

Reviews

THE MANIPULATION OF HISTORY

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"Can We Manipulate The Past?" by Fawn Brodie. First Annual "American West Lecture," Hotel Utah, Salt Lake City, October 3, 1970. Copies available from "The Center for Studies of the American West," University of Utah, \$1.00. Marvin S. Hill, the author of a forthcoming book on Joseph Smith, teaches History at B.Y.U.

On one occasion in Kirtland, Ohio, when the congregation was told by an elder that the Latter-day Saints must be bound by the written word of God, Brigham Young responded that he would not be circumscribed by written scripture. Alluding to the Bible, Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants, he said, "When compared with the living oracles those books are nothing to me." Joseph Smith nodded his agreement and said, "Brother Brigham has told you the word of the Lord, and he has told you the truth."

For the student of Mormonism, Brigham's affirmation is instructive. While Mormons venerate their sacred books, and read them (especially when the stake president assigns a chapter for an approaching conference) the final word comes not from any scriptural passage but from the living oracles. The Saints hang more upon the words of their prophets than upon the canons of the written law. This is one reason it may make little difference to them if they are told that some of the divine books have been altered, or even that the accepted view of the origin of one of their books might have to be revised. Like the American people generally, the Mormons have a very strong presentist and futuristic orientation. In some situations this proves a source of strength. Yesterday's mistakes and revisions seem insignificant when compared with the advantage of social stability which derives from waiting upon the word of the Lord.

In light of Mormon presentism, it seems unlikely that Fawn Brodie's recent address at the first annual "American West Lecture," delivered at the Hotel Utah on the evening of October 3, 1970, will have great effect upon the people of Zion. Author of a well-known biography of Joseph Smith and currently Senior Lecturer in History at U.C.L.A., Mrs. Brodie

discussed the question, "Can We Manipulate the Past?" and declared that men in positions of power can and do manipulate written history for purposes of social control. It is the job of the historian, she affirmed, quoting the Cambridge historian J. H. Plumb, to "cleanse the story of mankind from those deceiving visions of a purposeful past," thus preventing it from being put to ruthless use by willful members of the establishment.

Mrs. Brodie applied this principle of her creed to the Negro question in the Mormon Church, maintaining that Church leaders have drawn on but a portion of their relevant "Negro past" by emphasizing Joseph Smith's stand against giving the Priesthood to Blacks and forgetting the change in his attitude. Citing evidence from Joseph's history and public addresses, Brodie argues that within seven years he progressed from public support of slavery to open avowal of abolition and equal rights. For Brodie the evolution of Joseph Smith's views on this question compares favorably with that of both Jefferson and Lincoln.

Mrs. Brodie is to be commended for calling our attention to the historical record on this sensitive issue. Whether she has been wholly fair to Jefferson and Lincoln is one question. Whether she has accurately depicted Joseph Smith is another, but of most interest to Latter-day Saints is whether she has sufficient grounds to declare that the Church establishment has willfully "manipulated" history in this regard.

With respect to Jefferson, Brodie overlooks the fact that during the Revolution he drew up a bill to free the Blacks in his state and provide them with education and protection outside the limits of Virginia. But Jefferson was in an extremely difficult position. He rightly saw that, given the fierce prejudice of his people against the Blacks, to support such a bill openly would be political suicide. He therefore abstained from actively supporting his own reform bill in the Virginia assembly.

For Lincoln too, the political realities took precedent. Although he deeply felt the injustice of Negro slavery, he never allowed this sentiment to blur his clear sense of the politically achievable. Thus he was able to contribute substantially to the initial liberation of the Negro and yet not alienate those people around him whose help would be needed to make it politically possible.

Joseph Smith was neither a professional politician nor in essence a reformer, but a prophet and a leader of a religious community. He never was in a position to influence the liberation of the Blacks in America. Yet he was a man with a strong sense of national destiny and a genuine concern for the poor and underprivileged. For these reasons he could not help but reflect upon the slavery question and feel compassion for the exploited black man. When running for the Presidential office, he did propose that the government buy the slaves' freedom.

Mrs. Brodie quotes Joseph as saying in 1844, "Had I anything to do with the Negro, I would confine them by law to their own species, and put them on a national equalization." She remarks that while this repudiated intermarriage, it was "in every other respect in favor of total equality. . . ,

a stand which in 1844 was dangerously revolutionary." To support her contention that Joseph had progressed from an extremely conservative position, Brodie contrasts Joseph's 1844 stand with his earlier letter to the editor of the *Messenger and Advocate* in 1836, which urged the Mormon people to shun abolitionism as insurrectionary and affirmed that slavery was God's will. Brodie maintains that Joseph Smith sought here to promote the Mormon missionary program in the South by placating the Southern planter.

