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**Analysis of the life of Joseph Smith: Why Was He So Successful?**

If you were to ask a Mormon about the story of Joseph Smith, it would sound a lot different than what an unbiased historian would tell you. The “legends” of Joseph Smith that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints tell are selective in favor of the supposed prophet. The Mormon religion now has 15 million adherents worldwide, and any discussions on the life of Smith (other than their own narrative) are unwelcomed. However, we do know a lot about the man that is Joseph Smith aside from the religious texts that Mormonism offers. To understand why he was so successful, we must first know the story of Joseph Smith and the Mormon religion.

**Early Life**

Joseph Smith was born to his father Joseph and mother Lucy Mack whowere merchants and farmers. He grew up on a farm in Vermont without any formal education. In 1816, his family was forced to move to a small village in New York after ill-fated business ventures and crop failures. Because of this, Smith was largely deprived of any formal education. Lucy Mack said that Smith was often meditating and in deep study at a young age. In addition, he was described as “nimble-witted, ambitious, and gifted with boundless imagination, he dreamed of escape into an illustrious and affluent future.” He was fascinated by ancient civilizations and loved telling detailed stories about them. He loved the Mayans, Aztecs, and American Indians and got fascinated by the possibility of finding their treasure. [[1]](#footnote-1)

The northeast region of the United States was a hotbed of enthusiasm for the Second Great Awakening, and his parents were caught up in the commotion. However, they did disagree on religion; his mother leaned toward the Presbyterian church, while his father forced him to stay at home and stayed away from Christianity mostly[[2]](#footnote-2). Nonetheless, both were caught up in religious folk magic. Both parents reported having visions or dreams where God communicated with them. In addition, his parents were both involved in treasure-seeking and using magic to find the treasure. Smith was largely confused by all the religious commotion, but was concerned for his place in it. When Smith was just 14, he encountered passage in James chapter 1 instructing any person who lacked wisdom to ask God for it. He went to the woods to pray to God, and he claims he was visited by two “personages” who identified themselves as God and Jesus Christ. They told Smith that all the churches were apostate and that he shouldn’t join any of them. (Joseph Smith didn’t give this account until 1842). 3 years later in 1823, he received another revelation, this time from the Angel Moroni (Gabriel). This Angel told him all about a set of golden plates that contained a record of the ancient inhabitants of America. These plates, along with two stones that would help him read the plates, happened to be buried very closely to his home in New York. Joseph Smith would constantly try to dig up the plates, but he was unsuccessful for 4 years.

**Finding the Plates**

Meanwhile, his family faced more hardship. They had to bring in supplemental income by hiring out for odd jobs. One of these was being a treasure seeker; this was a type of magical supernaturalism common during this period.[[3]](#footnote-3) Smith would often say he had magic seer stones and that those stones would lead him to the treasure. This is the first we hear of Joseph smith being a con-artist. He would tell people he had the map to a lost treasure and trick New Yorkers into paying him to come on these treasure hunts. He led people on many unsuccessful attempts to find a treasure that was buried by a wealthy farmer in the area. In 1826, Smith was arrested for pretending to find lost treasure.[[4]](#footnote-4) Smith even met a girl named Emma Hale on one of these expeditions, and he would later ask her to marry him. However, Emma’s father objected to the proposal because Smith didn’t have the means to support Emma.[[5]](#footnote-5) They married anyway, and Smith soon promised to abandon treasure seeking. It was around this time in 1827 when Joseph Smith supposedly was able to dig up the golden plates that the Angel Maroni had told him about 4 years prior.

