

Maternal Influence

(January 30, 2007)

Last week I described Joseph Smith's Father:

The picture was of a man who

- would not embrace any organized religion
- who as a Universalist believed everyone would be saved
- who waited for the true Church of Jesus to be restored to the earth through his family
- who faced great financial woes
- and battled with the bottle a bit
- and had a penchant for spending not a little time in the search of lost and buried treasures using magic stones, rods, and visions.
- We also mentioned that he was a dreamer whose dreams even wound up somehow in the text of the Book of Mormon.

Tonight we are going to look at another influence on the boy prophet – even his mother, Lucy Mack Smith.

Now there is a lot more information on Joseph Smith's mother than his father.

I am merely going to give you some background on what made her who she was.

Over the course of the year I'll fill in the blanks about her whereabouts, contributions, and views.

There are differences of opinions on whether Joseph Senior and Lucy's marriage was harmonious.

Vogel and Hill say's it wasn't.
And Bushman says it was.

But all three agree that there was certainly religious conflict within the marriage and home.

Like many of you, and like Joseph Junior himself, I know from first-hand experience what it is like to be in a home where the matriarch was religiously inclined and the patriarch was religiously liberal.

There's a certain dynamic that occurs in a home where the parents do not see religion through the same lens.

The point her is to get you to try and imagine how a religiously liberal father and a religiously exuberant and devoted mother would contribute to the make-up of an imaginative son who later called himself "The Prophet."

From the beginning, life was hard on Lucy Mack Smith. In writing about her existence, she spoke primarily about illness and death.

Bushman writes that Lucy measured her "early years not by happy friendships and childish adventures but by deaths and illnesses."

This took its toll on her emotional health.

At nineteen years of age she wrote:

"I was pensive and melancholy, and often in my reflections I thought life was not worth possessing."

I do not mean to infer that Lucy was without God. She came from a family that was extremely devout in their religious appellations.

Her oldest brother, Jason, became a preacher at twenty years old, having sought for spiritual gifts outside of established churches since he was just sixteen. He later established a religious commune in Canada.

When Lucy was just 16, as her two older sisters Lovina and Lovisa were about to die, they spent their last breaths warning bedside listeners on the importance of "preparing for eternity."

Lucy was accustomed to religious differences in the home as her own mother and father seemed to bear the same faith-traits she and her husband Joseph Senior bore in their marriage.

Lucy's mother Lydia, who as a Calvinist was raised in a Deacon's house, joined the Congregational Church at thirty after she married her husband Solomon, who at that time spent his days in failed searches for wealth.

Like the Smith family Lucy would someday join through marriage, Solomon Mack was also a Universalist up until he found the Lord in 1809.

Lucy attributes all the religious piety within her to her mother, however, who at a minimum ensured that her family gathered twice daily for morning and evening prayers.

Lucy's similar dedication to religious practices would greatly influence her own brood years later, especially Joseph Junior.

At nineteen, possibly in response to the depressed state she found herself in, Lucy said in her Biographical Sketches,

“In the midst of the anxiety of my mind, I determined to obtain that which I had heard spoken of from the pulpit - a change of heart.”

Interestingly enough, the Bible never uses such phraseology as change of heart or mighty change of heart, that Lucy does, and that her son Joseph would use in the text of the Book of Mormon (Alma 5:22) years later.

Lucy goes on to say that “I spent much of my time in reading the Bible and praying.” Nevertheless, she was afraid to join any single denomination for fear of offending another.

As devoted as she was to religious practices, Lucy did maintain an attitude that was shared by her husband and the rest of the Smith family.

She said

“If I remain a member of no church, all religious people will say I am of the world; and if I join some one of the different denominations, all the rest will say I am in error. No church will admit that I am right, except the one I am associated.”

While at first glance this may seem to be an indictment on the various Christian Churches at the time, who just “couldn’t get along,” it is also quite revelatory of Lucy Smith’s mind and personality.

Listen to it again.

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Several dominant personality traits of Lucy Mack Smith present themselves time and time again when reading about her life.

They are an almost overwhelming obsession with pleasing God through religious allegiance and a desire to maintain a certain level of social standing with the community around her.

These traits carried over into her marriage to Joseph Smith Senior.

