

THE SEARCH FOR TRUTH AND MEANING IN MORMON HISTORY

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The philosopher Plato, to whom dialogue was the highest expression of intellectuality, defined thought as "the dialogue of the soul with itself." It is thus altogether fitting that the editors of *Dialogue* should encourage Mormon scholars to conduct periodic soul-searchings in regard to the relevance of their studies to the Gospel. I am grateful for this opportunity of reappraising Mormon history and of relating historical studies to the Church and its historic mission of building the Kingdom of God on earth.

I

From its very inception The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints sought to leave an accurate and complete record of its history. On April 6, 1830, the date of the organization of the Church, a revelation was given to

Joseph Smith which began "Behold, there shall be a record kept among you . . ."¹ To accomplish this purpose the Second Elder of the Church, Oliver Cowdery, was selected to serve as Church Recorder. When Elder Cowdery was transferred to other work a year later, John Whitmer was appointed, by revelation, to "write and keep a regular history."² Whitmer served in this capacity until 1835, and wrote a brief manuscript narrative, which is now in the possession of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.³

Thus, from the earliest years the Church designated an official to record its story and preserve its records. Twenty-five men have been sustained during the years 1830 to 1968 as Church Historians and Recorders. (The list of those who have served in these capacities is given at the end of this essay.) In addition to the records kept by these men, each of the organizations of the Church has kept minutes of its meetings and other documents, individuals have kept diaries and journals, and newspapers and magazines have published items of contemporary and earlier history. Thus, a surprisingly complete record of the Church and its instrumentalities, from 1830 to the present, can be found in the Church Historian's Library and Archives, in Salt Lake City. The records in the Church Archives appear to be "honest," in the sense of presenting the facts as nearly as the designated historians could determine them, and there does not appear to have been any destruction of or tampering with the records or the evidence.

The second phase of official Church historiography began in 1838 when Joseph Smith and his associates began the preparation of a documentary record entitled "History of Joseph Smith." This detailed chronology, written as an official diary of the Prophet, appeared in serial form in the *Times and Seasons* (Nauvoo, Illinois), beginning in 1842. When that publication was discontinued in 1846, the remainder of the "History" was published in issues of the *Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star* (Liverpool), during the years 1853-1863. A follow-up "History of Brigham Young" and other Church officials covered the years to 1844, and was published in the *Deseret News* (Salt Lake City) and *Millennial Star*, 1863-1865. In subsequent years Church Historians and Assistant Church Historians worked through these manuscripts, corrected errors, added corroborative material, and "improved" the narrative. The result was the seven-volume *History of the Church*, edited and annotated by B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City, 1902-1912), which is still the standard "documentary history" of the Church.

A third stage of the recording of the history of the Church was initiated by Andrew Jenson at the turn of the century, when he commenced three important projects: (1) the preparation and accumulation of biographies of the founders and subsequent officers of the Church, many of which even-

¹Doctrine and Covenants (Salt Lake City, 1935), section 21, verse 1.

²*Ibid.*, section 47, verse 1.

³*John Whitmer's History* (Salt Lake City, 1966), 24 pp. A similar history, overlapping the Whitmer account, is the "Far West Record," in the L.D.S. Church Historian's Library and Archives, Salt Lake City. Parts of it have been published in Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, B. H. Roberts, ed. (6 vols., Salt Lake City, 1902-1912).

tually found an outlet in the *L.D.S. Biographical Encyclopedia* (4 vols., Salt Lake City, 1901-1936). Unfortunately, subsequent volumes have not been issued with information on Church officials of the past thirty years. (2) The preparation of an encyclopedia of Church history, subsequently published as *Encyclopedic History of the Church* (Salt Lake City, 1941). (3) The preparation of a massive multi-volume scrapbook record of the day-to-day activities of the Church, with excerpts from available sources, both published and unpublished. This "Journal History of the Church" now comprises more than 1,300 legal-size scrapbooks, from three to five inches thick; it is being extended daily by the addition of clippings from Salt Lake City and other newspapers. Happily there is an index to this mammoth collection so that one is able to trace references to individuals and organizations with considerable ease.