Smith dug up the plates, and once he retrieved them, the angel appeared to him and commanded him not to show the plates to anyone else. Instead, he was told to translate them and publish the translation so others could learn about it. He used the seer stones, Urim and Thummim, to translate what he called “reformed Egyptian”. He would stick his head in a hat with the plates and seer stones, and he would translate what he read while he had a scribe write down the words. Smith first dictated the translation to his wife, and this translation was later transcribed by Smith’s neighbor and friend Martin Harris. Harris took the transcription to a prominent scholar named Charles Anthon who warned Harris that he was the victim of a fraud.[[6]](#footnote-6) However, Harris continued as Smith’s scribe. Harris began having doubts about the project after his wife ingrained him with much skepticism around the ordeal. Harris decided to take over 100 pages of the manuscript to show his family members, and when he did so he lost the manuscript. When Harris told Joseph Smith this, Smith said that the angel returned to him and took the plates away as well as revoking his ability to translate them. For a short while, Smith attended Methodist groups with his wife before being rejected for being a necromancer. A few months later, Smith claimed the angel returned the plates to him. However, this time it would be a different translation since the plates would be slightly different. Accordingly, the plates wouldn’t be exactly like the missing ones, but will contain the same general message. He then made a man named Oliver Cowdery his scribe and read the translation to him. After the plates were fully translated and scribed, Joseph Smith showed the plates to Harris, Cowdery, and David Whitmer. These three would become the “Three Witnesses”, and they signed a statement stating that they had been shown the golden plates by an angel and that God confirmed their truth. Later, Smith would assemble another eight witnesses that signed a similar statement. (Every witness would eventually become apostate to the Mormon religion).

**The Beginning of a Church**

By July 1829 Joseph Smith had translated the Mormon Bible. It turned out to was a 1000 year history of the Israelites who were led from Jerusalem to a promised land in the Western Hemisphere. They built a civilization there, fought wars, had prophets, and even received a visit from Jesus after his resurrection. According to the record, a prophet named Mormon engraved the golden plates. When the record keepers, the Nephites, were killed by their enemies the Lamanites (ancestors of Native Americans), they hid the plates in the ground in New York. Although the text was translated, Joseph Smith had a lot of work to do in order to successfully start a religion.

On April 6, 1830, Joseph Smith and his followers started their church with the mission of gathering people into settlements called cities of Zion.[[7]](#footnote-7) These settlements would provide refuge from the calamities of the last days according to Smith. The Book of Mormon was immediately met with opposition from those in the area who knew Smith as a swindler and treasure hunter. In addition, Smith’s authority was beginning to be undermined after some of his followers claimed to have revelations. After this, Smith cemented his authority by claiming to have a revelation that clarified his office as the only prophet and apostle. This allowed him alone to declare new doctrines and revelations. Around this time, Smith was arrested for being a disorderly person, although the charges were dropped. Because of this criticism, Smith and his followers and left for Ohio while claiming that Kirtland was the eastern boundary of the New Jerusalem.[[8]](#footnote-8)

In Ohio, Smith met a few groups of people that would both grow his church and persecute it. Firstly, he met followers of the Restoration movement. These people believed that Christianity should return to its roots of what was known of the apostolic church. Some of these members were easily won over by Joseph Smith including Sydney Rigdon who would go on to be Smith’s right-hand man. In addition, Kirtland held an enthusiastic religious culture that believed in fits and trances, rolling on the ground, speaking in tongues, and that spiritual gifts brought about these phenomena. Meanwhile, Cowdery claimed to have found the center of the New Jerusalem in Jackson County, Missouri. Smith visited this site and affirmed that it was indeed the center place of Zion. Over the next year, this would create tension between followers in Ohio and Missouri. Mobs were forming, and at one point a mob, infuriated by Smith’s political power, beat Smith and Rigdon unconscious with the intent to kill them. Smith would survive, but the violence continued. Mormons faced persecution and even were killed in Missouri by dissenters of the religion. Eventually they were driven from the area. By 1835, there were roughly 2000 Mormons in the Ohio area, around which time Smith changed the name of his religion to the Church of Latter Day Saints. Also, at this time, Smith began to form a formal militia to respond to mobs and dissenters of his religion. In 1837, Smith and other leaders created and failed in multiple bank ventures. He ended up in a lot of debt, and eventually had a warrant for his arrest on a charge of banking fraud. Amidst this, Smith was accused of being in a sexual relationship with one of his servants. Thus, Smith and many of his followers migrated to Missouri in 1838.[[9]](#footnote-9)

