

THE RISE AND FALL OF *COURAGE*, AN INDEPENDENT RLDS JOURNAL

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Courage: A Journal of History, Thought and Action

For the past two decades, a number of books and articles have been published that sometimes conflict with certain traditions¹ in the RLDS² heritage. Many of the writers of these books have been employed in the Church's departments and its publishing house, and some have been on the faculty at Graceland College.³ Some adult church school study texts in Biblical studies, church history and world religions, published by the Religious Education Department, reflected perspectives not common to typical Reorganized saints, who accept Joseph Smith's teachings rather uncritically—especially his pre-Nauvoo utterances. Church Historian Charles Davies wrote articles reflecting a willingness to take an objective look at the history of the RLDS Church, and his successor, Richard Howard, published *Restoration Scriptures: A Study of Their Textual Development*⁴ which documented the changes in the texts of the *Book of Mormon*, *Doctrine and Covenants* and the *Inspired Version of the Bible*. Howard used his evidence to promote a liberal interpretation of scripture.

In the early 1960's, under the editorship of Roger Yarrington, the *Saints' Herald* (an official publication of the RLDS Church) became more of an open forum in which differing views were published. James Lancaster's article on the method of translation of the *Book of Mormon* seriously questioned Joseph Smith's account of the translation process and shocked many Reorganized saints. Other articles challenged such cherished beliefs as the virgin birth, the existence of the devil and the *Inspired Version of the Bible*.

The *Herald* also addressed contemporary social issues, thereby drawing heavy criticism for its sympathy with the nonviolent civil rights movement. As a result, by about 1967, the top leadership of the Church concluded that the *Herald* should avoid controversy and promote subscriptions by whole congregations. (For example, the First Presidency instructed the *Herald* editors to avoid discussing the Vietnam war.) In short, the "house organ" function would be emphasized and controversial articles shunned.

Several members of the faculty at Graceland College felt this change in *Saints' Herald* represented a great loss for the Church, since they believed that the Church should confront certain serious theological, historical and ethical issues. After finding the Church leaders uninterested either in changing the house organ function of the *Herald* or in beginning a new journal, five members of the Graceland faculty began

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plans for a new journal, to be called *Courage: A Journal of History, Thought and Action*. Other interested persons contributed \$100 each, and a pilot issue, dated April 1970, was published in time for sale at the 1970 RLDS World Conference in Independence. A subscription list of nearly one thousand was soon built up, at six dollars per year, for four issues. By the end of the first full year of publication, the journal reached its peak of about fourteen hundred subscribers, but during the next two years the list was reduced to less than eight hundred, and in the summer of 1973 the journal folded for financial reasons.

The *Courage* editors intended to publish articles, editorials, reviews and letters in history, theology and other areas of interest to the broad Latter Day Saint community. Most of the historical articles, for example, dealt with issues the editors felt needed re-examination. Richard Howard's article on Joseph Smith's conception of revelation was intended to question the propositional character of revelation which was common with the prophet. The traditional faithful view of the historicity of the *Book of Mormon* was challenged by Wayne Ham. Melvin Petersen's article on Joseph Smith's editing—and altering—the revelations for publication revealed a historical fact that is difficult for some RLDS members to accept. Kathryn Olson, in comparing "instant canonization" of latter-day revelations with the longer canonization process of Biblical writings, found the former process wanting, and an editorial in the same issue questioned the need for canonizing writings at all. Richard Howard's article on the Book of Abraham questioned its "fallacious translation" as well as its racial teachings. Two reviews dealing with publications about the *Inspired Version of the Bible* found Robert Matthews of the Utah Mormon Church appreciative of the "New Translation," while William Russell, of the Reorganized Church, (which accepts this version) found little value in it.

Several articles discussed various presidents of the Church. Howard Booth's and Richard Howard's articles, mentioned above, dealt with Joseph Smith, Jr. William Russell wrote a favorable review of the second edition of Fawn Brodie's *No Man Knows My History*, a biography of Joseph Smith which is usually condemned by Mormons of whatever faction. Daniel Muir wrote an article encouraging research in the life of Joseph Smith III, the first president of the Reorganized Church. In an article that won an award for the best historical article in the first year of *Courage*, Clare Vlahos dealt with Zenos Gurley, Jr.'s challenge to centralized power in the time of Joseph III. Larry Hunt, who is writing his Ph.D. dissertation on Frederick M. Smith, the son and successor of Joseph III, contended that "Fred M." was simply a product of his time, and not a prophet "ahead of his time," as many Reorganized members have contended. An editorial criticized the method of presidential succession which is customary in both the Reorganized Church and in the Utah Church.

Two other historical articles dealt with significant leaders in the Church, Mark McKiernan dealing with Sidney Rigdon and Paul Edwards with David H. Smith. Edwards' article won the award for the best historical article in the second year of *Courage*. The Cutlerite splinter group was discussed by Biloine Young, and Alma Blair wrote an article on the Haun's Mill massacre.

Robert Mesle and Geoffrey Spencer contributed articles on the nature of the early Christian Church while Bruce Lindgren wrote on the development of the priesthood in early Mormonism. The effect of these articles was to challenge the common assertion among saints that Joseph Smith had completely restored New Testament Christianity and its organizational pattern. A related article by Grant

McMurray treated the Reorganized Church's practice of closed communion, while an editorial endorsed by the Editorial Committee and a letter by Robert Mesle advocated open communion.