A fourth stage in the setting down of Mormon history was the preparation of synthesis histories. Overlooking the fragmentary histories of Elders Cowdery, Whitmer, and Correll,⁴ and the publication of various missionary tracts with historical sections, the first attempt of Mormon historians to set down a synthesis history was that of Edward Tullidge, who was granted access to materials in the Church Archives for the preparation of his *Life of Brigham Young; or Utah and Her Founders* (New York, 1876), *History of Salt Lake City* (Salt Lake City, 1886), and *History of Northern Utah and Southern Idaho* (Salt Lake City 1889). Hubert Howe Bancroft also received extensive materials from the Historian's Office, and had the personal help of Orson Pratt, Franklin D. Richards, John Taylor, and Wilford Woodruff in the preparation of his *History of Utah* (San Francisco, 1889), which might be said to contain the first "professional" history of the Mormons. Bancroft's one-volume history was followed by Orson F. Whitney's four-volume *History of Utah* (Salt Lake City, 1898-1904), which was written almost exclusively from Mormon sources. The next history was B. H. Roberts' "History of the Mormon Church," which appeared in serialized form in *Americana* (New York), 1909-1915. With some additions and changes it reappeared in *A Comprehensive History of the Church: Century I* (6 vols., Salt Lake City, 1930). A one-volume synthesis history, originally prepared as a manual for Priesthood classes and since reissued many times with additional material is Joseph Fielding Smith's, *Essentials of Church History* (Salt Lake City, 1922).

With the exception of the Bancroft volume and some sections of Roberts's *Comprehensive History*, most of our Latter-day Saint histories and the monographs which have been written from them, represent what might be called "documentary histories." They attempt to give an account of the important events of the past without critical analysis or interpretation. They depend, essentially, on the statements of participants and observers, whose testimonies have been excerpted and combined, with due regard for their trustworthiness, and "compiled" into a narrative. Some of the histories have been written to prove a theological thesis, such as that the Lord looked after the Saints, pun-

⁴A series of letters by Oliver Cowdery and W. W. Phelps in the *Latter-day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* (Kirtland, Ohio, 1834-1837) contain much history. John Correll published *A Brief History of the Church* (St. Louis, 1839).

ished them when disobedient, and frustrated their enemies. They have dealt primarily with the externals of the events which transpired, and have not concerned themselves with the internals — the underlying motives or thoughts of those who made the actions happen. Above all, our historians were perhaps unduly respectful of certain authorities, placing credence in accounts that should have been subjected to critical analysis.

This tradition of unquestioning "compiled external history" presented not only an authoritative narration of the succession of events, but also set the tone for a large proportion of the subsequent studies in Mormon history. These have dealt primarily with changes in the institutional structure of the Church — with the development of its doctrine, program, and organization. Particularly popular objects of study have been histories of the missions, wards and stakes, auxiliaries, educational and cultural institutions and programs, and economic enterprises. One reason for the popularity of such studies is the survival and availability of the records of the organizations and programs. Personal records were hardly available to anyone outside of given families, and these were widely scattered. There was always a problem about family records because every family organization had at least *one* person who did not want anyone to know that grandpa once shared a bottle of wine with his Battalion buddies, or that Aunt Jane once served tea to an officer of the Relief Society. Thus, using organizational records rather than family records, scholars tended to describe the "outside" of the events.

There is, of course, another kind of history — the type which the British historian and philosopher, R. G. Collingwood, has called the history of the inside of the event. This history seeks to determine and expose the thoughts in the minds of the persons "by whose agency the events came about."⁵ The historian does this by creatively re-thinking the thoughts of the participants in the context of his knowledge, analyzing them and forming his own judgment of the validity of their explanations. He invests the narrative with meaning by consciously selecting from the sources what he thinks important, by interpolating in the reports of the participants and observers things which they do not explicitly say, and by rejecting or amending what he regards as due to misinformation or mendacity. Above all, he puts his sources in the witness-box, and by cross-examination extorts from them information which in their original statements they withheld, either because they did not wish to give it or because they did not realize they possessed it. In other words, the Mormon historian, like other historians, must read contemporary accounts with a question in his mind, and seek to find out, by inference and otherwise, what he wants to find out from them. Every step in his research depends on asking a question — not so much whether the statement is true or false, but what the statement means. Obviously, since his informants, by and large, are dead, the historian must put the questions to himself.⁶ The historian, as with

⁵R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (New York, 1956), p. 215. The first English edition was 1946.

