderest of hearts and the most affectionate of natures to feel. And by the deathbed of my beloved companion, I saw him stand in sorrow, reluctantly submitting to the decree of Providence, while the tears of love and sympathy freely flowed. Joseph took charge of the funeral ceremonies, strictly adhering to my husband's wish that there should be no military or other display at his burial as had been but a short time before on the occasion of the burial of Joseph's brother, Don Carlos.

"This indeed was a time of sorrow, but I can never forget the tender sympathy and brotherly kindness he ever showed toward me and my fatherless child. When riding with him and his wife Emma in their carriage I have known him to alight and gather prairie flowers for my little girl."

Brother Madsen: Watching him in his multiple roles, he was president, mayor, head of the Legion, judge, missionary, teacher, city builder, organizer, counselor, husband, father, they had glimpses of his deepest concerns. Wilford Woodruff records him saying, "Would to God that I could unbosom my feelings in the house of my friends. But I never expect to in this life. When others rejoice, I rejoice, when others mourn I mourn." In Liberty Jail, he wrote a letter, which says in effect, "I could not feel as I feel now, if I had not suffered what I had suffered." And he wrote again, toward the end of his life, "As I grow older, my heart grows tenderer for you."

Sister Madsen: One day the Prophet commented on how Emma set such a generous table and a guest said, "Why don't you eat alone at a small table like Napoleon?" Emma replied, "Joseph is a greater man than Napoleon. He can only eat with his friends." Joseph said, "Emma that is the wisest thing I ever heard you say."

The Walker family, like many others bereft and homeless, lived for a time in the Mansion House with Emma and Joseph's family. Their daughter, Lucy, wrote:

"The Prophet Joseph Smith often referred to the feelings that should exist between husbands and wives. . .that they should be bosom companions, the nearest and dearest objects on earth in every sense of the word. He said men must beware how they treat their wives, that they were given them for a holy purpose that the myriads of spirits that were waiting for tabernacles might have pure and healthy bodies." (Life Sketch of Lucy Walker, Ancestry & Descendants of John Walker, Kaysville, Inland Printing, 1953, p.32)

Brother Madsen: Franklin D. Richards reports a day that Joseph and Emma came down from Temple Hill on the muddy slope and their buggy capsized. Neither was badly hurt, but when Joseph came to a meeting that afternoon, he spoke of what Emma meant to him. "The Prophet Joseph remarked in the meeting. . .how he rejoiced in the love of his faithful wife Emma, who had given her hand, her heart and her soul to him in Harmony, Pennsylvania, when first he had been called to the work of the Lord, and had braved all these difficulties with him; and he made this remark, that whatever happened to Emma, he would go, if he had to go to hell, to find her and bring her home, that she might share with him the blessings of his exaltation as she had shared with him his sufferings. He rejoiced greatly in the anticipation of these eternal family relations in the future." (Collected Discourses, Vol.5, Franklin D. Richards, October 5, 1896)

Sister Madsen: Rachel Ivins Grant, a convert from New Jersey, who later married Jedediah Grant. Recalled:

"He was not at home very much. His life was so often sought that he had to be hid up. After he had been in hiding and had come out, he was always so jolly and happy. He would play with the people, and he was always cheerful and happy whenever he would come out. He was different in that respect from Brother Hyrum, who was more sedate, more serious. I thought at the time Hyrum seemed more like a Prophet than Joseph did. You see there was a great deal of sectarianism about me. I thought it was bad to sing or read a newspaper on Sunday."

Bathsheba W. Smith, Wife of George A. Smith, the prophet's cousin, tells us:

"I wish to say that the pictures we see here of the Prophet are not true likenesses. Joseph was a handsome man, and above all he was a noble-appearing man. These pictures do not do him justice, and the best I have seen are little better than caricatures."

