THE WORLD AND THE PROPHET

Klaus Hansen

Nauvoo: Kingdom on the Mississippi. By Robert Bruce Flanders. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965. x plus 364 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, and index. $6.50. Klaus J. Hansen is Visiting Assistant Professor of History at Utah State University, where he advises the Priests' Quorum in his L.D.S. ward; he has articles and reviews in various professional journals, and his *Millennial Empire: The Political Kingdom of God and the Council of Fifty in Mormon History* will be published this year.

Discussing religion in America, de Tocqueville once remarked that "religions ought . . . to confine themselves within their own precincts; for in seeking to extend their power beyond religious matters, they incur a risk of not being believed at all. The circle within which they seek to restrict the human intellect ought therefore to be carefully traced, and, beyond its verge, the mind should be left entirely free to its own guidance." Joseph Smith could not have disagreed more. Religion, in his opinion, clearly should not confine itself to traditional precincts. In fact, it served its intended purpose only if it included the entire spectrum of human thought and action. Nauvoo became his monument to this philosophy. Perhaps at no other period of his career was Joseph able to merge religion and temporal affairs more fully. He saw his roles as real estate promoter and speculator, city planner, architect, politician, military leader, innkeeper, business entrepreneur, progagandist, and public relations man as necessary and complementary adjuncts to the role of "Prophet, Seer, and Revelator." This all-inclusive view of religion became a major heritage of Mormonism and Nauvoo the crucible in which were formed the religious, social, and political institutions which Brigham Young transferred to the Great Basin after Joseph's tragic death.

Not all Mormon residents of Nauvoo would have disagreed with de Tocqueville. Ebenezer Robinson, for example, first editor of the *Times and Seasons,* found it increasingly difficult to accept the temporal counsel of his beloved prophet. He refused to join the Nauvoo Legion at the peril of tremendous social and moral pressure; when he learned of the doctrines of plural marriage, he refused to believe they were of God. William Marks, president of the Nauvoo Stake, joined the Council of Fifty — a secret political organization with executive, legislative, and judicial powers intended as a nucleus government for a projected Mormon nation state — only because of his strong ties of fealty to Joseph Smith. He witnessed Joseph's installation as king over that organization with the greatest distaste. Others, less loyal to Joseph, openly broke with him over such doctrines while he was still alive. In fact, this break precipitated the events leading to the murder of the Mormon prophet.

The death of Joseph Smith produced a rift in Mormon history which has not yet been healed. Those who accepted the union of temporal and spiritual matters, those who supported the political kingdom of God, polygamy, and temple work, followed Brigham Young to the Valley of the Great Salt Lake. Those who rejected these doctrines and practices — which they considered to be radical departures from the more "orthodox" Mormonism they

had joined – refused the leadership of Young, and, flitting from one claimant to the mantle of the Prophet to another, ultimately joined the Reorganized Church, established in 1860.

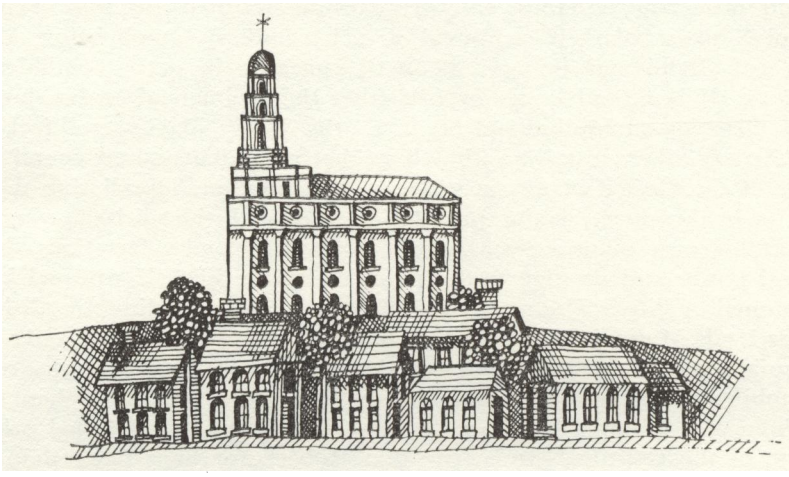
It is understandable that Utah Mormons and those of the Reorganized Church have disagreed about the significance of Nauvoo and the role of Joseph Smith in its controversial history. Utah Mormons, proud of their Nauvoo heritage, have always pointed to Joseph Smith as the father of their institutions. It was in Nauvoo, according to B. H. Roberts, "that Joseph Smith reached the summit of his remarkable career. It was in Nauvoo that he grew bolder in the proclamation of those doctrines which stamp Mormonism as the great religion of the age. It was in Nauvoo that Joseph Smith's life expanded into that eloquent fulness which gives so much promise of what man will be in eternity." All his life Brigham Young insisted that he was merely following the visions Joseph Smith had imparted to him in Nauvoo. The union of the spiritual and temporal continued inseparable in Utah. Polygamy was publicly announced; the Council of Fifty controlled political and economic life; endowments, marriages, and baptisms for the dead were performed in temples as they rose in St. George, Logan, Manti, and Salt Lake City. Hence Utah Mormons had no difficulties with historical logic and continuity. Joseph was a prophet of God in both temporal and spiritual affairs, and so was Brigham Young.

