

ACT ONE: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Chapter 1

Historical Empathy, and the Burned-over District

- 1) When one ponders and studies the Book of Mormon, there's simply no way to fully understand it, without understanding the burned-over district in New York, from whence the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith came. This requires a small step back in time using, what I like to call, historical empathy.
- 2) Before talking about the Burned-over District, what is meant by historical empathy? It's a fairly nuanced term, and quite useful for educational purposes. When we try to understand a historical figure, it's helpful to empathize with that person, in order to understand what they did, and why they did it.
 - a. "Historical empathy is the process of students' cognitive and affective engagement with historical figures to better understand and contextualize their lived experiences, decisions, or actions."(Endacott & Brooks, 2013)
- 3) To illustrate, let's take an extreme example here from my history junkie perspective. Let's try our first attempt at historical empathy, by putting ourselves in the shoes of Joseph Stalin at the end of June 1941. It may be an extreme example, but it really helps to illustrate the utility of historical empathy. Hitler's Nazi army was 3.7 million men strong, about 3 million of which were stationed on the German-Soviet border as the primary invasion force of Operation Barbarossa.(C N Trueman, 2015b)
- 4) On June 22 of 1941, Hitler mobilized a large portion of the stationed forces across the Soviet border, thus invading the Soviet Union, and effectively declaring war on a rather unprepared Stalinist Soviet Union. Based on how easily the German forces plowed through their first couple weeks of operations, it looked like taking Moscow might be a walk in the park for Hitler and the Third Reich. Stalin was completely under-prepared for such an invasion, and as soon as it happened, He scrambled to remedy the situation by whatever means possible.
- 5) This meant that some extreme measures would be taken to slow the progress of the Nazi army. Stalin implemented a scorched earth policy, meaning the Soviet soldiers

were required to destroy any villages, and poison water wells that the Germans were set to take over, before the Germans even arrived to invade. This practice effectively denied the Nazis any sustenance or shelter during their steady, clockwork-like, invasion.

- 6) This is an extreme example, and it's only used to make a point. It may be a challenge, because Stalin was so evil (for lack of a better term), but we need to try and empathize with Stalin during this time. Hitler, who was one of the best allies Stalin had, had amassed possibly the biggest army in all human history to cross the border and invade the motherland. Hitler stabbed Stalin in the back with this invasion by violating peace treaties between Germany and the Soviet Union since the end of World War I.
- 7) Now think about it this way, if you were in Stalin's shoes, would you have any idea about how to stop the Nazis from their Blitzkrieg advance to conquer Moscow? Would you be able to hold the entire country together as the Nazis were taking hundreds of thousands of Soviet prisoners in their first weeks of invasion? Stalin had a very short time to react to the biggest impending disaster Russia had seen since Napoleon's Grande Armée, nearly 130 years prior.
- 8) Thinking about the immense pressure the situation created, Stalin had to act very quickly, and in some very harsh ways. One of these harsh reactions was Stalin's implementation his infamous Order No. 227, aka "Not one step back". This order declared that any soldier found retreating without being ordered to do so, was to be shot on sight. The order specifically called for a line of soldiers with machine pistols, called a "blocking battalion," to be stationed behind the Soviet front line. If, at any point, a soldier began an unauthorized retreat, that man or woman was shot by this line of comrades with machine pistols.
 - a. "'Not One Step Back' then outlined some of the practical measures that would be introduced. Any soldiers of whatever rank found guilty of a disciplinary offence would be sent to penal battalion (known as a shtrafbat). These units would be used for marching across, for example, a minefield before a main infantry unit moved up. Order 227 stated that men in these units had to atone for their crimes against the Motherland with their blood. Another new unit created by 'Not One Step Back' was the 'blocking battalion' (known as the zagrdbat). Men in these units would be at the rear of an attack and would shoot anyone not advancing quickly enough or were seen retreating. Blocking battalions would end up shooting thousands of Russian soldiers at the Battle of Stalingrad for failing to show the necessary resolve in combat." (C N Trueman, 2015a)
- 9) Order No. 227 may seem extreme, as was the "scorched earth policy" that Stalin implemented. Amazingly enough, these horrible policies worked! The relentless opposition given by each individual soldier, some fighting to literally the last bullet, caused immense casualties for the Nazis. Couple the relentless opposition Order No. 227 created, with the scorched earth policy, and Stalin's orders starved, and eventually forced retreat for the Third Reich. Every bit of land that the Nazi's conquered was already destroyed and mine laden, thus the "scorched earth policy," and every battle

between the Third Reich and the Soviets spelled obscenely huge casualty numbers that simply weren't sustainable by Germany.