**Missouri and Illinois**

Abandoning his plans to redeem Zion in Jackson County, Smith, along with Rigdon, settled in the town of Far West, Missouri. Thousands of followers left Kirtland and came with them, and soon a large temple was built. As happened in previous cities, the native Missourians of Far West had different political and religious differences from the Mormons that moved in. Heightened tensions swept through the city. Because of his past experiences, Joseph Smith believed it was necessary to heighten his military presence in reaction to anti-Mormons. The militia began expelling dissenters out of the county with Smith’s approval. At one point, Rigdon gave a speech in which he declared that there would be a “war of extermination” if Mormons were attacked[[10]](#footnote-10). Shortly after, a group of Mormons mistakenly attacked the Missouri state militia after believing them to be anti-Mormon vigilantes. Consequentially, the Governor mandated that the Mormons should be exterminated or driven from the state. Because of this, a party of Missourians massacred 17 Mormons just a month after this declarative statement by the Governor. 2500 state troops surrounded the Latter Day Saints and forced them to forfeit their property and leave Missouri. Meanwhile, Smith was brought before the court having been accused of treason. He was sentenced to be executed, but his lawyer was able to get him another trial. While waiting for his trial, Smith sat in prison. While in prison, Brigham Young rose to leadership and moved about 14,000 Mormons to Illinois. After a few months in prison, Smith escaped with the illegal help of some of the sheriffs and guards at the prison.

Joseph Smith rejoined his followers near Quincy, Illinois. He would rename the area “Nauvoo” which he claimed meant “beautiful” in Hebrew. Broken as the following was, Smith went to meet with President Martin Van Buren to seek redress. However, nothing came of the meeting. Smith sent some of his followers, including the rising Brigham Young, to Great Britain on a missionary trip. In this way Smith was able to recover his prestige and authority of the Latter-Day Saints. Illinois largely accepted the Mormon refugees after Smith positioned the followers as oppressed and a minority. Smith was able to attract some wealthy and powerful men to convert to Mormonism, and these men were able to help influence Illinois legislature. In 1841, Illinois gave Smith and the city of Nauvoo a charter that gave them autonomy to build a university, their own courts, and even a rather large militia. The Nauvoo Legion had 3000 troops by 1844; by comparison, the U.S. Army had around 8500 troops at the time. Smith was appointed a Lieutenant General of the militia – the highest ranking official of the legion.

Now that Smith had control and stability, he started introducing more doctrines that brought scrutiny to the religion. The controversial doctrines included:

* God only assembled the earth through preexisting materials, and God himself developed through time and space
* Baptism for the dead
* Plural marriage
* Zion was now all of North and South America

Amidst the growing town and doctrines, Smith faced many allegations. Smith was never a good

judge of men, and the increasing number of men in his company who had multiple wives soon became a problem. Members of the Latter-Day Saints became suspicious and questioned his authority. In addition, Non-Mormons became increasingly uneasy with this practice and how it might spread outside of Nauvoo. Smith would even later be accused of allowing a Mormon medical doctor to preform abortions on polygamous wives who were officially single[[11]](#footnote-11).

In the spring of 1842, Missouri governor, Lilburn Boggs, was shot in the head. The Sheriff named a Mormon loyalist, Porter Rockwell, as the assailant. Mormons considered his assassination a fulfillment of prophecy and even gloated that the person who “did the noble deed remains to be found out[[12]](#footnote-12).” However, Boggs would survive the assassination attempt, and pressed Thomas Carlin, governor of Illinois, to extradite Smith to be convicted in Missouri. Smith had to go into hiding for months until it was dismissed. Although Porter Rockwell denied these allegations, he served as Smith’s bodyguard and was his friend for some time. Also, Smith was reported as prophesying a violent death for Boggs.

In 1843, Joseph Smith was indicted on a charge of treason by a court in Missouri. The governor of Illinois reluctantly extradited Smith, and he was arrested and set to be brought to Missouri. However, a group of Mormons intercepted the traveling party before they reached Missouri. The Missouri courts eventually gave up on extradition attempts. Although, this created a lot of political tension with the Latter-Day Saints and their surrounding citizens.

Smith became increasingly worried with the safety and protection of himself and the Latter Day Saints. He wrote to the presidential candidates in 1844 asking them how they would protect the Mormons. When he got noncommittal responses, he decided to run for President of the U.S. Sydney Rigdon was his vice-presidential running mate, and Brigham Young was his chief campaign officer. This political move tied politics and the Mormons even more closely together, and authorities took notice. Smith wanted to annex Texas and Oregon, reestablish a national bank, decrease the importance of Congress, and close prisons. In addition, Smith also wanted to make Nauvoo a federal territory with the right to call on federal troops if needed. He even attempted to set up a shadow government where he would ordain himself as the King of the Kingdom of God[[13]](#footnote-13).