Those, however, who rejected the political kingdom of God, plural marriage, and temple work were trapped in a contradiction if they acknowledged Joseph's authorship of these "innovations." The simplest escape was simply to deny that he had anything to do with such practices. According to them, the villainous John C. Bennett had duped an honest prophet who always believed the best of those who served him and who lacked experience in temporal affairs. The episode taught the prophet to stick to spiritual matters and they would argue that Joseph did so most of the time after the Bennett affair. That arch-villain Brigham Young, they would say, foisted the image of a temporal-minded Joseph Smith upon the world. Brigham put into the mouth of a Joseph unavailable to defend himself doctrines which the Utah leader wanted to practice in his new kingdom and for which he needed Joseph's prestige and the authority. And so it can hardly be said that the historiographies of the Reorganized Church and of Utah Mormonism have been parallel.

It is, therefore, refreshing and not a little ironic to read a book by a brilliant and objective historian, a member of the Reorganized Church, who corrects some of the discrepancies in the historical record. He has looked unflinchingly at facts which for the most part support the Utah Church: Joseph Smith *did* start a political kingdom of God and a Council of Fifty; he *was* made king over that organization; he *did* originate polygamy; he *was* the author of those new rituals which were practiced in the Nauvoo Temple – all facts which the Reorganized Church has preferred to contradict or ignore. Again and again, he emphasizes that Nauvoo was the prototype for Utah. Flanders is even more emphatic on this point than B. H. Roberts or Reva Latimer Halford in her gigantic masters' thesis, "Nauvoo—The City Beautiful" (University of Utah, 1945), because he has uncovered much significant new evidence to substantiate that assertion. It is doubtful that anyone will improve on Flanders in this respect for a long time to come.

This book is indeed the definitive political and economic history of the Mormons in Illinois, superseding George R. Gayler's rather superficial doctoral dissertation, "A Social, Economic, and Political Study of the Mormons in Western Illinois, 1839-1846: A Re-Evaluation" (Indiana University, 1955). Flanders's work will be a major building block for whoever attempts the Herculean task of writing a much-needed encyclopedic history of the Mormons in Illinois, an undertaking in which Mrs. Halford only partially succeeded.

Largely disregarding social history or the development of Mormon theology, Flanders focuses almost completely on Nauvoo as a political, corporate kingdom of God, a kingdom that was not only *in* this world, but in his opinion very much *of* it. Flanders's interpretation will undoubtedly alienate many Utah Mormons, although they will be delighted with the additional historical proof for their position. As an objective historian, he presents the facts. But what do these facts mean to him? He makes it obvious that he does not like what he has uncovered. Although agreeing with Roberts that Nauvoo was



the prototype for the Rocky Mountain kingdom, Flanders clearly implies that the results were unfortunate. If the one was flawed, as he obviously believes, so inevitably must be the other. In Flanders's opinion, Joseph was first of all founder of a new religion, one who "inspired a new faith in his converts, and gave them and their posterity a large body of scripture, much of which has proved of lasting religious and literary value" (p. 4). Yet at Nauvoo Joseph abandoned these high endeavors for more mundane pursuits. Flanders obviously agrees with de Tocqueville.

Flanders's story of Nauvoo is tragedy in the large sense of the word, a tragedy resulting from the same dilemma that faced John Winthrop three hundred years earlier: the dilemma of living in the world without becoming part of it. Simon Stylites, who pursued holiness on a pillar in the Syrian desert, took the easy way and could never aspire to sainthood either in the Puritan or the Mormon heaven. But as Winthrop recorded so candidly in his journal, if man did live in the world, he was continually in danger of becoming either an intolerant religious zealot or a profligate. Joseph Smith and his

followers faced essentially the same problem. Yet they also had other troubles which Winthrop escaped by sailing to America: the Gentiles. If the Saints defended the kingdom too vigorously, they might become too exclusive; but they would also be tempted to adopt the methods of their enemies for self-defense and thus become like those whom they despised. How could a worldly Mormon "Kingdom of God" defend and protect the kingdom of Christ? That is Flanders's implicit question. His objective answer is the history of the fall of Nauvoo — a fall produced because the Saints were too much in and of the world.