Brodie's argument deserves close consideration. Did Joseph Smith undergo a profound alteration in his attitude toward Blacks? Was his early racism unadulterated by liberal sentiment? And if there was expediency behind his conservatism of 1836, was this not also true of his apparent liberalism in 1844?

There is some evidence to suggest that from the beginning Joseph Smith's racism, while manifest, was qualified by Christian idealism. Even in 1830, he would not have excluded Blacks from Church society and fellowship. The Book of Mormon had affirmed that the Lord "inviteth them all to come unto him and partake of his goodness: and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free. . . ." Joseph proposed in his letter to the *Messenger and Advocate* that the missionaries should continue to preach to the Blacks if the Southern masters would give their permission. In Willard Richards' unpublished journal, which he kept for the prophet, it is recorded that Orson Hyde asked Joseph on December 30, 1842, what he would instruct a new member from the South to do with his one-hundred slaves. Joseph replied, "I have always advised such to bring their slaves into a free country and set them free — Educate them and give them equal Rights." Here Joseph insisted that this was "always" his position; while he tolerated the keeping of slaves by a few Saints, this may nonetheless suggest some persistent uneasiness with regard to slavery. Brodie's emphasis on Joseph's 1836 statement, may lead her to underestimate his initial liberal inclinations.

But her weakest claim is that Joseph became the black man's champion after January, 1842, when he "came under the influence of abolitionist C. V. Dyer." Joseph never met Dyer, nor is there sufficient evidence that he came under his influence. While Mrs. Brodie has maintained elsewhere that Joseph Smith and Dyer had correspondence, a careful reading of the *History of the Church* shows that it was John C. Bennett who corresponded with Dyer (but only to a limited extent) and that Joseph, after reading Dyer's letters, commented that he shared Dyer's anger at the Missourians who had sentenced three abolitionists in the state to twelve years in prison. Joseph had personal reasons for feeling that Missourians sentenced men unjustly — this rather than slavery was likely what made him angry.

Again, Mrs. Brodie overlooks the fact that while Joseph might have advocated "equal rights" for Negroes, he had no specific plans for their social improvement after they were free. In the Richards' account it is noted that Joseph believed them incapable of self-government. He told Judge Adams in December 1842, "Should the slaves be organized into an independent government they would become quarrelsome [:] it would not be wisdom . . ."

He is reported in the same source to have told Adams that he could not support a Southern presidential candidate because he might acquire a "religious peak" against the Saints and "subdue them and compel our children to mix with their slaves."

In his March 7, 1844, address before the Temple Committee, Joseph discussed his stand on the Texas question, saying that some were opposed to the annexation of Texas because of the Blacks there. Joseph said that he would annex Texas for that very reason, to prevent the British from freeing the slaves and enlisting them and the Indians in a war to "use us up." Joseph proposed to counter this by freeing Blacks, employing them in the war against Mexico, and then sending them to Texas and eventually to Mexico where "all colors are alike." Joseph's interest here seems more political and nationalistic than humanitarian.

Even Joseph's "calling for the end of slavery by 1850" in his Presidential campaign is not so liberal as Brodie supposes. For his assumption was that each Southerner would take the initiative in freeing his own slaves once he learned that the government would compensate him for his monetary losses. The Prophet failed to perceive that economic and social aspects of slavery made such a proposition unacceptable to the South. When Lincoln offered to buy the slaves in the loyal border states during the war, there were no takers.

Joseph Smith was, therefore, to some degree a racist, a segregationist, a colonizer, and only incidentally a supporter of abolition. He had some elements of liberalism in his thinking, but these had definite limits. His record, like Jefferson's and Lincoln's, is marked by ambiguity. Was he really progressive and in advance of his time in 1844? Colonization of Blacks was by then nearly a dead issue. It had proved too costly. And by 1844 the abolitionist movement was gaining ground in the North, strengthened by many reluctant Americans who may not have had as much compassion for the Blacks as fear that the Southern demand for a cessation of all discussion of the issue would deny the North basic democratic rights. By 1844 Joseph was appealing in his Presidential campaign to people in the North who wanted the annexation of Texas but not the addition of another slave state. Joseph's position looks very much like a politician's compromise; he would give the Northerners the two seemingly contradictory things they wanted. Freeing the slave may have been another way of gaining votes. If Joseph was guided by expediency in 1836, we cannot be sure he was not in 1844.

Mrs. Brodie is right in saying that Mormons do not often hear of the more liberal side of Joseph Smith's thinking about Blacks. Yet the record of the past may have no clear mandate for us in our current Church dilemma. That there was an evolution in the attitude of Joseph Smith is not so clearly substantiated as Mrs. Brodie maintains. The more carefully the events surrounding Joseph Smith's pronouncement are examined, the more ambiguous they become. In her haste to make Joseph Smith progressive, Mrs. Brodie failed to perceive the genuine dilemma the Black issue posed for the Prophet in his day. In this regard he was not unique, but typical of the American people as a whole.