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The Character of the New Witness

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CHAPTER XIV.

THE CHARACTER OF THE NEW WITNESS.

It will be argued that the ancient and true prophets were *falsely* accused, and proceeded against, not because they were law-breakers and immoral persons, but because of the message they bore; while it is charged that Joseph Smith was a very vile person, lawless and immoral, and so odious at the last that the people rose *en masse* and crushed him! Thus has reasoned every persecutor in every age from Cain to the last under whose hands a martyr fell. Can it in reason be expected that human nature will fall so low that we shall find men who will be so recklessly wicked as to avow their intention to kill men for righteousness sake? Why even devils seek out some semblance of virtue in which to enshroud their evil deeds. There never yet was man so vile, if he retained his reason, but sought out some excuse to sanctify his crime. It was not because Jesus of Nazareth was pure and upright in his own heart; gracious in speech; dignified and gentle in action; merciful to the wayward; considerate to the unfortunate; loving and kind to the poor—God-like in spirit, in thought, in conduct—a reprover of the wicked, a reformer of evil ways—it was not for these qualities that he was hailed before the high priest, thence to the Sanhedrim, there condemned and thence dragged to Pilate's judgment seat to have the sentence confirmed; and thence whipped through the streets of Jerusalem to Golgotha and there crucified! Not for his virtues was this done. Could any one suppose that the Sanhedrim of Israel, the dignified senate of the Jews, could condemn anyone to death for right-

eousness? No, certainly not! It was because Jesus was to them a wicked imposter; who, being in the form of man, and so far as they could discern, very like the rest of his fellow-men—made himself God^a—was guilty of blasphemy. It was written in their law that he that blasphemed should be put to death, and all the people should say Amen.^b Jesus was found guilty of blasphemy by the Sanhedrim, and accordingly condemned to death. The sentence was confirmed by the Roman judge and executed. The procedure was strictly according to the forms of the law, and to the Jews of that generation Jesus of Nazareth was not condemned and executed for that he was a prophet, and the Son of God; but because he was a pestilential fellow, a mover of sedition, a blaspheming imposter. And so it has been in all ages of the world. All the martyrs that ever fell were, to those who struck the blow, lawless, dangerous characters, of whom it were a blessing to rid the world; and so it promises to be to the last hour of recorded time.

In view of the fact that so much which is evil has been said of Joseph Smith I think it proper here to give some account of his character. Of necessity what is said must be brief.

It would be impossible as also unprofitable to reproduce all or any considerable part of what has been said of him by his enemies, since it would be only a repetition of slanders and untruths which have spent their force and accomplished nothing. It will be sufficient to say that on the unfriendly side it is claimed that—in the language of one who in his life time was recognized as one of the world's leading scientists—Professor Huxley—"There is a complete consensus of testimony that the founder of Mormonism, one Joseph

^a John x: 22-37, also ch. v: 17, 18.

^b Levit. xxiv: 15, 16.

Smith, was a low-minded, ignorant scamp, and that he stole the 'scriptures,' which he propounded; not being clever enough to forge even such contemptible stuff as they contain. Nevertheless, he must have been a man of some force of character, for a considerable number of disciples soon gathered about him."^c

I have selected this passage from a mass of such matter at command, first, because of the prominence of the one who utters it; second, because in it is focused the spirit of coarseness and vulgarity characteristic of all that has been said by those who have rejected the claims of Joseph Smith as a witness and Prophet of God; and third, because it may be looked upon as the "Complete consensus of the testimony" of his enemies, and presents all they have to say against him in a single sentence, slightly modified by one other sentence, recognizing the prophet's force of character.

I am happy also in having another utterance, representative of another class of men who have viewed the character of the Prophet from the standpoint of the *savant*—the dispassionate philosophe looking at passing events without prejudice, and speculating upon what shall grow out of them—such was Josiah Quincy, author of the book "Figures of the Past." He visited Joseph Smith at Nauvoo a short time before the tragedy at Carthage, and after the Prophet's death, wrote:

"It is by no means improbable that some future text-book, for the use of generations yet unborn, will contain a question something like this: What historical American of the nineteenth century has exerted the most powerful influence upon the destinies of his countrymen? And it is by no means impossible that the answer to that interrogatory may be thus written: Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet. And the reply, absurd as it doubt-

^c Agnosticism and Christianity (Humbolt Library ed.), p. 28.