The image of Joseph Smith in Nauvoo emerging from Flanders's pages "is of a man of affairs — planner, promoter, architect, entrepreneur, executive, politician, filibusterer — matters of which he was sometimes less sure than he was those of the spirit" (p. vi). "When Smith failed to separate the prophetic role from that of administrator, entrepreneur, political aspirant, and plain disputant, the sacredness of his spiritual leadership became jeopardized in the eyes of many Mormons. When 'thus saith God' mixed in temporal affairs, as it did in the Nauvoo House enterprise, trouble resulted" (p. 244). Flanders's story of Nauvoo is largely composed of such troubles: Joseph being taken in by Isaac Galland and John C. Bennett; engaging in petty squabbles with the Laws, Higbees, and Foster over whether the commercial center should be on the "flat" or on Mulholland Street on the "hill"; playing political games with Cyrus Walker; installing himself as the only Lieutenant General in the history of the United States since George Washington; repudiating debts by filing for bankruptcy; relaxing prohibition laws, with the spirits flowing freely even at his own mansion; succumbing to vanity and affectation; desiring political power and prestige to the point of having himself crowned king in the Council of Fifty. The melancholy facts of a tragic decline are all here.

For Utah Mormons, on the other hand, Nauvoo was tragedy only in the colloquial sense of the word that permits newspapers to call murder or even automobile and airplane accidents tragedy. For in the eyes of Brigham Young and those who followed him to Utah, Joseph's "innovations" failed primarily because of the Gentiles. It is true that Roberts, perhaps more than many of his coreligionists, acknowledged human weaknesses in the Saints. He even recognized minor flaws in the character of Joseph Smith, something the more flowery panegyrics issuing periodically from Mormon presses in recent years fail to do; yet ultimately there is no question in Roberts's mind that Nauvoo fell because, as Joseph once remarked, "the influence of the devil and his servants will be used against the Kingdom of God." Utah Mormons cannot admit a major flaw in Nauvoo, for these were the very practices and doctrines Young transplanted to the Rocky Mountain kingdom. Hence the inevitability of Roberts's proud evaluation of Smith's accomplishments in Nauvoo.

Flanders may have gone a little too far with his implicit uncomplimentary evluation of Utah Mormonism. He might well have let his readers come to their own conclusions. What the facts imply is uncomfortable enough. A final quote at the end of the book, a very derogatory assessment of Utah Mormonism by the apostate Stenhouse, seems gratuitous. Unfortunately, Flanders has thus seriously weakened a strong position, particularly because such barbs, though irritating, have long ago lost their sting. After having suffered such missiles for more than a hundred years, Utah Mormons have developed a thick hide. I am afraid that too many readers will simply

pull out the barb and with it dismiss the whole book. And that would be unfortunate indeed; they cannot afford to dismiss this study for such superficial barbs, which may well have been intended as balm for members of the Reorganized Church, who have to grapple with veritable spears thrust into their sides.

Flanders's book may be uncomfortable for a more important reason. It is a monument to the irony of Mormon history. How much of the Nauvoo that Flanders establishes as a prototype for Young's Rocky Mountain kingdom are contemporary Utah Mormons willing to accept? How do they feel about Joseph Smith as king over the Council of Fifty and as Lieutenant General of the Nauvoo Legion? And what is their real attitude towards polygamy? Admittedly, descendants of polygamous families still proudly acknowledge their heritage; but many Mormons clearly wish it had never happened. A leading historian at the leading state university in Utah for years avoided any mention of the subject; references to it in graduate theses were eradicated with the remark, "Too controversial!" Preston Nibley, it will be remembered, wrote an entire book on Brigham Young without mentioning the dread word once. The Nauvoo most Utah Mormons are willing to accept as a cradle for their institutions has more in common with the romanticized and superficial image of Cecil McGavin's *Nauvoo the Beautiful* (Salt Lake City, 1946) than with historical reality.

Utah Mormonism has moved subtly but distinctly in the direction of de Tocqueville. Not that anyone would publicly admit the change. Yet unquestionably, those who rejected Brigham Young and what he stood for in Nauvoo could more easily have accepted the kind of Mormonism found in Utah today. In many ways Nauvoo was less the prototype of the future than was the Mormonism of those who rejected all the city stood for. Today kingdom building is frowned upon not only in Independence but in Salt Lake City as well. Here is the larger meaning of Flanders's book. Clearly, it is a pivotal work in the historiography of Mormonism, one that could well initiate serious dialogue between the factions. If no Mormon scholar can afford to ignore it, neither can other Mormons of whatever persuasion.

MORMONS IN THE SIDE STREAM

Milton V. Backman, Jr.

Christian Deviations: The Challenge of the New Spiritual Movements. By Horton Davies. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965. 144 pp. $1.45 (paper). Milton Backman is Associate Professor of History of Religion at Brigham Young University and serves in the presidency of his L.D.S. stake mission; he recently published *American Religions and the Rise of Mormonism.*

During the third week of January, 1966, millions of Americans united in prayer, beseeching God's assistance in their quest for Christian unity. One of the leading advocates of this ecumenical movement is Horton Davies, Putnam Professor of Religion at Princeton University. According to Professor Davies, the next stage in the reintegration of a divided Christendom is the uniting of "side-stream" Christianity with the "mainstream." Many Catholics and Protestants are not satisfied, he asserts in the recent reissue of