Through their lives Hyrum and Joseph were never apart for more than six months. And once, for almost six months, they were together day and night in prison. At the introduction of baptism for the dead in Nauvoo, Joseph baptized Hyrum and then said prophetically in the spirit of covenant "today I weld the link of priesthood that was broken [by Oliver Cowdery], for in life we shall be one and in Death we shall not be separated." Autobiography of John Riggs. HDC 2103 of Bitton, p. 296.

William Taylor records, "Never in all my life have I seen anything more beautiful than the striking example of brotherly love and devotion felt for each other by Joseph and Hyrum. I witnessed this many, many times. No matter how often, or when or where they met, it was always with the same expression of supreme joy. It could not have been otherwise, when both were filled to overflowing with the gift and power of the Holy Ghost! It was kindred spirits meeting!"

Now, out of all that experience, Hyrum said of Joseph, in the last year of Joseph's life: "There were prophets before. But Joseph has the spirit and power of all the prophets."

Sister Madsen: Elizabeth Ann Whitney, wife of Newel K. Whitney, recalled, "One night when the mob were in search of the Prophet, and he had taken refuge in my home, the little children gathered in one of the rooms and prayed, as they often did, that the Prophet might be unmolested and rest there in peace. They all knelt down and prayed earnestly to the Lord and said they would not rise until they had a testimony. Very soon one of the

children rose from her knees,-- saying "I have the spirit, brother Joseph will be safe." The Prophet and Brother and Sister Whitney had been standing at the door and when Joseph heard this, he turned to Bishop Whitney and said, while his eyes were filled with tears: "You need not hide me to-night, I will be perfectly safe."

Brother Madsen: Four of Joseph's close associates became Presidents of the Church, that doesn't include Joseph F. Smith, who was a mere boy the day Joseph and Hyrum left for Carthage.

Brigham said of Joseph (and this is one of many glimpses that demonstrates the depth of their comprehension) that the life of the Restored Church was in living oracles, more so than the scriptures he had restored. Joseph, he said, brought heaven down to earth, and no other man could have gathered such a diverse group of people and guided them into unity, gathering together all truth wherever found "all things in Christ."

John Taylor, looking back, said that he found Joseph not the most schoolish, but the most educated and enlightened man he ever met in America, Europe or elsewhere. He describes Joseph's eyes sparkling with animation as his grasp of the divine plan unfolded. He said Joseph as it were put an "s" on many terms heretofore faintly understood: creations, worlds without number, priesthoods, sacred books, keys, ordinances, degrees of glory. He understood that this undertaking was to create an entire community, a total culture, a nation under divine tutelage.

Wilford Woodruff marveled at Joseph's inclusive vision Of the emerging kingdom of God that would eventually reach to all the human family on both sides of the veil, and he envisioned a glorious Messianic winding up scene. He said, "Joseph's mind expands like Enoch's and only God can comprehend his soul." And near the dedication of the Salt Lake Temple, Wilford Woodruff said, "In all his testimonies to us, the power of God was visibly manifest to the Prophet Joseph Smith."

Lorenzo Snow spoke, after his mission abroad, of Joseph's healing presence, that just to shake his hand or be in his presence was to feel the Spirit of God.

Sister Madsen: AUNT JANE, an AFRO-AMERICAN CONVERT, typifies the witness of thousands who saw the Prophet in life and death:

"We had come afoot, a thousand miles. We lay in bushes, and in barns and outdoors, and traveled until there was a frost just like a snow, and we had to walk on that frost. I could not tell you, but I wanted to go to Brother Joseph.

"I did not talk much to him, but every time he saw me he would say, "God bless you," and pat me on the shoulder. To Sister Emma, he said, 'go and clothe her up, go down to the store and clothe her up.' Sister Emma did. She got me clothes by the bolt. I had everything.

". . . I could not begin to tell you what he was, only this way, he was tall, over six feet; he was a fine, big, noble, beautiful man! He had blue eyes and light hair, and very fine white skin.

When he was killed, I liked to a died myself, I felt so bad. I was sick abed, and the teachers told me.

