

### Substantial, Important, and Brilliant

*Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* by Jan Shippo (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985). xvii+212 pp. Appendix, notes, bibliography, and index.

Reviewed by Thomas G. Alexander, professor of history and director of the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies at Brigham Young University.

RICHARD BUSHMAN said that this book "may be the most brilliant book ever written on Mormonism, in the sense of shedding new light on virtually every aspect of Mormon history and in offering a perspective that both Mormons and others can accept." (Jacket.) He may well be right. Without a doubt, Jan Shippo has emerged as the most knowledgeable non-Mormon scholar in the field of Mormon studies. This should not be interpreted as a backhanded compliment, since her knowledge of the Mormon past eclipses that of virtually all lay Church members and is equal to that of scholars from the Mormon community. Moreover, her command of the interpretative literature of religious studies is surpassed by no one within the field of whom I am aware.

In *Mormonism* she has attempted to do two things. First, she has tried as faithfully as possible, to understand the experiences of actors in the Mormon past as they understood themselves. Then she has used the comparative approach to interpret those experiences in the light of the religious studies literature, particularly the works by John Gager and others that consider the origins of the Christian Church, the literary criticism of Northrop Frye, and others, studies of religious experience by Mircea Eliade, and others, and examinations of the

sociology of religion by Peter Berger and others.

The book consists of seven chapters. In the first, she tells the pre-1830 story of the Smith family and the culture in which they lived. In this chapter, like Richard Bushman in his recently published *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, she places the experiences with magic in the context of contemporary vernacular culture and shows that it was actually an attractive force.

In Chapter 2, she places the Book of Mormon and Joseph's revelations in the context of early nineteenth century biblical culture. She argues that these attracted people and that those who accepted the message moved from profane time into sacred time as they participated in the creation of "the dispensation of the fulness of times."

In Chapters 3 and 4, she interprets the events of early Church history using as a model a four stage recapitulation of the experience of biblical peoples as a means of understanding early Mormonism, which she believes was a radical restoration movement.

Chapter 5 looks at the Latter-day Saints' attempts to write about their past. Using the problems in the publication of Lucy Mack Smith's history as a model, she also makes explicit comparisons with the recent attempts to control the publication of Church history.

Chapter 6 shows how it is possible to learn the facts of the Mormon past without really understanding their meaning. Using a comparative model from the Jewish experience in Israel, she argues that people living in sacred time may behave differently than those in profane time and that,

while by comparing specific behavioral norms they may appear less religious, they are, in fact, religious in a different way.

The final chapter interprets the transformation of the Church around the turn of the century into an institution in which members can live in profane time and still retain a sense of continuity with their nineteenth century predecessors.

The original insights in this book are not found in her retelling of the story of the Mormon past. The story has been told before. Her contribution comes in the selection of evidence to play against the extra-Mormon literature. In doing so, she argues a number of significant points. Among them are the theses that it is unperceptive to dismiss Mormonism "as little more than an elaborate idiosyncratic strain of the nineteenth-century search for primitive Christianity" (p. 68), or to perceive twentieth century Mormonism as "an idiosyncratic Protestant denomination" (p. 117). Rather, she argues, drawing on a categorization shared both by Fawn Brodie and believing Mormons (though in different ways) that in comparison with Judaism and contemporary Christianity, the Church can best be viewed as a new religious tradition.

In my view, the most important contributions in the book are her comparative discussions of the concepts of time and space. Some preliminary work has been done on these topics in the Mormon context by scholars like Robert Flanders and Adele McCollom, but no one has previously invested the time and energy in explicating the importance of these ideas for understanding nineteenth- and twentieth-century Mormonism.

In reviewing Shipps's work, I find myself in fundamental disagreement with aspects of Klaus Hansen's pre-publication review. While Hansen calls her work "a stunning tour de force," he is critical of what he rightly perceives as "her historicist approach," since it "allows her to dismiss epithets such as fraud or delusion as utterly irrelevant to the kind of questions

she asks." (Hansen, "Jan Shipps and the Mormon Tradition," *Journal of Mormon History* 11 [1984]: 144.)

In a sense, Hansen, on the left, has joined forces with critics of the New Mormon History on the right who insist that history which accepts the Latter-day Saints on their own terms and then proceeds to interpret these people using models drawn from historical works on context, religious studies, and the social behavioral science are misguided because they do not try to resolve questions of faith. That Richard Bushman, a believing Mormon scholar, and Jan Shipps, a believing Methodist, could "both write the same kind of history" (Hansen, p. 137), ought to be perceived as a compliment rather than as an occasion for irony. This is because both Bushman and Shipps have sought to understand the Mormon people and interpret them to a late twentieth century audience rather than engage in sectarian controversy. It is this, as both Marvin Hill and Larry Foster have observed, that has characterized the most important recent work in Mormon studies.

While I applaud Shipp's method and believe that her interpretations on a number of points are right, I think she is wrong on a number of matters. For example, I am impressed with her views that people in the midst of creating a new religious tradition lived in sacred time, in the attempts to control the story of the Church's past, and in the emphasis on continuity during the period of change after 1900. Nevertheless, in interpreting the nineteenth century Mormon understanding of what they were doing, I believe that Melodie Moench Charles is right and Shipps is wrong. Charles argues that nineteenth century Mormons saw the Old Testament through the eyes of Paul and the authors of the synoptic gospels, rather than dividing Old and New Testament traditions as Shipps believes. While the patriarchal office and blessings may seem to be an anomaly in this interpretation, a careful reading of Doctrine and Covenants 124,