- 10) The Battle of Stalingrad in the previous quote, was home to some 250,000 Axis deaths, totaling around 800,000 Axis casualties, and that was one battle. If you factor in the 1,100,000 Soviet casualties, that's almost 2,000,000 casualties in one battle. America suffered something like 400,000 casualties for the entire four years they were engaged in the war, these numbers came from *one battle!* War on the East front, was real hell, while war on Germany's Western front was often called proper sport, in comparison.
- 11) Arguably, without these two desperate measures that Stalin implemented, "scorched earth policy" and "not one step back", the Soviet Union could have fallen under the control of Hitler, and who knows what the realm of world politics would look like today. Those two policies are majorly responsible for the defeat of the Third Reich in Russia.
- 12) While this is a *very* extreme example, and vastly more horrible than anything else this book discusses, put yourself in Stalin's shoes. Let's use that "historical empathy" to try to understand the situation. Would you have what it takes to pass such horrible orders at the cost of millions of human lives? Would you be able to keep the country from falling into Hitler's hands with totalitarian measures like "not one step back", and the "scorched earth policy?" These measures were put in place as almost nuclear options to save The Motherland, and they worked. When we take a step back and consider the world Stalin was operating in, we can really gain a new perspective on the situation that made the man. We can possibly gain some understanding about how a person in Stalin's shoes, probably would have made similar decisions to save their country, it merely takes stepping into his shoes with historical empathy.
- 13) To make this historical empathy a little more realistic, would *you* be able to make the hard decisions that Stalin made, in order to *save your* country? Ponder on that question for a minute, and keep in mind, it's nothing but a thought exercise, and it forces us to imagine living during a challenging time in world history, however, it can be useful to more fully understand these historical individuals. It's just really hard to get our minds into the heads of people like a Stalin or a Hitler. I personally wouldn't want to walk a single day in either of their shoes, but that's the utility of historical empathy, to understand why people made certain decisions at any given time in history.
- 14) I know that empathizing with such a horrible human being as Stalin can cause one to feel very dirty inside, but, think about the new perspective we can gain with the useful little tool of 'historical empathizing'. We can really begin to see the landscape that created mountains of dead bodies, both Axis, and Soviet, that is scarcely captured by the few surviving grainy black and white photos of such disturbing battles on the Eastern Front.
- 15) This is why historical empathizing can be so useful, and it's a tool we'll occasionally employ in our analysis of the Book of Mormon, and Joseph Smith. It becomes especially useful in this first part of the book; the historical context of the early 19th century United States.
- 16) Let's use historical empathy with the time and place Joseph Smith was living in. In order to understand the Book of Mormon, we need to understand a little bit about the

historical narrative that puts Joseph Smith in the burned-over district of New York in 1829, during the time the Book of Mormon was being written and published.

- 17) The problem with any historical narrative, is knowing where to pick up the story, because all history is so interconnected and interdependent. Take the example of Stalin and Hitler on the Eastern Front. We only discussed a single snapshot of a much larger World War that's had volumes upon volumes of books written about it. It's necessary to ignore large portions of the story for the sake of comprehensibility.
- 18) With the history of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, we can start the historical narrative with publishing the Book of Mormon, but we would be remiss to ignore the first vision accounts leading up to the Book of Mormon. We can back it up further, and say that the history of the Church starts with the birth of Joseph Smith on December 23, 1805, but that would be entirely negligent of the time frame, and mindset, that the Smith family was exposed to, and part of, in the burned-over district.
- 19) We can go back even further and discuss the protestant religious revivals that were happening throughout the early American settlements. The problem with stepping back only that far is it tells us nothing about how or why Protestantism exists, or what drove people to start their own religions in the wake of Catholic control over European nations and settlements.
- 20) This earlier progressing timeline only reinforces the point that it's hard to decide where to pick up a historical narrative, with everything in history so tightly intertwined. Well, we have to pick up the story somewhere. For the sake of examining the world that the early Mormon religion evolved out of, let's look at the burned-over district.
- 21) The phrase "burned-over district," was coined by a man named Charles Finney in his 1876 book "Autobiography of Charles G. Finney". He felt that the area had been so heavily evangelized that it had no "fuel left over to burn," with the "fuel" meaning people that weren't converted to Christianity, and the "burning" meaning to be converted. This was during a time in early American history when Christianity was in a constant state of evolution.
- 22) To put it simply, there really were no Christian authorities in the area, as had been the case with the majority of the European countries that the American Founding Fathers escaped from. This lack of a single authority figure or entity spawned a constant stream of new, mainly Protestant, religions in the early colonies.
- 23) Martin Luther, of Protestant Reformation fame, established the upheaval of Catholic authoritarianism with the help of the Printing Press. Luther was able to publish thousands of copies of pamphlets he was writing that questioned the authority claims and practices of the Catholic Church. These pamphlets circulated and gained traction, which slowly evolved into the Protestant Reformation.
- 24) Many religious visionaries and leaders by the 1800's in America were using local printing presses for the purpose of establishing their own unique religions, and furthering their messages to gain more members. The mixed bag of new interpretations of the bible, and progressive tweaks on old interpretations of religious literature created a lush rain forest of religious ideals and tolerance. It truly was a golden age of idea exploration and political experimentation.

