



Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling

By Richard Lyman Bushman

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Founder of the largest indigenous Christian church in American history, Joseph Smith published the 584-page Book of Mormon when he was twenty-three and went on to organize a church, found cities, and attract thousands of followers before his violent death at age thirty-eight. Richard Bushman, an esteemed cultural historian and a practicing Mormon, moves beyond the popular stereotype of Smith as a colorful fraud to explore his personality, his relationships with others, and how he received revelations. An arresting narrative of the birth of the Mormon Church, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* also brilliantly evaluates the prophet's bold contributions to Christian theology and his cultural place in the modern world.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. How should a historian depict a man's life when that man, and his religion, remain a mystery to so many 200 years after his birth? Bushman, an emeritus professor at Columbia University and author of *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, greatly expands on that previous work, filling in many details of the founding prophet of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and carrying the story through to the end of Smith's life. Many continue to view Smith as an enigmatic and controversial figure. Bushman locates him in his historical and cultural context, fleshing out the many nuances of 19th-century American life that produced such a fertile ground for emerging religions. The author, a practicing Mormon, is aware that his book stands in the intersection of faith and scholarship, but does not avoid the problematic aspects of Smith's life and work, such as his practice of polygamy, his early attempts at treasure-seeking and his later political aspirations. In the end, Smith emerges as a genuine American phenomenon, a man driven by inspiration but not unaffected by his cultural context. This is a remarkable book, wonderfully readable and supported by exhaustive research. For anyone interested in the Mormon experience, it will be required reading for years to come. (Oct. 10)

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From [The New Yorker](#)

Joseph Smith claimed that he was visited by an angel who gave him golden plates from which he transcribed the Book of Mormon, and he had organized a church before he was twenty-five. His personal charisma and his administrative genius helped spread Mormonism throughout the Western United States, turning the sect into a legislative federation complete with social and political institutions. There were always those who thought Smith a charlatan and a fanatic, and, in 1844, at the age of thirty-eight, he was fatally shot by an angry mob. Bushman is both an emeritus professor of history at Columbia and a practicing Mormon, and his exhaustive biography carefully treads a path between reverence and objectivity, as when he investigates the phenomenon of "plural marriage"; Smith, in order to establish "a Righteous race . . . upon the Earth," had more than thirty wives.

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From [Booklist](#)

Starred Review Peter Burnett, California's first governor, never converted to Mormonism, but he came away from his encounter with the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith convinced that he had met "much more than an ordinary man" teaching "strange and striking" doctrines. Both the extraordinary man and his highly distinctive doctrines receive illuminating attention in this landmark biography, published to mark the bicentennial of the American prophet's birth. A distinguished Columbia historian, Bushman stresses the boy seer's thoroughly ordinary origins--born to a hard-pressed New England farm family and denied all but the rudiments of a formal education--to emphasize the marvel of the religious revolution he brought about. Beginning with the publication of a new volume of scripture--the Book of Mormon--recounting the resurrected Christ's ministry in ancient America, that revolution eventually produced a dynamic church run by a complex lay ministry and committed to spreading its message worldwide. Though himself a practicing Latter-day Saint (Mormon), Bushman steers clear of hagiography by permitting readers to hear the voices not only of the prophet's loyal followers but also of various skeptics and adversaries. Readers see in particular detail the views of those who rose against Smith during the turbulent final years of his life, when the practice of plural marriage helped stoke a firestorm of religious conflict. Though that storm ended with the prophet's death at the hands of an angry mob, Bushman gives the slain revelator credit for the remarkable durability of the church he left behind. A deft portrait of a deeply controversial figure. Bryce Christensen

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