

An Approach to the Mormon Past

Mormonism and the American Experience by Klaus J. Hansen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), xvii, 257 pp., \$15.

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THE EXPLOSION OF books and articles on the Mormons over the past ten years is nothing short of phenomenal. Two books, James Allen and Glen Leonard's *Story of the Latter-day Saints* and Leonard Arrington and Davis Bitton's *The Mormon Experience*, have given us at least a reliable and sympathetic overview of the history of the Church, which carries the story to the present. Interpretive articles by Neal Lambert and Richard Cracroft, James Allen, Marvin Hill, Jan Shipps, Gary Bergera, Paul Edwards, myself, and others have considered the religious experiences and doctrines of the Latter-day Saints in the context of nineteenth-century American development. Writers like Charles Peterson, Wayne Wahlquist, Michael Raber, and Richard Jackson have reinterpreted Latter-day Saint settlement patterns. Articles such as those by Wayne Larsen, Alvin Rencher, and Tim Layton have proposed interpretive techniques for studying the documents of the Latter-day Saint past.

In *Mormonism and the American Experience*, Klaus Hansen interprets Latter-day Saint experience in relation to general American history by focusing on selected problems in Mormon studies. He constructs a series of essays analyzing Mormon experience and comparing and contrasting it to the general American pattern. The problems Hansen considers are: the origins of the Mormon religion (focusing on the process of revelation and the Book of Mormon), Mormonism's similarities to or differences from nineteenth-century American religion, the way in which Mormons have

coped with the problem of death (considering the doctrine of the potential godhood of mankind), the relationship between secular and religious authority in economics and politics (his point of view is similar to that in his previously published *Quest for Empire*), Mormon traditions on sexuality and marriage (including plural marriage), the development of Mormon racial attitudes, and a final chapter speculating on the meaning of the Mormon experience.

A careful reading of Hansen's book reveals that he has consulted an impressively wide range of secondary sources in Mormon studies, religion, history, and anthropology. However, they date from 1979 and before. A number of interpretive articles published between 1978 and 1981 could have helped considerably — particularly in Chapter One. It seems apparent that he has not explained away the negative evidence presented in those works which disagree with his point of view — Marvin Hill's "Quest for Refuge," Michael Quinn's "The Council of Fifty and its Members," my "Ulysses S. Grant and the Mormons" and "Wilford Woodruff and the Changing Nature of Mormon Religious Experience," and Victoria Grover-Swank's master's thesis, "Sex, Sickness, and Statehood: The Influence of Victorian Medical Opinion on Self-Government in Utah." (In fairness, he may not have had access to her work.)

Hansen explains Mormonism as the attempt of a group of early nineteenth-century Americans ravaged by the vicissitudes of modernization to find a religious life which allowed them to cope with a world they did not like but could not change. They adopted a new world view which provided satisfying answers to the questions uppermost in their minds which contemporary evangelical Christianity did not answer. As Hansen sees it, some of the elements of the Mormon tradition were found in Puritanism, some in Arminianism.

Others, such as the potential godhood of human beings, were unique, at least in contemporary Christianity. Mormons rejected much in nineteenth-century Christianity, especially revivalism, and provided a view of the pre-Columbian past which placed the American continent in a primary position rather than the traditional secondary status in world history.

The author or revelator of those views (depending on how you read Hansen's argument) was Joseph Smith. Hansen focuses on the Book of Mormon and the nature of personal revelation rather than on the First Vision where most other Mormons would have begun. He sees the Prophet as an enormously gifted man of towering spiritual stature, rejecting the characterizations of Joseph as a deviant, a fraud, or a psychotic. Hansen's argument is naturalistic rather than supernatural, but at base defends Joseph Smith and the Mormons for those outside the Church.

In constructing this defense, he occasionally overreaches himself. Part of his argument about the nature of revelation in Chapter One is based on an appeal to the work of Julian Jaynes and the theory of the bicameral mind. This thesis is highly speculative and recent neurological experiments at Stanford University and elsewhere indicate that the entire brain, rather than a part of it or even a single side, is involved in complex thought. Moreover, its use as a model is problematic. Any model (Hansen calls it a "metaphor") is valuable only to the extent that it assists understanding. This model fails. The bicameral mind is, by definition, located entirely within the subject; and any external influences, whether from God, culture, or other sources, are excluded.

Moreover, Hansen's discussion of Joseph Smith's early religious experiences and his critique of Fawn Brodie's view of the First Vision could have benefited from the research of Lambert and Cracroft, who have shown that others, contemporary with Joseph Smith in Western New York, reported similar visions of Christ. His in-

terpretation of the Book of Mormon could have benefited from the studies of Larson, Rencher, and Layton, even though their methodology has been questioned.

Perhaps the strongest point of the book is the serious attention Hansen gives to Mormon doctrine as a vehicle for understanding both the Latter-day Saints and American culture. The Latter-day Saint belief system has been an important motivating force in Mormon society. Hansen's chapters on plural marriage and racial attitudes are important. He recognizes that attributing change to pressure from outside forces fails to address the operation of the internal dynamics of Mormon doctrine and society. Instead of seeing the Mormons reacting to outside pressure as many others have done, he argues that internal changes made alterations of both doctrines and practices necessary.

Since this is one of the books in the Chicago History of American Religion, it is written primarily for the non-Mormon student of American religious history. It should, nevertheless, prove useful to Latter-day Saints as well, not because it will reveal a great deal to them about their own religion but rather because it will help them to understand some of the relationships between Mormonism and the larger American society.

Such an understanding is needed to correct a rather unfortunate if not imperceptive belief in some LDS circles that no relationship between the two groups existed or, among others, that it is irrelevant to understanding Mormonism. Pushed to its logical conclusion, this point of view would create a degree of ignorance of the Mormon past which would make it impossible for Latter-day Saints to understand either themselves or the surrounding society.

Ironically, a number of proponents of this point of view apparently see it as an affirmation of the divinity of Mormonism. What it seems to reveal, however, is the fear that scholarly interpretations will undermine faith or "disprove" the Church.