- 25) As these new religions became more popular, they would burn across large swaths of land, consuming all souls susceptible to spirituality and religious inclinations. Whenever a new religion would come on to the scene in the burned-over district, the people living there would convert in mass droves, and it was like a wildfire burning parts of this lush forest of ideas.
- 26) Most of these religions were led by charismatic leaders. While there's nothing wrong with charismatic leaders, it can become a problem with sustainability. When one charismatic person is able to pull parishioners away from any given religion with their heightened level of charisma, those parishioners are just as likely to be pulled away by the next charismatic leader, that comes along with their own more intense level of charisma. Maybe this new leader has their own proprietary books and pamphlets, or just has an extra twinkle in their eye, regardless of what that charisma is made of, it makes for volatile membership numbers, and lacks sustainability.
- 27) Leading a religion with charisma tends to draw people that are predisposed to very spiritual experiences, and as a byproduct, is inherently less stable than a religion based on strict adherence to rules and obedience. As soon as a charismatic leader stops being charismatic, those parishioners that crave the charisma will move on to another religion, with the next leader that can minister with angels, speak in tongues, or pound the pulpit better than the last guy.
- 28) The burned-over district is responsible for the fabrication and promulgation of such religions as the Millerites, Campbellites, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Shakers, the Oneida Society, and many other smaller sects that never gained much traction. All of these small churches and cults began in the burned-over district of New York.
- 29) Here enters a man named Joseph Smith Sr., and his lovely wife, Lucy Mack Smith, betrothed in January of 1796. On December 23, 1805, Lucy gave birth to Joseph Smith Jr., heretofore and for the rest of this book referred to as Joseph Smith. Joseph Smith would endure a turbulent life, living in a huge family, with very little resources.
- 30) Joseph Smith Sr., would take on the role of being a role model of business, commodity speculation, and occult practices in Joseph's early life. A bad business deal, while Joseph was in his early years, would leave the Smith family destitute for years to come, forcing them to acquire living expenses through nearly any means necessary.
- 31) Lucy would take on the role of homemaker, and spiritual or religious leader of the household, being the parent to motivate her children to attend church during their impressionable years. The family came to live in the Manchester/Palmyra area of Wayne County, New York around 1816, and would continue to live there until after the Church of Christ was established in 1830.
- 32) Much more useful information on the Smith family dynamic lies in the pages of "Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet, and his Progenitors for many Generations," written by Joseph's mother, Lucy Smith. This is a wonderful first-hand account of the life of Joseph Smith, and enlightens us to the religious dynamic present in the life of the young boy prophet. Although, be sure to read the 1853 version available on archive.org, there are many versions that have been highly modified from the book's original printed form.