less seems to most men now, may be an obvious commonplace to their descendants. History deals in surprises and paradoxes quite as startling as this. The man who establishes a religion in this age of free debate, who was and is today accepted by hundreds of thousands as a direct emissary from the Most High—such a rare human being is not to be disposed of by pelting his memory with unsavory epithets. * * * * The most vital questions Americans are asking each other today have to do with this man and what he has left us. * * * * Burning questions, they are, which must give a prominent place in the history of the country to that sturdy self-asserter whom I visited at Nauvoo. Joseph Smith, claiming to be an inspired teacher, faced adversity, such as few men have been called to meet, enjoyed a brief season of prosperity, such as few men have ever attained, and, finally, forty-three days after I saw him, went cheerfully to a martyr's death. When he surrendered his person to Governor Ford, in order to prevent the shedding of blood, the Prophet had a presentiment of what was before him. 'I am going like a lamb to the slaughter,' he is reported to have said, 'but I am as calm as a summer's morning. I have a conscience void of offense and shall die innocent.'"^d

Of course testimony which sustains the virtue and uprightness of Joseph Smith is abundant, but I shall content myself by a very limited reference to it; depending not so much upon the testimony of men as upon the work he has accomplished for the vindication of his character. But I think it proper that the world should know in what esteem he was held by his friends and followers.

First, I introduce the description and estimation of the character of the Prophet by Parley P. Pratt, who was intimately associated with him, who shared his toils, labors, persecutions and imprisonment; and who spent his life in preaching the gospel taught him by the youthful Prophet. Elder Pratt says:

^d "Figures of the Past." pp. 376, 377, 378.

“President Joseph Smith was in person tall and well built, strong and active; of a light complexion, light hair, blue eyes, very little beard, and of an expression peculiar to himself, on which the eye naturally rested with interest, and was never weary of beholding. His countenance was ever mild, affable, beaming with intelligence and benevolence, mingled with a look of interest and an unconscious smile of cheerfulness, and entirely free from all restraint or affectation of gravity; and there was something connected with the serene and penetrating glance of his eye, as if he could penetrate the deepest abyss of the human heart, gaze into eternity, penetrate the heavens and comprehend all worlds.

“He possessed a noble boldness and independence of character; his manner was easy and familiar; his rebuke terrible as the lion; his benevolence unbounded as the ocean; his intelligence universal, and his language abounding in original eloquence peculiar to himself—not polished—not studied—not smoothed and softened by education and refined by art, but flowing forth in its own native simplicity, and profusely abounding in variety of subject and manner. He interested and edified, while, at the same time, he amused and entertained his audience; and none listened to him that were ever weary with his discourse. I have even known him to retain a congregation of willing and anxious listeners for many hours together, in the midst of cold or sunshine, rain or wind, while they were laughing at one moment and weeping the next. Even his most bitter enemies were generally overcome, if he could once get their ears. I have known him when chained and surrounded with armed murderers and assassins who were heaping upon him every possible insult and abuse, rise up in the majesty of a son of God and rebuke them, in the name of Jesus Christ, till they quailed before him, dropped their weapons, and, on their knees, begged his pardon and ceased their abuse.

“In short, in him the characters of a Daniel and a Cyrus were wonderfully blended. The gifts, wisdom and devotion of a Daniel were united with the boldness, courage, temperance, perseverance and generosity of a Cyrus. And had he been spared a martyr’s fate till mature manhood and age, he was certainly endowed with powers and abilities to have revolutionized the world in many respects, and to have transmitted to posterity a name associated with more brilliant and glorious acts than has yet fallen to the

lot of mortal. As it is his works will live to endless ages, and unnumbered millions yet unborn will mention his name with honor, as a noble instrument in the hands of God, who, during his short and youthful career, laid the foundation of that kingdom spoken of by Daniel, the prophet, which should break in pieces all other kingdoms and stand forever.”^e

Brigham Young, the successor of Joseph Smith in the Presidency of the Church, said of him:

“From the first day I knew Brother Joseph to the time of his death, a better man never lived upon the face of the earth. * * * * Joseph Smith was not killed because he was deserving of it, nor because he was a wicked man; but because he was a virtuous man. I know that to be so, as well as I know that the sun now shines. * * * * I know for myself that Joseph Smith was the subject of forty-eight lawsuits, and the most of them I witnessed with my own eyes. But not one action could ever be made to bear against him. No law or constitutional right did he ever violate. He was innocent and virtuous; he kept the laws of his country and lived above them; out of forty-eight lawsuits, not one charge could be substantiated against him. He was pure, just and holy as to the keeping of the law.”^f

John Taylor, who succeeded Brigham Young as President of the Church, and who in Carthage jail may be said to have shared martyrdom with the Prophet Joseph—for he was savagely wounded when the Prophet was slain—says of him:

“I was acquainted with Joseph Smith for years. I have traveled with him; I have been with him in private and in public; I have associated with him in councils of all kinds; I have listened hundreds of times to his public teachings, and his advice to his friends and associates of a more private nature. I have been at his house and seen his deportment in his family. I have seen him arraigned before the courts of his country, and seen him honorably acquitted,

^e “Autobiography of P. P. Pratt,” pp. 47, 48.