An Editorial Committee editorial and an article by Paul Edwards affirmed the need for honest historical examination, and strongly criticized the Council of Twelve in Independence for not granting historians access to Council of Twelve minutes that are nearly 100 years old. The Twelve did not alter their policy.

Other articles in *Courage* usually were designed to foster discussion of significant issues. An over-riding issue is what might be called the intellectual struggle between the traditionalists (or fundamentalists) who resist change in church doctrine and "liberals" who demand change. Several major articles by men with strong conservative positions were published.

A major battle in recent years has revolved around the traditionalists' resistance to the new church school curriculum which was then in the planning stage by the Department of Religious Education. Its director, Donald Landon, articulately stated the department's position in the lead article in the pilot issue. An insightful piece which sheds much light on this whole development is the review of the book published by the Committee on Basic Beliefs entitled *Exploring the Faith*. Carl Bangs, a professor of historical theology at the Methodist seminary in Kansas City and past president of the American Society of Church History, detected "Protestantizing" trends in the Reorganized Church as seen in this "new creed."

In the late 1960's the approval by the Council of Twelve of the baptism of East Indian polygamists particularly agitated the conservative wing. In one issue of *Courage* Maurice Draper of the First Presidency wrote an article defending the Twelve, while Verne Deskin vigorously criticized the policy, and the Editorial Committee took a more liberal position than did Draper.

The Editorial Committee advocated greater contact and communication between the Reorganized Church and the Utah Church and sought to involve Utah Mormons in writing for *Courage*. Besides the article by Melvin Petersen of BYU, book reviews were written by Milton Backman, Robert Matthews, Albert Payne, Paul Cheesman and LaMar Petersen. To this writer's knowledge, the major contact in the past decade has been the history departments of the two churches and by those of both churches who have joined the Mormon History Association.

Articles were not limited to discussions of Mormon theology. Dayle Bethel sharply criticized United States involvement in Vietnam. John Swomley, colleague of Carl Bangs at Saint Paul School of Theology and a leading pacifist, discussed the draft. William Raiser dealt with the population crisis. Another issue with implications for the churches as well as society at large is sex discrimination. The Editorial Committee favored ordaining women. Major articles on the feminist movement were written by Chris Piatt, Carolyn Raiser, and Barbara Higdon and Larry Moffet.

Courage attracted considerable attention during its three-year life. When the pilot issue came out, the *New York Times'* Wallace Turner discussed Richard Howard's challenge to the Book of Abraham. The second issue elicited another story in the *Times* on the liberal RLDS challenge to some traditional beliefs, as reflected particularly in Wayne Ham's article, and Howard Booth's article on the personality of Joseph Smith. Some other newspapers, especially in the Independence area, occasionally commented on *Courage*, and *Dialogue* carried favorable reviews by Robert Flanders and James Clayton.

Although *Courage* struck a responsive chord in quite a few hearts, its readers did not support it to the extent the editors had expected. Appealing only to a minority in a small church, and without either sufficient subscribers or a financial "angel," *Courage* died after its eleventh number (Winter/Spring 1973). Its eleven issues are still available upon request, and many libraries with significant Mormon collections have a complete set.

Note: The founders of Courage were Paul Edwards, who teaches history and philosophy; William Russell, religion and history; Barbara Higdon, literature and speech; Lorne White, religion; and Roy Muir, English. Higdon, Muir, Russell and White had previously edited church publications; Edwards and Russell had written books published by Herald House. They invited four others to join them on a nine-member Executive Editorial Committee: Roger Yarrington, former Saints' Herald editor; Joe Pearson, former editor of the church's youth magazine, Stride; Clifford Buck, former Director of the Religious Education Department; and Judie Schneebeck, former English professor at Graceland who was at the time teaching in the public schools in Iowa City. Russell was selected as Editor. Later, Carolyn Raiser, a part time Graceland faculty member in English, joined him as co-editor. Another thirty persons were invited to serve on an Advisory Board. Barney Newcom, a professional artist, did the art work and layout.

NOTES

¹ For a discussion of this tension between liberals and traditionalists in the RLDS Church, see William D. Russell, "Reorganized Mormon Church Beset by Controversy," *Christian Century*, June 17, 1970, 769-771.

² The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints will be referred to simply as the "Reorganized Church" or the "RLDS Church."

³ Graceland College was founded in 1895. It was the only RLDS college until the Church recently acquired Park College, Parkville, Missouri, which for one hundred years had been a Presbyterian college.

⁴ Independence: Herald Publishing House, 1969.

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4. "A Challenge to Some Hallowed Tenets of Mormonism," *New York Times*, October 18, 1970, 9E.
5. "Problems in Interpreting the Book of Mormon as History," *Courage*, Vol. 1, No. 1, September 1970, 15-22.
6. "An Image of Joseph Smith, Jr.: A Personality Study," Vol. 1, No. 1, September 1970, 5-14.
7. See, e.g., "RLDS Journal Editors Urge Ladies' Ordination," *Independence Examiner*, February 27, 1971.
8. "Dialogue East," *Dialogue*, Vol. V, No. 3, Autumn 1970, 100-103.
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