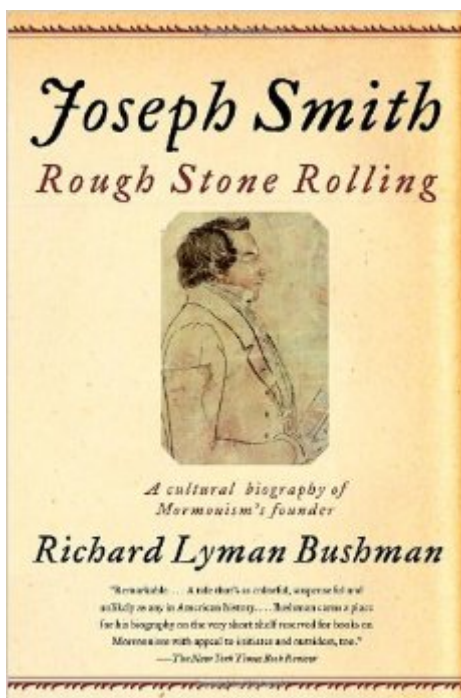


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Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling



Synopsis

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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Desiring some basic understanding of Mormonism, I asked a priest friend from Utah to recommend a book. He said that it is hard to find a good book because writings on Mormonism tend to be either Mormon propaganda or anti-Mormon attacks. He did mention that a lot of people were reading *Under the Banner of Heaven* by Jon Krakauer. It turned out to be a slash-and-burn attack not only on Mormonism, but religion in general. Shortly after reading Krakauer's book, I discovered *Rough Stone Rolling*. What a contrast! And what an amazing accomplishment! As both a practicing Mormon and a Columbia University professor, Dr. Bushman enables an outsider (like myself) to appreciate the life and times of Joseph Smith. Before commenting on *Rough Stone Rolling*, I want to make an obvious (but necessary) disclaimer: As a Catholic I do not accept the basic thesis of

Mormonism - namely, that Jesus founded a Church and then allowed it to fall into apostasy until a nineteenth century American named Joseph Smith restored it. Mormons believe that, with the death of the last apostle, the Church also died. Catholics, by contrast, believe that the pope and bishops are successors of the apostles. With that disclaimer in mind, I must say that Dr. Bushman helped me appreciate the great genius of Joseph Smith. At a time when rationalism was robbing people of a direct experience of God, Smith convincingly presented himself as a prophet and wanted others to have similar revelations from God. But he also recognized the need for authority to prevent individual revelations from fracturing the community. In the process he set up structures very familiar to Catholics: a priesthood, a hierarchy with one final authority and rituals which connect believers to divine mysteries. **Rough Stone Rolling** details the steps involved in the creation of a church that would impact the lives of millions of people. Joseph Smith lived only thirty-eight years, but he had a greater long-term influence than any nineteenth century American. In some ways he was the quintessential American. Emerging from very humble origins, Smith embodies the American ideal of the self-made man. And he had democracy deep his bones: Notwithstanding his extraordinary revelations, he did not put on airs; he wanted all of his follower to receive revelations. Above all, Joseph Smith was a quintessential American in his can-do spirit. Build the heavenly Zion here on earth? No problem. Let's do it right here in Missouri. And when they drove him out of Missouri, he started over again in Illinois with an even bolder vision. That is the American spirit - and Joseph Smith incarnated it to the nth degree. As Bushman brings out in great detail, Joseph Smith not only had faith in his personal revelations; he had great faith in his country and its constitution. Even when that country treated him badly, he kept faith that its institutions would bring him vindication. In the end the legal system and its officers failed him and he died at the hands of a mob while being held in the Carthage, IL, jail. Joseph Smith's life provides much material for reflection. I would like to mention two areas that particularly called my attention. The first relates to Joseph Smith's "can do" spirit. It has a downside: a peculiar blindness to the reality of man's fallen nature (original sin). Bushman describes Smith as someone who underestimated the evil in his enemies, his followers - and himself. It came out most dramatically in the shameful treatment of his wife. He tried to give Emma everything, but in the end he did not give her what he had pledged and what she most desired: Joseph himself. A second question **Rough Stone Rolling** raises is how we as a society accommodate people who have very different beliefs. Can we appeal to a "natural law" which binds everyone? I believe we can. For example, that it is wrong to defraud, break a contract, physically harm or take an innocent human life. Also, I believe, we can argue from the basis of the natural law that marriage is an institution that binds one man and one woman in a life-long and

exclusive union. At the same time, I am concerned that our society is falling into what Pope Benedict called a "dictatorship of relativism." That is, many people have despaired of articulating a natural law applicable to all - and instead feel that the only thing we have left is a kind of mob rule, where matters are decided simply on the basis of who (or what group) is most powerful politically. The life of Joseph Smith - and his continuing influence among Mormons - provides a dramatic test case for these important questions. And it appears that, if we continue to move in the direction of a dictatorship of relativism, Catholics, Mormons and other people of faith, will have many occasions to stand together for the rights of conscience.

I would like to start the review admitting I am not a Mormon. I love biographies of great people in history. I read "No man knows my History" by Fawn Brodie. I came on that book by accident. And I realize from some of the reviews on that Mormons don't like that book much. I thought it was great, but admit that she paints Joseph Smith in a negative light sometimes. But I could still see through enough to see a great man behind her attacks on his character. "Rough Stone Rolling" is the exact opposite of that book. Richard Bushman uses a lot of the same stories but doesn't have the same negative slant. But he still shows that Joseph Smith was not perfect, which I admire. This is the best biography I have ever read. This book takes you all through Joseph Smith's life. From a farmboy in New York who got on his knees and asked God to show him the way, to the man who was gunned down in Carthage a martyr for his calling. If he was a Prophet or not is up for debate. As a Christian I believe that God is real and God can still speak today. Before I read the history of Joseph Smith if someone asked me if he was a prophet, I would have said no. After reading up on the man I would answer that it is not out of the realm of possibility. I believe he believed he was a prophet. I believe that some unexplainable things happened around him and the early Church. The question was he a great man or not has been settled in my mind at least. I think he was a great man. To be tired and feathered and beaten, and still preach that next morning. To take persecutions and imprisonment in stride, to never compromise what you believe even in the face of death. These things are the very definition of a great man. The fact he put people off sometimes because he played with children and liked to wrestle and have fun. I think it just shows a genuine human being. His great love for his people caused many of his mistakes in life. Like the idea of everybody having everything in common, and his business dealings. Everything he did was with his people in mind. He not only talked the talk but walked the walk. I encourage everyone to read this book. If for nothing else than read a well written, entertaining biography of a real person that is more interesting than fiction. Good day.

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