^f “Journal of Discourses.”

and delivered from the pernicious breath of slander, and the machinations and falsehoods of wicked and corrupt men. I was with him living, and with him when he died; when he was murdered in Carthage jail by a ruthless mob with their faces painted, and headed by a Methodist minister named Williams—I was there, and was myself wounded in my body. I have seen him under all these various circumstances, and I testify before God, angels and men that he was a good, honorable, virtuous man—that his doctrines were good, scriptural and wholesome—that his precepts were such as became a man of God—that his private and public character was unimpeachable—and that he lived and died as a man of God.”^g

If of these testimonies it shall be said they are borne by men who were Joseph Smith’s friends and followers—interested parties, bent on perpetuating the frauds he inaugurated, I would reply by asking: Whose testimony do Christians accept as representing the true character of Jesus Christ? Certainly *not* the testimony of the Sadducees and Pharisees; but the testimony of Matthew, of Peter, of James and John—“his friends and followers,” the infidel exclaims—“*interested parties*, bent on perpetuating the frauds he inaugurated!” Will the Christian world because of that preposterous claim that Christ’s friends and followers are not proper witnesses of his life and character, give up the evidence supplied in the testimonies of his friends to the uprightness and purity of his life, and the divinity of himself and his mission? Ah, no! They will ask rather, Who so competent to bear testimony of his life and the divinity of his character as those who intimately knew him, who lived with him, who shared his joys and his sorrows; who were in sympathy with his life’s mission and could enter into its spirit? I only ask that the same reasoning be applied to the testimony given by the friends of Joseph Smith.

^g “Life of John Taylor,” pp. 213, 214.

One thing connected with the character of Joseph Smith, and one that distinguishes him from false prophets and mere enthusiasts is the unaffectedness of his conduct. It was the prevailing idea of his day and even now that the calling of a prophet is inseparably connected with a life of austerity—with inordinate fastings and midnight prayers; with the vows of monastic life, with gloom and self-mortifications; with hair shirts, long robes, and sandals; with long hair, beard unkempt and bodies filthy—as if prophets had no time to keep clean—with solemn, awful brows and measured tread—lives wherein there is nothing natural—no sunshine, nor smiles nor rose-lipped laughter—as if communing with God was such awful business that it chills the heart and drives all happiness out of the life of man! Joseph Smith was nothing of all this. There was no affectation about him. He complied with the customs of his time and nation in respect to his apparel—scrupulously neat and clean therein; face smooth shaven, and hair cut according to the prevailing fashion. While temperate in his habits and content with the humble fare which adverse circumstances during the most of his life forced upon him, he was not averse to good food and pleasant surroundings—he was not the prophet of sack-cloth and ashes. While dignified in deportment and having a due comprehension of the magnitude of his calling and the work committed to his hands, there was nothing strained or unnatural in his demeanor—no striving after effect; and often he unbent, played ball, wrestled, or romped with children—with whom he was a general favorite—with all the joyousness and freedom of a boy. And what may be regarded as one of the true tests of his greatness is, that while here and there his happiness and freedom shocked some over-pious persons who looked on from without, and expected austerity and gloom in one claiming to be

a prophet, he never lost caste with his friends for his unconventional conduct. He was the Prophet of a joyous countenance; of unconventional but upright deportment; the apostle of cleanliness and becoming apparel. He believed that serving God should make men happier and that the good things of the earth were made for the comfort and to increase the happiness of the righteous.

To take such a stand as this in the face of the traditional idea of a prophet, stamps him as an original character, and separates him by long distances from the mere enthusiasts and the false prophets whose extreme pretensions to sanctity, whose studied gloom, whose affectation of impassioned devotion and assumption of the garb and supposed severe demeanor of ancient prophets—all too plainly proclaim their hypocrisy and declare them players of parts they have assigned themselves.