LDS Psychologist C. Jess Grosbeck wrote:

“An overriding theme that emerges from Lucy Mack’s autobiography is perfectionism and moralism surrounding a religious quest that was part of an attempt to save and heal her husband.”

With a history of New England Puritan leanings, a Calvinist mother who raised her, and bouts of anxiety and depression, Lucy was primed for a life of religious obsession – and everything which that entails.

After marrying Joseph Smith Senior and having given birth to three children, Lucy got very, very sick.

Some say it was consumption, some say pneumonia. By its description, some even believe it was a nervous breakdown.

Describing her condition she wrote:

“I continued to grow weaker and weaker, until I could barely endure a footfall on the floor, except in stocking-foot, and no one was allowed to speak in the room above a whisper.”

A Methodist exhorter came to visit and asked her if she was ready to die. She recalls her response in her autobiography:

“I knew not the ways of Christ; besides, there appeared to be a dark and lonely chasm, between myself and the Savior, which I dared not attempt to pass.”

As she laid there in bed she contemplated her death and thought that by

“straining towards the light (which I knew lay just beyond the gloomy veil before me) that I could discover a faint glimmer.”

During that same night, she begged God to spare her life and secretly covenanted that

“if He would let me live I would endeavor to get that religion that would enable me to serve Him right whether it was in the Bible or wherever it might be found even if it was to be obtained from heaven by prayer and faith.”

She then heard a voice speak to her that said,

“Seek, and ye shall find; knock and it shall be opened up to you. Ye believe in God, believe also in me.”

Her recovery began immediately thereafter.

In this recitation of Lucy’s own words, we learn that Joseph Smith’s mother:

- 1) was unsure of her salvation even as she laid at death’s door and in spite of her religious upbringing.
- 2) was visionary, to the point of “seeing a faint glimmer of light from heaven.
- 3) was willing to embrace religion, even

one found outside the Bible if it would enable her to “serve God right” and would spend her life in search of this religion if her life was spared.

- 4) received an audible communication from God.

All of these events and beliefs were well established well before her prophet Son was born.

How do you choose to view these factual portraits of the parents of Joseph Smith?

I am not pretending to say that I am certain as to how they contributed to the make-up of Joseph Junior, but I do admit I think they provide some possible explanations for why he approached religion as he did.

In addition to her religious make-up and moralism, Lucy Mack Smith was, like her husband Joseph Senior and their future son, Joseph Junior, a visionary and a prophetic dreamer.

In 1803 or 1804, when she was greatly troubled by her husband's resistance to organized religion, Lucy “retired to a grove of trees to pray” for her husband to experience a change of heart.

While sleeping later that night, she had a dream of two trees standing in the wind.

According to Lucy, the trees represented her husband and his stubborn brother, Jesse.

From this dream she was able to interpret the future religious state of both men – with her husband becoming flexible to God's truth and her brother in law remaining stiff and immovable to it.

With a father as a stubborn Universalist and a nagging habit for drink and magic, and a mother who secretly covenanted with God to spend her days searching for the “true religion” the family was in need of something no less than a religious savior.

It was in these conditions that Joseph Smith Junior was born, becoming, as it were, the prime candidate in the Smith home to bring them peace.

Jesus obviously hadn't done it for them. They had had Jesus for decades in their families and lives and what did He bring?

Religion couldn't heal them. All it did was bring division!

No, something had to be done and it must have seemed to Joseph Junior like nothing was going to change unless he took steps to make it happen.

In a sense, he made himself their savior

I propose that the Book of Mormon and the establishment of the Church was in part – in part - a response to the immediate needs of Joseph Junior's parents and family.

I think the announcement of seeing a vision of the Lord fit well into the psychological make-up of his mother and I think the announcement from this visage that “all the churches were wrong” pleased his father.

I think that the announcement of the buried Golden Plates gave the family further hope,

It is hardly surprising to know, in this context, that the Broome County Courier on December 29 1831 called Joseph Smith a “second Messiah.”

and I think the text of the translated book provided seven years later gave the Smith family all the direction, promise, and public acclaim they could ever desire.

Indeed, Lucy Mack Smith's wishful prayer of *"getting that religion whether it was in the Bible or wherever it might be found . . ."* was fulfilled . . . since not by God, then by her own son.