⁶Compare Collingwood, pp. 235-237, 269, 273-275. This paragraph is very close to a paraphrase of Collingwood.

scholars in other disciplines, must engage in the continuous Socratic questioning that Plato described so well (in the quotation used at the beginning of the article) as "a dialogue of the soul with itself."

This kind of history, which we may call Socratic or interpretive history, must by its very nature be a private and not a Church venture. Although this history is intended to imbue the written record with meaning and significance, the Church cannot afford to place its official stamp of approval on any "private" interpretation of its past. Interpretations are influenced by styles and ideas of the times, not to say the personalities and experiences of historians, and the Church itself ought not to be burdened with the responsibility of weighing the worth of one interpretation as against another. Contrariwise, the historian ought to be free to suggest interpretations without placing his faith and loyalty on the line.

Fortunately, the Church Historian's Library and Archives is now admirably arranged to permit responsible historians to get at the "inside" of the events in our history.⁷ Materials are filed in three separate sections, each of which has its own card catalogues and indexes:

1. Library Section. This includes a nearly-complete library of books, pamphlets, tracts, and periodicals published by and about the Church, including "Anti-Mormon" works. There are also newspapers and maps, films and filmstrips.
2. Manuscript Section. In addition to the "Journal History of the Church" initiated by Andrew Jenson, there are similar journal or manuscript histories of each of the wards, stakes, and missions; Name Files of several thousand church officials and members (and some non-members as well); and the diaries and journals of several hundred persons.
3. Written Records Section. This section features tens of thousands of minute books and other records of wards, stakes, Priesthood quorums, auxiliary organizations, and missions, as well as emigration records.

The alphabetically-arranged Name Files in the Manuscript Section, which are now in the process of being indexed, are of particular value in the re-writing of our history. Typically, they include autobiographical sketches, newspaper clippings, letters to and from the person, and other personal records and documents. Thus, these files permit us to look at the record from the standpoint of many individual participants. These records must be examined with care, and because of the intimate family information which they contain can often be made available only to professional historians who are accustomed to handling confidential data.

After working through several hundred of these Name Files, I do not see any major revisions of our history — that is, revisions of conclusions to which sophisticated historians have come in years past. Indeed, on some of the con-

⁷Certain materials are not in the Church Historian's Library and Archives; for example, minutes of meetings of the First Presidency, certain diaries of members of the First Presidency, certain financial records, etc., are in the vault of the First Presidency.

clusions reached long ago by our historians but doubted by some recent historians, there is a wealth of material, heretofore unused, which corroborates the "official" point of view. For this reason, it is fortunate that this material is now more generally available. The records contain numerous accounts and evidences of individual greatness, heroism, and sacrifice. My own impression is that an intensive study of Church history, while it will dispel certain myths or half-myths sometimes perpetuated in Sunday School (and other) classes, will *build* testimonies rather than weaken them.

II

The more one works with the materials of Mormon history the more one becomes aware of certain built-in biases which have influenced our impressions of Church history. Let me suggest five of these:

1. *The theological marionette bias.* One gets the impression from some of our literature and sermons that the Prophets and their associates in the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve were pious personages who responded somewhat mechanically, as if by conditioned reflex, to explicit instructions from On High, and that God manipulated the leaders much as marionettes in a puppet show — that Church leaders themselves were not significant as agents of history. While this may very well have been the case in some instances, all developments did not come about "naturally" or even "supernaturally," nor can we describe innovations naively as "expedients necessitated by the times." The introduction of theological and organizational changes is done by people — by learned scripturists, talented organizers, and energetic innovators. They may have operated individually or in groups; they may have been motivated by ambition, prestige, or the good of the Church. In any event, they introduced new programs and organizational instrumentalities, and assumed the responsibility for the adjustment to external circumstances without which the programs would not work. To study the mentality, personality, and character of our leaders is to study the activators of history. Biographical and psychological studies are an indispensable but little-used vehicle for the study and comprehension of our history.