Dissenters among his own followers grew against Joseph Smith in Nauvoo. Some of the more powerful followers printed a paper called the Nauvoo Expositor to denounce Smith’s false doctrines. Smith, as mayor, ordered the destruction of the paper, and the newspapers were dragged into the street in burned. Eventually Smith declared martial law in Nauvoo. This lead to Illinois Governor Thomas Ford mobilizing the state militia. Smith agreed to stand trial in Carthage for the destruction of the paper after Thomas Ford beckoned with him to demilitarize his militia. While Smith was held in jail awaiting trial for more charges the jail was stormed and Joseph Smith was assassinated.

Joseph Smith undoubtedly left a legacy that would continue to expand to the present day. Mormons regard him as a prophet like Moses or Elijah. Mormons portray him as a man of God, and non-Mormons portray him as a fraud who preyed on ignorance of people. Writers even suggest that he suffered from psychological disorders like paranoid delusions or manic-depressive illness. Many non-Mormon biographers have at least settled on Smith being a fraud and mythmaker who was a product of his upbringing.

**Why was he so successful?**

In studying the history of Joseph Smith, it is plain to see he is a pious fraud. So, how was he so successful? There are a few main factors that I believe caused Smith to be so effective in building his phony religion. Based on the research of Ph.D. Sociologist from Harvard, William Bainbridge, we can see correlations between successful religious movements and how Joseph Smith successfully cultivated Mormonism.

1. The State of the Religious Culture
2. Conservation of Cultural Capital
3. Smith’s care with Prophecy
4. A strict, but not too strict, environment
5. Establishment of Authority

**State of Religious Culture**

In the 19th century, Christianity was becoming more split than ever. Protestant churches began to feel the influence of Enlightenment due to the scientific and atheistic views of many people. After the Reformation, more denominations were created, leaving many people confused. In addition, just twelve years before Joseph Smith was born, Louis XVI was guillotined, and people were turning from religion. Although this happened in France, it sparked thoughts of Nihilism across Europe that also bled to America. People had been beaten with the idea that God abhorred mankind and had no compassion for the unrepentant. This message left people longing for a personal connection with God. Joseph Smith strategically positioned his first encounter with God and Jesus as a personal and loving one. Smith began preaching that man is eternal, inherently innocent, free, and can become perfect. Although these ideas were somewhat radical, they resonated with the Northeastern communities he resided in.

**Conservation of Cultural Capital**

According to William Bainbridge, “people will be more willing to join a religious group to the degree that doing so minimizes their expenditure of cultural capital.[[14]](#footnote-14)” Put another way, people will try to acquire the most while expending the least. Since Mormonism was rooted in Christianity it wasn’t hard for many people to pick up. People who were raised as Christians accumulate a substantial store of the Christian cultural “capital”. Thus, it would be much easier to join a religion such as Mormonism that preached itself as adding to Christianity than to leave all Christian culture and join a religion like Hinduism. Bainbridge also proposes that “New religious movements are likely to succeed to the extent that they retain cultural continuity with the conventional faith(s) of the societies in which they seek converts.” Christianity dominated the religious minds in America in the 1800s. Smith didn’t stray from Christianity culture, tradition, or philosophy largely; instead, he added to it by claiming to have another testament of Jesus Christ. Although there are large differences and contradictions between the Bible and the Book of Mormon, it is posed as being congruous. Most people don’t worry about the details, and thus he was able to gain a large number of followers.

**Smith’s care with Prophecy**

Failed prophecies are detrimental to religious movements. There is a large risk/reward relationship with prophecies when gathering followers. A fulfilled prophecy creates excitement and can spread the word of the movement quickly. On the contrary, a failed prophecy is quickly snuffed out and spreads through the movement quickly. This leads to another proposition from Bainbridge; “new religious movements are likely to succeed to the extent that their doctrines are non-empirical.” Religions are stronger when their doctrines are focused on a non-empirical reality that can’t be easily tested. Joseph Smith was careful to not create too many prophecies around future events that would take place. In addition, he handled the golden plates and the translations with great care – only showing them to a chosen few. When asked about their legitimacy, he claimed God had given him new instruction. This closed door prophetical relationship he created with God allowed him to avoid questioning to some degree. He was even careful to do this in writing the Book of Mormon. Although now a large point of contention, they didn’t worry about fossil records and geographical inconsistencies when reading the next chronicles of the Israelites. Even today, Mormon’s aren’t concerned with empirical evidence for their religion. Their whole faith is based of a non-empirical experience they had in their rooms when praying to God.

