

cerned with news and local events, but rather with poems, stories, travel items, editorials, speeches, and, of course, advertising.

I recommend this attractively priced book to all students of the Illinois period of Mormon history.

"The Same Organization"?

The First Urban Christians by Wayne A. Meeks (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 299 pp., \$19.95.

Reviewed by Robert R. King, administrative assistant to a member of the U.S. House of Representatives.

IN AN 1842 DESCRIPTION of Latter-day Saint beliefs written for John Wentworth of the *Chicago Democrat*, Joseph Smith said: "We believe in the same organization that existed in the primitive church, viz. apostles, prophets, pastors, teachers, evangelists, etc." Some have taken this to mean that Relief Society presidents were organizing the delivery of casseroles and homemade bread to homes with sick mothers and twelve-year-old deacons were passing bread and water in sacrament meetings during the first century.

In fact, there have been a number of efforts to clarify and explain what Joseph Smith meant by "the same organization that existed in the primitive church." James E. Talmage and others have argued the similarity of priesthood offices by citing a New Testament reference to match each of the current priesthood offices.¹ These equivalents, however, are tenuous in many cases. Luke (10:1, 17) reports that Christ sent out "seventy" to cities he planned to visit to prepare the way for him, and Hebrews (6:20-8:5) refers to Christ as the great

high priest in the context of a discussion of Mosaic ritual. While there may have been priesthood offices of seventy and high priest then as now, these passages do not provide the evidence. In fact, careful study of the biblical texts and the few available historical records provides little evidence of a direct correlation in priesthood offices between ancient and modern churches.

The meaning of "the same organization" is made even more complicated by the pronounced evolution of Latter-day Saint organization between the early nineteenth and late twentieth centuries. Brigham Young's reorganization of stake and ward priesthood structure in 1877 was a significant departure from earlier practice, to name only one change. This raises the question of what "organization" Joseph Smith meant when he wrote to John Wentworth in 1842.

The list of offices enumerated in the sixth Article of Faith is somewhat troubling, although it is the same as that given in Ephesians 4:11. First, it includes names of offices that are no longer used (pastors, evangelists). The suggestion from Talmage that today's pastors are stake presidents and that evangelists are patriarchs is not really satisfactory since those offices existed in the Church in 1842 under the same names. Second, the list does not include some of the offices that are very common today which also existed both in 1842 and in the primitive church—e.g., bishops and deacons.

For Latter-day Saint students who want to probe deeper into the nature of the primitive church in an effort to come to grips with these questions, *The First Urban Christians* by Yale professor Wayne A. Meeks provides an excellent starting point. Meeks seeks to explain what it was like to be a Christian in the first century after

¹James E. Talmage, *The Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1959), pp. 198-216; "Priesthood" and references for individual priesthood offices in the *Topical Guide* published in the Latter-day Saint edition of the Bible (1979), pp. 386-87; and John Tvedtnes, *The Church of the Old Testament* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1980), for an argument that "church organization" in ancient Israel was much the same as that of the contemporary church.

Christ. In the first part of the study, he describes the social milieu of the Roman city in the eastern Mediterranean where early Christianity began. Christianity, much like early Mormonism, flourished in urban areas rather than the conservative tradition-bound rural areas.

The second part of Meek's book focuses on the world of the Christian congregations. These assemblies of believers were organized around the household and existed both as separate bodies and as parts of the larger whole. Meeks analyzes how belief, ritual, language, organization, and government helped establish boundaries between these early Christian communities and their non-Christian neighbors.

The most significant contribution of Meeks's volume is its assistance in understanding the social and cultural world in which early Christians functioned, as a prerequisite to understanding what it was like to be a Christian. For example, the conception that candidates for baptism in all dispensations wore modest white robes (for example, as in Arnold Friberg's depiction of Alma baptizing at the Waters of Mormon), may be jarred by the information that

Christian converts were baptized naked. Analogy with the Jewish rites might suggest that; it is explicit in the Roman practice described by Hippolytus and indicated in all the early portrayals of baptism in Christian art. What confirms the fact for the Pauline groups is the variety of metaphorical allusions to taking off and putting on clothing that we find in those parts of the letters that refer to baptism. Those allusions are of two sorts, as we shall see: the mythical notion of taking off the body, the 'old human,' and putting on instead Christ, the 'new human,' and the rather common ethical convergence of both types in the baptismal reminders of Pauline paraenesis is most easily accounted for on the assumption that the candidates from the beginning took off their clothes to be baptized and put them back on afterward, and that these natural actions were given metaphorical significance. (p. 151)

Meeks's discussion of first-century Christianity suggests some elements that are

similar to modern Mormonism, but most are not what would generally be considered "organizational" matters. First, then as now, there was a sense of double identity. The church or *ekklesia* was both a local organization in which strong ties existed between local members of the group and a worldwide institution in which strong bonds linked members with believers in other cities and other lands (pp. 107-110). Mormonism, of course, shares this trait with some other religions.

Second, some similarities in offices exist, but they are limited. The only offices mentioned in the New Testament epistles are apostle (*apostolos*), bishop (*episkopos*), and deacon (*diakonos*). Evidence is quite strong that women held the office of deacon. Phebe (Rom. 16:1) is called a deaconess, and "wives and deacons" (1 Tim. 3:1, King James Version) could be more correctly translated "deaconesses" (Meeks, pp. 60, 79-80). The "general authorities"—a term not used in the epistles—are referred to as apostles and "fellow workers" or associates of Paul. The bishops and deacons were the local officers. Beyond these officers, however, the Pauline letters and other contemporary sources do not give much information about other church officers.

Third, and perhaps more important than the titles of offices, is the sense of cohesion and boundaries that bind believers and separate the believing community from the world. Meeks describes the "language of belonging" and the "language of separation" that served to emphasize the separateness of the early Christians from the Roman world that surrounded them (pp. 85-103). He also considers the role of ritual and belief in creating a separate world of believers (pp. 164-90). Particularly important, Meeks asserts, were beliefs about the nature of evil, repentance, and an imminent Second Coming (pp. 170-80, 183-90)—all of which are similar to contemporary Mormon beliefs.

For early Christians and Mormons, expelling those who violated group rules and maintaining group purity were important