2. *The male bias.* This is the notion that men hold all the important policy-making positions, therefore they are the ones who determine the course of events. The Priesthood holds the key leadership offices, we reason, so the Priesthood is responsible for everything that happens. We are inclined toward a male interpretation of Mormon history. A few years ago, the Gospel Doctrine classes studied a manual prepared by Dr. Thomas C. Romney entitled *The Gospel In Action* (Salt Lake City, 1949). Each week we studied the life of one historic Latter-day Saint — and we discussed some truly interesting and inspiring lives. Forty-five biographies were given in the manual; and while half of the persons attending Gospel Doctrine classes were presumably women, forty-two of the biographies were of men, and only three were of women. We studied the life of Angus M. Cannon, who was a long-time president of Salt Lake Stake;

but we did not study his fascinating wife, Martha Hughes Cannon, who was the first woman state senator in the United States. (As a matter of fact, when the Republican Party nominated her husband for the State Senate, the Democratic Party had no one who thought it worthwhile to run against him — that is, until some party member conceived the idea of running Sister Cannon. She won against her husband, served two terms, and proved a brilliant and resourceful senator.) We studied Orson Spencer, the president of the University of Nauvoo; but we did not study his equally intelligent and fascinating daughter, Aurelia Spencer Rogers, the founder of the Primary Association of the Church. This pattern of assumed male dominance is characteristic of all our histories. Edward Tullidge gave biographies of thirty persons in his *Life of Brigham Young*; all of the thirty were men. The fourth volume of Orson F. Whitney's monumental *History of Utah* contains the biographies of 351 persons, only twenty-nine of which were women. One section entitled "First Immigrants," presents biographies of thirty persons, in only two of which was any attempt made to recognize the fact that women also came to Utah. (As a matter of fact, eighty-three women had arrived in the Salt Lake Valley by the end of July 1847, three from the original "pioneer" company, sixty from the Mormon Battalion, and twenty with the "Mississippi Saints.")

Another category in the Whitney biographies is entitled "Farmers and Stockraisers." Sixty-two biographies are presented, but in only two instances does the biography make any attempt to identify and describe the history of the wife or wives, along with that of the husband. This, despite the fact that the men were away on missions so often that in many cases the women were the effective farmers of the family. This was even more true in the case of polygamous households where the husband could not possibly manage on a day-to-day basis the farms of his various families. It may well be true, as some historians have asserted, that the Mormons were the best farmers in the West, but very often Mormon farms were managed by women, not men.

In any event, anyone who spends a substantial amount of time going through the materials in the Church Archives must gain a new appreciation of the important and indispensable role of women in the history of the Church — not to mention new insights into Church history resulting from viewing it through the eyes of women.⁸

3. *The solid achievement bias*, with emphasis on the word "solid." We have tended to remember the tangible, the material, the visible, simply because these have had greater survival value. We have tended to measure the accomplishments of the pioneers by such *durable* achievements as the construction of canals and dams, temples and meetinghouses, houses and cooperative stores. We have forgotten that the pioneers also made contributions in thought, in

⁸A good example of the "new look" at the inside of Church history by viewing it through the life of a woman is K. K. Thurston, *The Winds of Doctrine: The Story of the Life of Mary Lockwood Kemp in Mormon Utah During the Last Half of the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1952). An interesting recent essay emphasizing the role of women is Kenneth Godfrey, "Feminine-flavored Church History," *The Improvement Era*, January 1968, p. 52.

human relations, in education. From the evidence of pioneer life still surviving, we are led to conclude that the Mormons were good farmers and engineers, but poor poets and philosophers. By thus giving emphasis to the achievements of the more active members of the community, we have overlooked the quiet and immeasurable achievements of the reflective and contemplative. An extended experience among the Name Files has convinced this historian that the role of the writer and the intellectual was greater than we have ever acknowledged. These contributions are more subtle — more difficult to discover and to trace — but they are nevertheless there.