**A strict, but not too strict, environment**

To set itself apart and grow, new religious movements must set themselves apart from secular culture. Often this is done by claiming that the outside world is too dangerous/tempting, or that the outside world is too unclean to commune with. However, go to far on this spectrum and the negative connotations of cults are heaped on the religion. Bainbridge puts it that “New religious movements are likely to succeed to the extent that they maintain a medium level of tension with their surrounding environment—are strict, but not too strict.” Joseph Smith mastered this idea. He was able to maintain a separate and distinct lifestyle in personal and family life, such as dress, diet, drinking, entertainment, etc.[[15]](#footnote-15). To be effective, the religion shouldn’t affirm the mainline culture’s lifestyle in these respects. If the religion isn’t strict enough, weak members will discredit the legitimacy and commitment to the group. This free rider model undermines the foundation of the group and leaves the minority doing most of the work for the majority. Modern day Christianity is a good example of this. The religion has been largely undermined due to the lack of conviction of those who claim to be Christians. By imposing strict modes of living, free riders are screened out. In addition, participation rises among those who pass the barriers and enter the religion. This creates a strong and committed movement. Joseph Smith walked this careful line while sometimes overstepping his boundaries. From the start, Smith imposed a good level of tension with his surrounding society. However, it is always when he would overstep his boundaries that he would get into trouble. When he started using his community to get rich, marry/sleep with whomever he wanted, or expand into an entire governing city, he got into trouble.

This proposal is consistent with data observed today. Generally, stricter congregations have more active members and grow more steadily over time[[16]](#footnote-16). The health and growth of a religion can reinforce a member’s certainty that they are ‘doing or believing the right thing’ in a circular pattern. Certainly your religion is true if your movement is growing and those around you are thriving. Joseph Smith capitalized on this by creating many rules for Mormons to follow such as what to drink, what to wear, and who to marry without completely ostracizing them from society. However, Smith would inevitably overstep these boundaries to anger his surrounding societies.

**Establishment of Authority**

A successful movement needs a capable and effective leader. To follow a leader, one must see them as legitimate; this is even more true in religion. Bainbridge puts it that Religious movements will succeed to the extent they have legitimate leaders with adequate authority to be effective.” Joseph Smith rose to both tasks of establishing his authority with doctrinal justifications and structural systems. In a non-religious organization, leaders usually have special skills or experience. However, religion lends its leaders to be legitimized by the doctrines that govern them. These doctrines will dictate who can lead, how a leader is made, what powers they have, and more. Joseph Smith set up the Mormon doctrine with a clear voice on leadership. Often times he would even amend it in order to more clearly and powerfully dictate his seat of authority. He insisted that the President of the Mormon Church is “prophet, seer, and revelator” (he later added in revelator after many members claimed to have revelations). Smith clearly laid out how the President is chosen by way of the Council of Twelve, and he did so carefully so that he would remain in power. In doing so, he also established a structure of how the church would function. The hierarchy of the church lends itself to participation at all levels. This creates ‘buy-in’ from members who are affirmed by their leaders when they participate. This reinforcement cultivates a culture of affirmation and adoration. The leaders affirm younger, newer members, and the newer members tend to adore and look up to leaders. Smith set this up in many ways at an early stage of the movement, although it is more prevalent now in the Mormon religion with young missionaries traveling abroad and fathers being priests of their own families.

**Conclusion**

Looking at how of the factors an accredited sociologist has empirically observed to make a religious movement successful parallels how Joseph Smith built his movement, we can see how Smith was so successful. Smith created the right religion for the environment he was in. He built upon a popular religion at the time in Christianity while creating enough of a sect to illicit a new religion. His careful use of prophecy and secrecy in his prophetic relationship with God allowed him to establish an authority through doctrine that maintained a level of prowess. His people looked up to him and believed almost anything he said. When he was met with opposition, he weeded it out through revelation, defamation, and even violence. We must be careful not to attribute a religion’s success with it’s legitimacy. Joseph Smith was a con-artist from a young age, and he skillfully created a movement that would spark into millions. All of this was based on lies, yet that doesn’t matter because of how he molded his religion.

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