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Introduction, Volume 5

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Introduction

Daniel C. Peterson

In the spring or early summer of 1820, "some few days" after his epochal vision of the Father and the Son, the young Joseph Smith gave an account of the experience to a Methodist minister with whom he "happened to be in company." The minister had been active in the "excitement" about religion that inspired Joseph's fateful decision to go alone into the woods near his house to pray. Naïvely, the boy expected his story of a Bible-like divine manifestation to be well received. It was not.

> I was greatly surprised at his behavior; he treated my communication not only lightly, but with great contempt, saying it was all of the devil, that there were no such things as visions or revelations in these days; that all such things had ceased with the apostles, and that there would never be any more of them.[1]

Had the young boy been more worldly or sophisticated, he would not have been surprised. Resistance to the idea of post-biblical revelation has been the standard, mainstream position of Christendom for many centuries now.

I've run across a couple of striking examples of this fact within just the past few weeks, entirely without seeking them. Here, for example, is a passage from Thomas B. Costain's *The Last Plantagenets*. The book is a narrative history of the English monarchy from the birth of Richard II in 1367 to the death

1. Joseph Smith—History 1:21.

of Richard III at the Battle of Bosworth Field on 22 August 1485. Costain (d. 1965), now largely forgotten, was a Canadian-American journalist who, relatively late in life, became a best-selling popular historian and historical novelist.

The setting is the late fourteenth century, amidst the seemingly endless battles of the so-called "Hundred Years War" between France and England, which Costain himself repeatedly describes as pointless and inordinately destructive. Richard II was the ruler of England. Unfortunately, the French king of the time was mentally ill and, often, delusional.

> The state of mind into which Charles VI of France fell at frequent and sudden intervals must have had its effect on his attitude toward the continuation of the war. He now wanted peace as much as Richard. There is every reason to believe that the two monarchs were right and that the war parties which existed in both countries, made up largely of ambitious uncles and strutting nephews as well as the noisy customers of alehouses, were wrong. Only the personal interest of these blustering war panders would be served by continuing the costly war.
>
> An unusual olive branch was sent to Richard by the King of France. A pilgrim from the Holy Land known as Robert the Hermit put in an unexpected appearance at Eltham Castle, escorted by seven horsemen of the French king. It was observed at once that there was a strange glint in his eyes, but it was not until he proceeded to tell his story that his full fanaticism became apparent.[2]

2. Thomas B. Costain, *The Last Plantagenets* (New York: Popular Library, 1963), 170–71.

I don't know what Costain's evidence was for the "strange glint" in the Hermit's eyes, and can well imagine that it reflects nothing more than storyteller's license, but the basis for the verdict of "fanaticism" is immediately apparent: It's the man's claim of revelation:

> The vessel in which he returned from Palestine had been caught in a furious gale. For three days the ship had been driven in the teeth of the wind and all on board were convinced they were lost. But to Robert there appeared an apparition in the clouds, a shining figure like an angel.
>
> "Robert," said the strange visitor from above, with uplifted hand and speaking in a tongue which the pilgrim did not recognize though he had no difficulty in understanding the words, "thou shalt escape this danger. Thou and all with thee for thy sake." The voice went on to explain what he must do. He must seek out the King of France and lay an injunction on him to bring about a peace with England. "This war," continued the heavenly visitor, "has raged too long—Woe unto such as will not hear thee."[3]

Now, on the face of it, the apparent angel's advice seems reasonable enough. Indeed, Thomas Costain himself has already effectively endorsed it several times by this point. And it's not hard to imagine that it might come from a divine source. "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace," wrote the prophet Isaiah (52:7). "Blessed are the peacemakers," said the Savior himself (Matthew 5:9).

But perhaps Thomas Costain was hostile to all religion? No. It doesn't seem so. According to his Wikipedia biography—not,

3. Costain, *The Last Plantagenets*, 171.

perhaps, the most august of sources, but, so far as I can see, lacking any motivation to lie on this issue—he was raised as a Baptist, and was reported in the 1953 issue of *Current Biography* to be an active member of the Episcopal Church.[4] More to the point, perhaps, among his earliest books was a 1943 popular biography of Joshua, the successor of Moses to the leadership of the biblical Hebrews. And one of his most popular novels, *The Silver Chalice* (1952), centers on the "Holy Grail" and features such characters as the evangelist Luke, Joseph of Arimathea, the Gnostic arch-heretic Simon Magus (Acts 8:9–24) and his companion Helena, and the apostle Peter.

It seems that Thomas Costain was comfortable enough with the biblical accounts and with ancient miracles. But post-biblical revelations weren't even to be considered.

> As soon as the apparition dissolved from sight, the winds ceased and a gentle breeze took the vessel to Genoa. Robert went to Avignon and saw the Pope, who instructed him to reach the King of France at once. The French royal uncles scoffed at the pilgrim and his story, so Robert had left France and made his way to England. Richard listened attentively to the hermit's tale. He and John of Gaunt seemed ready to accept it as true, but Thomas of Woodstock, echoed by the Earl of Arundel, refused to believe a word of it. The two war leaders called the story the ravings of a madman and demanded that no credence be placed in it.[5]

Costain's account of the Earl of Arundel, and even more so of Thomas of Woodstock (King Richard's uncle), portrays the two men as cynical and self-serving traitors. His opinion was plainly shared by Richard II himself, who had them executed and murdered, respectively, in 1397. But when he's confronted

4. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_B._Costain.
5. Costain, *The Last Plantagenets*, 171.

by the Hermit's message of peace, a message with which he himself is clearly sympathetic, he endorses the position of the two villainous leaders of the English war party. Why? Plainly because the Hermit had claimed revelation.