- 33) This paints a picture of the family that Joseph Smith was born into, and the reality of the burned-over district his life was heavily influenced by. There were frequent religious gatherings and revivals in many towns near the Smith family living in New York. Frequently, preachers and evangelists would speak on preaching circuits throughout multiple states, advertising their proprietary version of Christianity, and bringing new followers into their fold.
- 34) This is taken from an article on FAIRMormon.org, the LDS Church's unofficial apologetics website.
- a. "References to regional revival activity in the *Palmyra Register*, a newspaper which Joseph's family would have read, are clearly evident. While these revivals did not occur in Palmyra itself, their mention in the local newspaper would have given Joseph Smith the sense that there was substantial revival activity in the region." ("Joseph Smith's First Vision/Religious revivals in 1820," 2016)
- 35) There is plenty of evidence to suggest that there were multiple religious revivals near the Palmyra area, ranging from a mention in a random man's obituary, all the way to full-blown articles announcing religious gatherings throughout the 1810's and 1820's. If we expand our scope to the area of Rochester, the biggest city within one day's walking distance from Palmyra, the number of religious revivals becomes overwhelming. There was truly no shortage of preachers, on the revival speaking circuit, that Joseph would have known about during the very formative years of his teenage life.
- 36) Additionally, his father, Joseph Smith Sr., would be a leader in occult practices in everything from divining rods, to seer stones, to magik rituals. He would join various treasure digging groups, and teach his sons from Alvin, all the way through Joseph, down to Don Carlos about these magik practices and rituals that would lead the family to money or treasure that was seen buried in the ground.
- 37) This is an affidavit from a man that was a close neighbor to the Smith's from 1822 until about 1831. His name was Peter Ingersoll, and his affidavit seems to enlighten us to the character of the Smith family quite well. To qualify this affidavit, it was published in the first real Mormon exposé piece, "Mormonism Unveiled," [sic]. This book was earth-shattering when it first came out in late 1834, a mere 4 years after the church was founded. However, a common argument used to ignore the book completely is the fact that it was written and published by a man that was violently opposed to the Mormon church, Eber D. Howe. Regardless of how the book is viewed, and how slanted the presentation is, there is still an abundance of signed statements from first-hand accounts, all from people close to the Smith family, and influentially important to the Smith family history. Once you strip away the biases from Howe's own writing, the facts and information left are quite fascinating and worthy of a quick read. So, that qualifies the following testimony as being from an almost "anti-Mormon" source, but really just a first-hand witness account of the experience.

- a. "The general employment of the family, was digging for money. I had frequent invitations to join the company, but always declined being one of their number. They used various arguments to induce me to accept of their invitations. I was once ploughing near the house of Joseph Smith, Sen.[,] about noon, he requested me to walk with him a short distance from his house, for the purpose of seeing whether a mineral rod would work in my hand, saying at the same time he was confident it would. As my oxen were eating, and being myself at leisure, I accepted the invitation. -- When we arrived near the place at which he thought there was money, he cut a small witch hazle[hazel] bush and gave me direction how to hold it. He then went off some rods, and told me to say to the rod, "work to the money," which I did, in an audible voice. He rebuked me severely for speaking it loud, and said it must be spoken in a whisper. This was rare sport for me. While the old man was standing off some rods, throwing himself into various shapes, I told him the rod did not work. He seemed much surprised at this, and said he thought he saw it move in my hand. It was now time for me to return to my labor. On my return, I picked up a small stone and was carelessly tossing it from one hand to the other. Said he, (looking very earnestly) what are you going to do with that stone? Throw it at the birds, I replied. No, said the old man, it is of great worth; and upon this I gave it to him. Now, says he, if you only knew the value there is back of my house (and pointing to a place near) -- *there*, exclaimed he, is one chest of gold and another of silver. He then put the stone which I had given him, into his hat, and stooping forward, he bowed and made sundry maneuvers, quite similar to those of a stool pigeon. At length he took down his hat, and being very much exhausted, said, in a faint voice, "if you knew what I had seen, you would believe." To see the old man thus try to impose upon me, I confess, rather had a tendency to excite contempt than pity. Yet I thought it best to conceal my feelings, preferring to appear the dupe of my credulity, than to expose myself to his resentment. His son Alvin then went through with the same performance, which was equally disgusting."(Howe, 1834)

- 38) From this quote, we can see that Joseph Smith Sr., was a leader of the family, but not in a religious way that you may expect. He was much more prone to magik spells and occult practices than he was to any specific religion. He was very practiced in the use of divining rods to locate water or buried treasure, although he seemingly didn't have much success in locating either of those commodities.
- 39) Lucy Smith stepped into the role of religious leader of the household, being more partial to the Methodists than any other religious sect. We will see this religious nature permeate the early Smith family experiences to the point that Joseph Smith joined a Methodist church in 1828, after the death of his first child.(Walters, n.d.)
- 40) Unfortunately for the Smith children, this diametric opposition between Lucy and Joseph Smith Sr.'s religious ideals were a point of contention in the household.

