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Review of *Joseph Smith and the Mormons* by Noah Van Sciver

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Abstract: A review of *Joseph Smith and the Mormons* by Noah Van Sciver. The reviewer notes that "[w]hile no reader may be wholly satisfied with Joseph Smith and the Mormons, the book is unquestionably a landmark text in Latter-day Saint literature—it is, perhaps, the best Mormon graphic novel to date—and an important touchstone in artistic representations of Joseph Smith."



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Joseph Smith and the Mormons
by Noah Van Sciver

New York: Abrams ComicArts, 2022

Reviewed by Scott Hales

Readers have been anticipating Noah Van Sciver's graphic novel *Joseph Smith and the Mormons* since 2011, when the cartoonist first published a story about Joseph Smith and Latter-day Saint origins in his indie comics anthology *Blammo*. In the story, Van Sciver offset a rather straightforward account of the First Vision and translation of the Book of Mormon with his signature visual style, an arresting combination of the primitive and the grotesque.¹ The result was an artistically intriguing retelling of early Church history, and readers wanted more. When Van Sciver subsequently published graphic novels about Abraham Lincoln (*The Hypo: The Melancholic Young Lincoln*, 2012) and Johnny Appleseed (*Johnny Appleseed: Green Spirit of the Frontier*, 2017), fans wondered if his next biographical work would tackle the life of the Latter-day Saint prophet.

In many ways, *Joseph Smith and the Mormons* does not disappoint. At 456 pages, it is an epic visual narrative covering the entirety of the Prophet's life, from his days as a young New York seer to his violent death at the Carthage jail. The book itself is as beautiful as it is ambitious. The golden color and gilt lettering of the cover evoke the gold plates, a detail accentuated by gilt-edged pages and front endpaper decorated with symbols from John Whitmer's "caractors" document. Inside, the book is richly colored with greens and other earth tones, and it contains a bibliography and extensive notes in back that reveal the depth of the author's research into and reflection on the life and ministry of Joseph Smith.

1. The story was later reprinted in the June 2011 issue of *Sunstone*. See Noah Van Sciver, "Van Sciver's Book of Mormon Origins," *Sunstone* 163 (June 2011): 23–27, <https://sunstone.org/wp-content/uploads/sbi/articles/163-23-27.pdf>.

Among other things, these notes reveal Van Sciver's motivation for telling Joseph Smith's story and for making certain artistic and interpretive decisions in the narrative. In his "Author's Note," Van Sciver explains that he was a practicing Latter-day Saint until the age of twelve, when his parents divorced and his mother "set to work separating her children from the faith as best she could," which included telling him "all about Joseph Smith and everything my Sunday School lessons never mentioned." Eventually, Van Sciver's faith "evaporated," and his childhood religion became a "curiosity" that his brain "couldn't quit picking at." Making *Joseph Smith and the Mormons*, he notes, became "a way of reconnecting with that part of my childhood." For him, Joseph Smith became something of a lynchpin in his relationship to his former faith: "I needed to know who Joseph Smith was. . . . I needed to *be* him, to inhabit the man through my art and act out the events of his life with my pen. I wanted to know how that would feel, and whether, after learning all about him, I would gain some special insight into and understanding of where the faith I grew up in came from. Then I would know if some divine heritage had been stripped from my life after my parents divorced" (440).

The book opens with Joseph's face buried in a hat, his father and Josiah Stowell looking on. Stowell is eager for Joseph, a barely literate young "scryer," to help him find buried treasure, and he is willing to pay. Joseph and his father take the job, but their efforts prove unsuccessful when Joseph, via a brown seer stone, sees the money slip away. While some readers may find this portrayal of the young prophet unflattering, Van Sciver treats Joseph with sensitivity and sympathy. The Smiths' poverty is evident throughout the early pages of the book, and Joseph hires out his services not to gain treasure or renown for himself, but to help support his close and loving family. In fact, there's a guilelessness—bordering on naiveté—to Joseph throughout the book, even when some of what he says or does seems, to some observers, questionable or problematic. Van Sciver's Joseph Smith is too earnest to be a con artist. He is a man of obvious faith and immense passion. Often, the story is less about him than the effect he has on people.