4. *The centrifugal bias* — the notion that the important influences and forces in Mormon history originated in the center and moved outward from there. This bias, which results partly from the greater survival value of materials collected and protected by the central Church, has had a discernible effect on our attitudes. Some Latter-day Saints have seemed to think that their primary task is to sit down and wait for instructions from 47 E. South Temple Street, Salt Lake City. This was clearly not the attitude of earlier generations, who were told by revelation that they were personally invested with the responsibility of contributing toward the building of the Kingdom and did not wait on anybody to tell them when to start.

For behold, it is not meet that I should command in all things; for he that is compelled in all things, the same is a slothful and not a wise servant; wherefore he receiveth no reward.

Verily I say, men should be anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of their own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness;

For the power is in them, wherein they are agents unto themselves. And inasmuch as men do good they shall in nowise lose their reward.

But he that doeth not anything until he is commanded . . . , the same is damned.⁹

Clearly that revelation had an impact, for a large share of the creativity in thought and practice in the Church came from what might be called the "private sector," or from the geographical and organizational periphery, and moved centripetally toward the center and universal adoption. To give some examples, the Relief Society originated as a voluntary ladies' aid society in Nauvoo, and was quickly reconstituted by the Prophet Joseph Smith as an official organization. The *Woman's Exponent*, first magazine for women west of the Mississippi (with one fly-by-night exception) originated as a semi-private venture in which the leading part was played by a twenty-two-year-old girl journalist from Smithfield, Utah. After many years of splendid service, it came to be recognized as the official organ of the Relief Societies. The *Contributor* and the *Young Woman's Journal*, the two periodicals which later formed *The Improvement Era*, were both initiated by the altruistic desire on the part of young men and young women writers to make a literary contribution to the

⁹Doctrine and Covenants, section 58, verses 26-29.

Church. The United Order, as established by the Church in 1874, was modeled along the lines of cooperative general stores established in Brigham City, Utah, in 1864, and in Lehi, Utah, in 1868. The Welfare Plan, as introduced in 1936, was built on experiences in St. George Stake, in southern Utah, and Liberty Stake, in Salt Lake City. All missionaries know of "good ideas" which were tried in one mission and quickly spread to others. All of this is quite "natural," and, upon reflection, is what we would expect; an examination of the Archives helps to demonstrate its validity. Brigham Young used to say that more testimonies were obtained on the feet than on the knees. What he obviously meant was that we must all be "about our Father's business."

5. *The unanimity bias.* This is the notion that Mormon society has, from the earliest years, been characterized by concert in thought and behavior — by cooperation, concord, and consensus. In this respect, our historians have been so charmed with the unity of the Saints after they have decided on a course of action, that they have neglected to inquire into the process by which they made up their minds what to do. As with other peoples, the Saints have had their controversies, conflicts, and questionings. The substantial disagreement on doctrine, practice, and collective policy becomes evident when one leaves the "official" sources to focus on the minds and careers of individuals. While the records of the Church emphasize the triumphs of union and accord, individual diaries often dwell on the difficulties of resolving differences. When one intensively studies certain controversies — whether they be doctrinal, economic, or political — one occasionally uncovers widely disparate positions, both among general authorities and among the "lay" members of the Church. The Saints were not without opportunities for criticism and the free expression of opinion — in general Priesthood meetings, in quorum meetings, and in other encounters; and sometimes opinions were articulated with considerable vigor and determination. Then, just as the divisiveness was threatening the unity of the Saints, the Prophet spoke, conflicts were resolved, and the Saints closed ranks to get the job done. There was apparently such debate over proper policy preceding the exodus from Nauvoo, before the coming of the railroad to Utah, and during the antipolygamy "Raid" of the 1880's and the Depression of the 1930's. In each instance, there were a few "die-hards" who could not reconcile themselves to the "final" solution and left the Church.