Frequent arguments would arise about the best way to raise the children, and what religious mindset was best to imprint on the children as they grew up. These are arguments commonly held in many households, even today, and young Joseph Smith's mind was formed around this central point of contention.

- 41) Another challenging point of contention in the Smith home was the conundrum of what happens to an unbaptized child after they die. On November 19, 1823, Alvin Smith died from mercury poisoning. We'll discuss that in detail in following chapters. He was given a mercury solution to cure his bilious colic, and died from the treatment. The minister that provided the funeral sermon made some inflammatory remarks about Alvin's salvation that didn't sit well with the Smith family.
 - a. "Alvin's tombstone says he died on Nov. 19, 1823, at the age of 25. The minister who preached at the funeral suggested that although Alvin had loved God deeply and had been extremely kind, good, and moral, he could not go to Heaven because he was unbaptized and did not belong to any church. Alvin's father felt deeply that this was false doctrine, but the matter weighed heavily on the grieving family for the next thirteen years."(Terrie Lynn Bittner, 2013)
- 42) The convictions this minister preached were altogether rejected by the majority of the Smith family, but it was still a point of severe contention in the Smith home. While Lucy was more religiously inclined, she tended to believe what the pastor said, meaning that Alvin was burning in hell due to his lack of baptism. Joseph Smith Sr., was much less dogmatic with his belief in God, thinking there was no possible way a just and merciful God would send a child to hell for eternity for not being baptized.
- 43) Of course, Joseph was caught in the middle, and wanted to intervene somehow, or settle the debate to alleviate the contentious nature of this argument. Thus we begin to see the life the young boy prophet was enduring, but was also shaping his theological comprehension, and instilling hostility to some religions.
- 44) Let's spend some time on Alvin and Joseph Sr. Alvin was a very important and influential member of the Smith family. He was the second born son of Lucy and Joseph Sr., but their first child was born prematurely and died soon after birth, making Alvin the eldest of Joseph's siblings.
- 45) Not only did Alvin carry the torch as eldest and wisest child, in some respects, he carried the weight of the family on his shoulders. Alvin and Hyrum were Joseph's older brothers, and many responsibilities of the family would fall to them as Joseph Sr. was a "noted drunkard," and Palmyra locals "frequently seen old Jo drunk". There are even stories of Joseph Sr. going to turkey shoots, getting drunk, and putting spells on the men's guns so they couldn't shoot the turkeys.(Dan Vogel, 2004)
- 46) Suffice it to say, Joseph Sr. was quite partial to his alcohol, and spent a fair amount of time inebriated. This may help to explain why young Joseph Smith didn't accept alcohol during his leg operation at the age of 8. Joseph had seen how alcohol made his

father act, and the contention that arose from Lucy disliking alcoholism, and Joseph didn't want any part of it.

- 47) There are many problems that can arise with alcoholism, and this is the first time that we really need to engage that tool of historical empathy to understand the Smith family. It seems worthwhile to picture ourselves in the Smith home during these challenging years in Joseph's teenage life. There were too many people living in a house that was much too small for all of them. There were hardly ever enough resources to satisfy the needs of all the children, so they frequently went to bed hungry, and lived in rags that were perpetually dirty and full of holes. Lucy was trying her best to lead the family, and be the spiritual guide for the toughest of questions raised by young inquiring minds, and anytime she would try to fall back on the parenting of Joseph Sr., he had a whiskey bottle in his hand, and couldn't be relied upon for the other half of the parenting workload. Anytime that Joseph Sr., picked up the bottle, it was a sign to Lucy, and the entire family, that he was checking out, and couldn't be relied on for emotional or familial support.
- 48) However, Joseph Sr., was not absent during these times, he was a great man for seeing spooks. He would instruct Alvin, Hyrum, Joseph, Samuel, and all the Smith boys on his beliefs in the occult practices. The Smith men would spend years digging for buried treasure, and chasing off the guardian spirits of said treasure. They would experiment with divining rods, and seer stones, trying to lift the enchanted treasure from its resting place in the hills all around Palmyra N.Y., Harmony PA, South Bainbridge N.Y., and many other places. Some of these holes the men dug exist even today. In September of 2015, Casey Kearns and Craig Povone, reopened one of the largest known holes the Smith men dug, being about 6 feet tall, and 10-12 feet deep into the hillside. (Dan Vogel, 2015)
- 49) These were really deep holes the Smith men dug in search of treasure. Picture yourself in the shoes of one of the Smith boys. You spend all day, every day, at the direction of Joseph with his seer stone, digging for hours in the sun, trying to obtain the buried treasure before its spirit guardian pulls the treasure away, and the it slips further into the ground. The Smiths must have felt like the Nephites in the Book of Mormon, Helaman 13:35-36.
- a. "35: Yea, we have hid up our treasures and they have slipped away from us, because of the curse of the land.
 - b. 36: O that we had repented in the day that the word of the Lord came unto us; for behold the land is cursed, and all things are become slippery, and we cannot hold them."
- 50) It's tough to imagine ourselves there, because the Smith's had a completely different mindset than we have today, at least when it comes to buried treasure, spirits, and God in general. Today, science has given us metal detectors and ground-penetrating radar to look for buried treasure, but in Joseph's time, all they had were rocks in hats, and witch hazel sticks cut into divining rods.