In her preface to *No Man Knows My History*, Fawn M. Brodie quipped that there are "few men" like Joseph Smith, "who have written so much and told so little about themselves." For her, the documentary record is "fiercely contradictory" about the Prophet, making it difficult for historians to sift fact from fiction and get a clear picture of the man. Ultimately, she found his "six-volume autobiography"—the first six books of

the *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*—to be “the antithesis of a confession.”² In making *Joseph Smith and the Mormons*, though, Van Sciver had no need of a confession. The graphic novel is a work of historical fiction, so it has no fixed obligation to the documentary record. As Van Sciver explains in his “Selected Bibliography” at the end of the book, he has given readers his “*interpretation* of the story of Joseph Smith,” and he freely admits to taking “a certain amount of artistic license” (452, emphasis original) with the historical record in order to make the narrative work. Yet, elsewhere in the back matter, he assures readers that “my approach with this graphic novel is to tell the story of Joseph Smith as straightforwardly as I can and to let readers draw their own conclusions” (440).

In this aim, he largely succeeds. Richard L. Bushman once argued that as a “practicing Mormon,” he had an “advantage” as a biographer of the Prophet because he “believe[d] enough to take Joseph Smith seriously”—something Fawn Brodie was never able to do.³ Although Noah Van Sciver is not a believer, one senses that he has enough respect for Joseph Smith and his followers, past and present, to give him and the church he founded a fair treatment. His thorough notes and glossary, which reveal a broad knowledge of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, are evidence of this. So too is his bibliography, which contains a wide range of Joseph Smith biographies, exposés, and church histories (including, to my delight, *Saints, Volume 1: The Standard of Truth*). While the book is not without its criticisms of Joseph Smith—particularly in his relationship with Emma and various Church dissenters—it never reduces the Prophet to a caricature. Latter-day Saints who are familiar with the Prophet’s life—through the Joseph Smith Papers or *Saints*—will generally recognize Joseph in this book.

They will also be pleasantly surprised by how complete and nuanced it is, especially considering how difficult it can be to tell such an epic story in the graphic novel form. A traditional novel, after all, has a virtually unlimited capacity for exposition, description, and character development, which makes the form ideal for storytelling on a grand scale. A graphic novel, on the other hand, generally requires more simplicity, at least if the graphic novelist wants to keep the book at a manageable

2. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), vii–viii.

3. Richard Lyman Bushman, *On the Road with Joseph Smith: An Author’s Diary* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 125.

length. The form is more like theater or film in its dependence on imagery and dialogue to carry the story. Sometimes graphic novelists use captions to enhance the form's expository power, as Van Sciver and his coauthor Paul Buhle do in *Johnny Appleseed: Green Spirit of the Frontier*, but this can tax the reader's patience if done to the extreme. What's impressive about *Joseph Smith and the Mormons* is that it uses almost no expository captions to move the narrative along, fill in gaps, or provide additional context to the story. Instead, what we see throughout the book are "silent" panels, often depicting landscapes, that give readers time to pause and reflect on the story and its meaning. One of the most visually moving of these panels shows the Smith's house in Harmony, Pennsylvania, during the translation of the Book of Mormon. The sky above the house is rosy and streaked with clouds while manuscript pages float between the heavens and a window in the house. It is unclear what direction the pages are moving—are they descending or ascending?—but an old graveyard in the panel's foreground and a lush forest behind the house remind readers of the Book of Mormon's lasting relevance to both the quick and the dead (96).

Historians and readers with any kind of investment in Joseph Smith's story are bound to take issue with aspects of the graphic novel. The narrative hits most major milestones in the life of the Prophet and the history of the Church, but its limited canvas rarely allows the story to dwell on any single episode or secondary character for very long. Consequently, readers who are unfamiliar with early Church history may experience some disorientation as they try to understand the significance of the Kirtland Temple or the Missouri conflicts. Some readers may also question Van Sciver's choice to present the First Vision and other miraculous visitations as memories—stylized as blue line drawings—rather than in the story's present action. As he explains in his author's note, he does this to give readers more freedom to "draw their own conclusions" about "the more extraordinary events" of Church history (440).