III

It is with respect to the last bias, perhaps, that the historian can make his greatest contribution to the Church today. There is now, as in early epochs, a certain amount of dissent. Some of it has to do with the Church's role in politics, some with the Church's business operations, and some with the emphasis on certain doctrines and practices such as "the Negro question" and the Word of Wisdom. We cannot deny the uneasiness which these strains and conflicts produce. But anxiety seems so much easier to bear when we understand the magnitude of the tensions and challenges of earlier generations. Indeed, one might make out a very good case for the fact that the Church has grown and

prospered precisely *because* of the dissent and discord, the obstacles and difficulties. Just as the Book of Mormon peoples seemed closest to God when they were meeting the greatest trials, the Saints of the latter-day also felt His presence most intimately when their individual and collective problems seemed so insurmountable that they were forced to call upon Him for help. For our pioneer ancestors, worship was not a running away or withdrawal from the battles of the world; neither was it an ostrich-like refusal to look problems in the face. They could not, even if they had wished, gloss over their many obstacles, physical and human, external and internal.

In his autobiographical recollections and reflections, *Little Did I Know* (New York, 1963), the great Jewish novelist and Zionist, Maurice Samuel, asserts that the "authentic Jew" is "the one who understands and is faithful to his own personal and social identity. One who, in short, accepts his history."¹⁰ May we not make an analogous definition of the Latter-day Saint? Are we authentic Latter-day Saints (i.e., real Mormons) unless we receive messages from our collective past? And who but the historian is prepared to relay authentic messages from the past? Our individual and collective authenticity as Latter-day Saints depends on the historians telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth about our past. This includes the failures as well as the achievements, the weaknesses as well as the strengths, the individual derelictions as well as the heroism and self-sacrifice.

History can give meaning and purpose to life; it can help to formulate attitudes and policies for the future. As we prepare to celebrate the sesquicentennial anniversary of the Church in 1980, we must intensify our historical inquiries. May the images conveyed by our historians help us to continue the restoration of the Gospel of the Master, and may they assist us in building the Kingdom of God on earth.

¹⁰See the review by Daniel Stern in *Saturday Review*, January 25, 1964, p. 35.

LIST OF L.D.S. CHURCH HISTORIANS AND GENERAL
CHURCH RECORDERS, 1830-1968

1. Oliver Cowdery Church Recorder, 1830-31, 1835-37
2. John Whitmer Church Recorder, 1831-35
3. George W. Robinson General Church Recorder, 1837-41
4. John Corrill Church Historian, 1838-39
5. Elias Higbee Church Historian, 1838-43
6. Robert B. Thompson General Church Clerk, 1840-41
7. James Sloan General Church Clerk, 1841-43
8. Willard Richards Church Historian, 1842-43
General Church Recorder, 1843-45
Church Historian and General Church Recorder, 1845-54
9. George A. Smith Church Historian and General Church Recorder, 1854-71
10. Wilford Woodruff Assistant Church Historian, 1856-83
Church Historian and General Church Recorder, 1883-89
11. Albert Carrington Church Historian and General Church Recorder, 1871-74
12. Orson Pratt Church Historian and General Church Recorder, 1874-81
13. Franklin D. Richards Assistant Church Historian, 1884-89
Church Historian and General Church Recorder, 1889-99
14. John Jaques Assistant Church Historian, 1889-1900
15. Charles W. Penrose Assistant Church Historian, 1896-98
16. Andrew Jenson Assistant Church Historian, 1897-1941
17. Anthon H. Lund Church Historian and General Church Recorder, 1900-21
18. Orson F. Whitney Assistant Church Historian, 1902-06
19. A. Milton Musser Assistant Church Historian, 1902-09
20. B. H. Roberts Assistant Church Historian, 1902-33
21. Joseph Fielding Smith Assistant Church Historian, 1906-21
Church Historian and General Church Recorder, 1921-date
22. A. William Lund Assistant Church Historian, 1911-date
23. Junius F. Wells Assistant Church Historian, 1921-30
24. Preston Nibley Assistant Church Historian, 1957-63
25. Earl E. Olson Assistant Church Historian, 1965-date