- 51) The role of bread-winner, and family leader would often fall on the shoulders of Alvin Smith. He was a very wise, kind, and loving man, and probably did more to support the Smith family than Joseph Sr. did on a day-to-day basis. All of Alvin's siblings looked up to him, and would lean on him for things they needed when Joseph Sr. was too busy with the liquor. This harsh reality would come back to haunt the entire Smith family after Alvin's death in 1823, which we'll examine soon.
- 52) This is the mindset we need to come to grips with, if we are ever to truly understand the Book of Mormon, and its author, Joseph Smith. We need to try and put ourselves there in the early 1800's America, and view the world through the eyes of Joseph Smith, his family, and his closest associates.
- 53) This is where historical empathy can really help us in understanding the minds of these people. Personally, in my journey through life, I've fundamentally changed my mind or perspective on many things, and learned countless beautiful aspects of the world I inhabit. That's only been the past 25 years of history, seen through my eyes that these changes and advances have been made. 25 years has educated me in ways that are completely unquantifiable, but have allowed my understanding of reality, to align closer with *actual* reality.
- 54) That's only 25 years from one person's perspective. Now, extrapolate that out to nearly 200 years through all the history the world has experienced since the early 1800's, and we're looking at some very fundamental shifts in the perspective of your every-day average Joe or Jane. People today are exponentially more literate, scientifically minded, educated, and rational than our ancestors, per capita, and these advances show through the amazing progression in science and medicine made in the past 200 years. There's simply no way of quantifying the improvements, discovered and built upon, for the past 200 years of our modern civilization.
- 55) It takes the mental exercise of historical empathy for us to try and get in the mindset of these early 19th century individuals. It's very difficult to put ourselves in their shoes, and see the world through their eyes, when we seem so far advanced from the reality they inhabited. Joseph Smith was a god-fearing, intelligent man, but it goes so much deeper than that. He was fascinated by politics as evidenced by his 1844 bid for president of the U.S. He believed in manifestations by angels, and communicating with long dead men who wandered the American continent. Joseph believed that he could see buried treasures through a stone he put in his hat, that would illuminate the treasure's location, allowing him and others to dig for it, sometimes for weeks on end. He believed that capitalism was sinful, and communistic theocracies were God's intention for governmental rule. Joseph believed that the mounds and civilizations that were being unearthed and discovered all around the American continents were far too advanced to be erected by any dark-skinned Native American people, therefore white people must have built them nearly 2000 years ago. He believed that these same white Israelites kept a record, and preserved it, engraved on golden plates, in Reformed Egyptian, only to be unearthed in Joseph's proverbial backyard, pulled from the Hill Comorah (Grant H. Palmer, 2014). These were some of the sincerely held religious beliefs of Joseph Smith, and we need to understand him, and his mindset, if we are to really understand the Book of Mormon.

- 56) As stated earlier, it's very challenging to put our minds where Joseph's mind was in the 1820's. It was simply a different reality that we have a hard time comprehending. Hopefully, this challenge can be overcome with a little historical empathy, almost like some kind of imaginative time-travelling. We may not be able to *fully* understand what it was like to live in 1820's burned-over district New York, but at least we can get one small step closer to seeing the world through the eyes of the young man prophet.

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