The book also contains some glaring absences. For instance, there are no panels devoted specifically to the eight witnesses, the publication of the Book of Mormon, the organization of the Church, the Word of Wisdom, the office of patriarch, the calling of the twelve Apostles, the start of the British Mission, the siege of Far West, Joseph Smith's legal troubles in Nauvoo, the founding of the Relief Society, or the Kirtland and Nauvoo endowments. Likely because of space constraints, the book also does little to help readers understand the events of 1837–38, reducing the

Missouri War to a montage of violent images showing the suffering of the Saints. Characters like Martin Harris and Sidney Rigdon, moreover, sometimes come across as caricatures or composites (or both) instead of well-rounded characters. Aside from Emma and the Partridge sisters, the book also has a shortage of developed female characters, and readers familiar with the stories of early Latter-day Saint women—women like Lucy Mack Smith, Eliza R. Snow, Mercy and Mary Fielding, Vilate Kimball, and Jane Manning—may ask why they don't play a more visible role in the book.

Unsurprisingly, the most controversial aspect of *Joseph Smith and the Mormons* is its treatment of plural marriage. For the most part, Van Sciver maintains his objective, straightforward approach to storytelling as he narrates Joseph's involvement in the practice. Indeed, readers will find many parallels between his treatment of plural marriage and the depiction of the practice in the first volume of *Saints*. For instance, like *Saints*, Van Sciver balances the pain and heartache of the practice, particularly for Emma Smith, with the stories of Lucy Walker and others who received powerful spiritual confirmations to become plural wives. He also makes a good-faith effort to present the historical origins of and theological justifications for the practice. But the book never really shows the elite community plural marriage created in Nauvoo nor the way Joseph recruited the help of friends and family members when making marriage proposals. Instead, Joseph often appears to act alone with something of a wandering eye when young women like Fanny Alger and Nancy Rigdon enter the room.

Sensitive readers should be advised, moreover, that Van Sciver makes use of William McLellin's account of Emma Smith coming upon Joseph and Fanny Alger "transacting" in a barn. A blanket and well-placed limbs obscure any nudity, and the situation is not depicted as necessarily adulterous. But the episode is potentially explosive for those who are unfamiliar with the story or uncomfortable with the possibility of sexuality in Joseph's plural marriages (227–30). Some readers may also object to the book's attention to the more troubling aspects of Joseph's revelation on marriage, now canonized as Doctrine and Covenants 132. In one panel, Hyrum Smith reads to Emma from the revelation, saying, "For I am the Lord and will destroy her if she abide not in my law" (see D&C 132:54). There is then a silent panel showing Emma, sitting alone, a dead expression on her face. It is then followed by an almost identical image, but now, cracks have formed all over Emma's body, literally splitting her

apart. The panel is a clear criticism of the revelation and its language, yet it is also a powerful visual representation of Emma's struggle to reconcile herself to her husband's plural marriages (365).

While no reader may be wholly satisfied with *Joseph Smith and the Mormons*, the book is unquestionably a landmark text in Latter-day Saint literature—it is, perhaps, the best Mormon graphic novel to date—and an important touchstone in artistic representations of Joseph Smith. Van Sciver readily acknowledges that he has not written “a perfect graphic novel about the events surrounding the early years of the Latter-day Saints” (452). But when is perfection ever a requirement for excellence? *Joseph Smith and the Mormons* is far more than the sum of its flaws, and its determination to treat its subject with seriousness and sensitivity is a high compliment to those who honor Joseph Smith and have faith in the message he restored.

Scott Hales is a writer and historian for the Church History Department. He is a general editor and lead writer for *Saints*, the new four-volume narrative history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. His two-part graphic novel *The Garden of Enid: Adventures of a Weird Mormon Girl* was published by Greg Kofford Books in 2016 and 2017. He is also the author of *Hemingway in Paradise and Other Mormon Poems*. His scholarship and creative writing have been published in *The Edgar Allan Poe Review*, *Religion and the Arts*, *BYU Studies Quarterly*, *Irreantum*, and the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*. He and his family live in Eagle Mountain, Utah.