> For once they were right. Robert the Hermit returned to his home in Normandy and was never heard of again. Fortunately for the cause of peace, however, there were better reasons for pursuing a pacific policy than the visions of a half-crazed pilgrim.[6]

The same curious attitude can be seen in a much greater writer, Charles Dickens (d. 1870). In his relatively brief book *A Child's History of England*, originally published in serial form between 1851 and 1853, Dickens spends a remarkable number of pages on the story of Joan of Arc (Jeanne d'Arc; d. 1431)—who was not only not English, but was a legendarily effective military *opponent* of the English. Manifestly, he likes her very much, as many other writers and composers (including even the cynical agnostic Mark Twain) have done, both before him and since. She was, he says, "religious," "unselfish," and "modest." "They threw her ashes into the river Seine," he says of the French who betrayed her and, despite his own nationality, of the English who executed her, "but they will rise against her murderers on the last day."[7]

Nevertheless, and despite the expressions of Christian piety that punctuate his *Child's History*, Dickens plainly doesn't entertain, even for a moment, the possibility that the visions of St. Margaret, St. Catherine, and St. Michael the Archangel that inspired her, the revelations that enabled her, an obscure teenage peasant girl, to lead the armies of France to repeated victories over the English, might have been real.

6. Costain, *The Last Plantagenets*, 171.

7. Charles Dickens, *Master Humphrey's Clock and A Child's History of England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), 328, 330.

"There is no doubt," writes Dickens, "that Joan believed she saw and heard these things. It is very well known that such delusions are a disease which is not by any means uncommon."[8] There were, he explains, probably images of Michael and St. Catherine and St. Margaret in Joan's village church, and she probably spent too much time there looking at them, and so she began to hear voices and to see the images as if they were real angelic beings.[9] But the voices were "imaginary," mere products of her "fancy," reflective of a "disorder," a "disease."[10] She was, he suggests, probably a little vain, and was seeking attention.[11]

Now, I don't know whether Robert the Hermit really saw an angelic apparition summoning him to "renounce war and proclaim peace" (Doctrine and Covenants 98:16). Perhaps he was, in fact, a half-crazed fanatic with a strange glint in his eye. And perhaps St. Jeanne d'Arc really was mentally ill. At this remove in time, it's impossible to know.

What strikes me, though, is the automatic, reflexive certainty of both Costain and Dickens that the claims to revelation of the two individuals of whom they were writing—people for whom, respectively, Costain ought have had sympathy and Dickens actually did have sympathy—were completely false and indicative of mental disorder.

The last of the Nephite prophets, Moroni, writing in the first quarter of the fifth century A.D., knew that such attitudes would prevail when, centuries after his time, the Book of Mormon came forth to a modern audience. Accordingly, he addressed unbelievers:

> I speak unto you who deny the revelations of God, and say that they are done away, that there are no revelations, nor prophecies, nor gifts, nor healing, nor speak-

8. Dickens, *Master Humphrey's Clock*, 323.
9. Dickens, *Master Humphrey's Clock* 323.
10. Dickens, *Master Humphrey's Clock*, 323, 324, 329.
11. Dickens, *Master Humphrey's Clock*, 323.

> ing with tongues, and the interpretation of tongues; Behold I say unto you, he that denieth these things knoweth not the gospel of Christ; yea, he has not read the scriptures; if so, he does not understand them. For do we not read that God is the same yesterday, today, and forever, and in him there is no variableness neither shadow of changing? (Mormon 9:7–9)

Nonetheless, the Book of Mormon has not, by and large, received the attention that it deserves. For all its potential significance in comparative religions, for all the historical influence that it has undeniably exercised, for all the spiritual value attributed to it by millions of believing Latter-day Saints, it has been left relatively unstudied. The eminent Judaic scholar Jacob Neusner put his finger on perhaps one of the reasons for this odd situation in an article published more than thirty-five years ago. "Among our colleagues," he remarked, "are some who do not really like religion in its living forms, but find it terribly interesting in its dead ones." To take a prominent example, Neusner continues, the Book of Mormon "is available principally for ridicule, but never for study. Religious experience in the third century is fascinating. Religious experience in the twentieth century is frightening or absurd."[12]

This journal exists, to a large extent, because we don't share the attitude to which Professor Neusner alludes. We unabashedly believe in modern-day revelation. And this belief grounds, motivates, and informs *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*. Moreover, we believe that it gives us a unique vantage point even for the study of the Bible—in which, with Thomas Costain and Charles Dickens, we also believe.

As always, my thanks go to those who have donated time and effort to The Interpreter Foundation, as well as those who

12. Jacob Neusner, "Religious Studies: The Next Location," *Bulletin of the Council on the Study of Religion* 8/5 (December 1977): 118.

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