You don't want to die because he did. He died for us, and now we all want to live and do all the good we can."

Brother Madsen: Heber C. Kimball once said that Joseph's greatest sorrow, amidst all his other afflictions, was his inability to communicate. He said, "I will remark that you will have here with you a few of us that have traveled with him here from the beginning. And we know his trials. And we know that the greatest torment he had, and the greatest mental suffering, was because this people would not live up to their privileges. There were

many things he desired to reveal that we have not learned yet, but he could not do it. He said sometimes he felt pressed upon, as though he was pent up in an acorn shell, and all because the people did not and would not prepare themselves to receive the rich treasures of wisdom and knowledge that he had to impart."

In one of his climactic discourses, the Prophet said, "Knowledge through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is the grand key that unlocks the glories and mysteries of the kingdom of Heaven."

Sister Madsen: We had the rare privilege of serving our mission in New England, which included the birthplace of the Prophet Joseph Smith tucked away in the hills of Vermont. It was, and still is, a sacred place to our family. A granite shaft 38 & 1/2 feet had been raised on a hill to remember each year of the prophet's life. Often missionaries met with us there. Can you imagine a testimony meeting of missionaries who regularly witnessed Joseph Smith's seeing the Father and the Son to the people of New England, sharing with each other that witness in the very spot where the Prophet was born?

I remember distinctly walking silently with about 150 missionaries to a shady glen only a few feet from where he was born. A witness of his goodness, his sacred calling, his reality, came down on me that day with a power that I can never forget.

Perhaps one of the most eloquent testimonies I heard during those years was our eight-year-old daughter, Emily, who took the opportunity to walk to the monument alone each time we visited the place. I remember her saying, one late afternoon as we were about to pull ourselves away, "I wish I could hug the monument!" And then, "I love you, Joseph Smith!"

Emily, now 49, and seven children later, recently wrote: "As a child, newly baptized, I remember how I loved being at the Prophet's birthplace in Vermont. When my father spoke of his beloved 'Joseph' I had a sense of the Prophet so vivid that it was as if he were there. I loved him and I knew he was a prophet. That testimony burned in me then and is undeniable now. It floods over me again whenever I go to South Royalton.

Brother Madsen: Our son, Barney, now a lawyer with four children, told us this week, "I remember in the mission home making a pencil drawing of the Prophet Joseph that Dad included in the mission newsletter. One of the deep impressions I had at the birthplace was that 'out of small things proceedeth that which is great.' Today we see the fulfillment of Moroni's prophecy that Joseph's name would be known for good across the earth. I add my testimony that he truly was God's prophet, that he consecrated his life in the service of Christ and that 'millions shall know Brother Joseph again.'"

Sister Madsen: Our youngest daughter, Mindy remembers: "I was only three and a half when my father was called to be the President in New England, so my memories are not as clear as Barney's and Emily's. I do have one particular memory at the Joseph Smith Birthplace in a crowded room full of missionaries in the Visitor's Center there. It must have been a zone conference. I was sitting on my father's lap and we all sang, 'The Spirit of God Like a Fire is Burning.' I believe that was the first time I ever felt the Spirit."

Brother Madsen: My own grandfather knew firsthand and, over a long ministry, associated with most of those whose recollections we have recalled here today. In my boyhood he poured his memories into me, and that was the beginning of my assurance that the prophet was what the Lord said he was. I now testify that independent of that hearsay, secondhand witness, I have my own firsthand.

I know that one of the things Heber C. Kimball was talking about, when he said that the Prophet yearned to give treasures that the people wouldn't receive was his statement about love. "Until," he said, "we have perfect love", and here you know more of this than many in the Church, "we're liable to fall. But when we have a testimony that our names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life", another way of saying it [is] *a testimony that He has made us His*

, "we have perfect love, and it is impossible for a false Christ to deceive us."

I bear testimony that he lived and lives, as a witness and as a transparent person through whom we may see the living Christ, in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.