

Not Enough Trouble

Trouble Enough: Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon by Ernest H. Taves (New York: Prometheus Books, 1984), \$19.95, 280 pp. and *Joseph Smith and the Origins of the Book of Mormon* by David Persuitte (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland and Co., 1985), 295 pp., \$19.95.

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AT LEAST ONCE a decade, it seems, someone publishes a book about the Latter-day Saints without taking the necessary "trouble" to adequately research the subject. Stanley Hirshon was judged guilty of this offense in 1969 and received from the Mormon History Association its "Worst Book" award for his volume on Brigham Young. Ernest H. Taves, a Massachusetts-based psychiatrist with both Mormon and Mennonite roots, would be a strong candidate for the same award this year. David Persuitte, a retired Air Force computer expert, would follow, though at a considerable distance. His book, though seriously flawed in approach and evidence and uninformed in key areas, is at least neither trivial nor silly.

The title for Taves's book comes from the pen of Ebenezer Robinson who in his newspaper *The Return* (vol. 2, p. 315), published years after the event supposedly occurred, tells us that when Joseph Smith placed the handwritten manuscript of the Book of Mormon in the cornerstone of the Nauvoo House, he exclaimed, "I have had trouble enough with this thing" (Taves, p. 160).

In *Trouble Enough*, Taves attempts to write a biography of Joseph Smith, relying almost wholly upon Lucy Mack Smith's *History of Joseph Smith and His Progenitors* (Liverpool: S. W. Richards, 1853), the *History of the Church*, B. H. Roberts, ed., 7 vols., 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1957), Fawn Brodie's *No Man Knows My History*, 2nd ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), Donna Hill's *Joseph Smith, The First Mormon* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1977), Gerald and Sandra Tanner's *Mormonism—Shadow or Reality?* (Salt Lake City: Modern Microfilm Co., 1972), and E. D. Howe's 1834 *Mormonism Unveiled* (Painesville, Ohio: Published by the author, 1834).

His bibliography totals only seventy books, articles, and monographs, while Richard L. Bushman's book, *Joseph Smith and Mormon Beginnings* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), which, incidentally, ends with the Prophet's move to Kirtland in 1832, has a bibliography which cites more than 700 documents. I use Bushman for comparison because he, too, lives on the east coast, far from the LDS Church Archives.

Trouble Enough begins with a chapter on the Prophet's ancestry, drawn mainly from Lucy Mack Smith's biographical sketches (which he describes incorrectly as a rare book) and the Solomon Mack narrative found in Richard L. Anderson's *Joseph Smith's New England Heritage* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1971). In Chapter 2, he moves the Smith family from Vermont to Palmyra in five pages. The narrative recounts money digging, the

First Vision, the bringing forth of the Book of Mormon, the Kirtland years, the troubles in Missouri, the founding of Nauvoo, and the Prophet's martyrdom, with hardly an innovative interpretation or thought to break the chronology.

Part 2 of this volume attempts to identify authorship of the Book of Mormon using stylometry. Stylometry, described as a "scientific recognition system for written or spoken utterances," began with Augustus De Morgan, the English mathematician and logician, in 1851. After delineating how it works, Taves then informs his readers that by using stylometry, he has discovered that the Book of Mormon was authored by only one person.

I would have been more impressed with this section had Taves provided an analysis of the weaknesses of stylometry as well as its strengths. Stylometry, contrary to what Taves writes, is not an exact science, and its use on the writings of Paul and Shakespeare have generated heated controversy. One argument has revolved around what constitutes a sentence in the New Testament Greek of the Apostle Paul. Stylometric studies are based, in part at least, on determining the average length of a writer's sentences. In old Greek manuscripts there is no punctuation. It is therefore difficult to determine just where Paul's sentences begin and end. Such judgments are subjective and not hazard free. Some of the same arguments used against those who have concluded that Paul did not author some of the New Testament books attributed to him could be made against the stylistic study of the manuscript of the Book of Mormon, which had, according to the printer, little, if any, punctuation (Stocks 1979, 10; Jessee 1970; Larson 1977).

One study using stylometry concluded that Thomas Jefferson did not write the Declaration of Independence, while another study, using the same methods demonstrated that the writings of the person who did the Jefferson study, were not penned by the same person (Ellison 1965).

Several Latter-day Saint scholars, including Robert K. Thomas (1972), have found stylistic differences among Book of Mormon writers and have pointed out, for example, that Enos certainly wrote differently than did his son, Jarom. I did a character study of more than twenty Book of Mormon personalities and found them as diverse as many of those found in the world's other scriptures. The Book of Mormon is a very complex canon of scripture that ought not be dismissed as the product of one man's mind on the basis of statistical studies that are hardly foolproof.

Trouble Enough, moreover, has other weaknesses. Historians generally agree that for something to become history, facts have to be put together into a pattern that is understandable and credible. Only then will the resulting portrait of the past be usable and useful in making decisions and taking action. Mere "facts" listed and unlinked do not a history make, but rather a catalogue. Taves provides us with a cursory glimpse of some "facts" in the life of Joseph Smith but fails to provide the reader with the necessary linkage to make a strong historical chain. The reader gains no new insights into the Prophet nor into the Mormon movement. The book seems to have no telechy, or reason for being.

Taves, a psychiatrist, might have produced a significant book had he psychoanalyzed Joseph Smith and his family as did Dr. Jess Grosbeck, who reported his findings in a paper he read at the 1985 Sunstone Symposium. However, when Taves attempts a very brief (three-page) analysis of one of Joseph, Sr.'s, dreams, I find Grosbeck's (1985) conclusions regarding the same dream far more convincing than those of Taves. Grosbeck plows new ground by hypothesizing that the dream points to the destitute circumstances of the Smith family, both economically and socially, as well as the depression of the senior Smith. Taves seems to dig furrows in fields that have already been plowed, planted, cultivated, and harvested by merely stating that it is a dream about the

family expressing hope and promise. Taves then concludes: "Well, here is the stuff of myth, enough to keep a convention of amateur (or professional) analysts busy for a week" (pp. 7-8). Yet he fails to deliver the analysis called for by such a stimulating assertion. His book would be better had he, at that point, provided us with his own interpretation of the significance of this dream; but instead he chose to write two paragraphs, mostly containing questions accompanied with no more insight than an amateur could have provided.

Unlike Bushman, Taves did not do his homework regarding the Smith family's financial difficulties, nor did he compare their experiences with that of other Americans. He characterizes the Prophet's parents as being uniquely inept in their personal affairs, while Bushman was able to convincingly demonstrate that they were far more typical than unusual. Taves has some interesting census data relating to the size of the town of Palmyra that refutes both Brodie and Hill and convincingly argues that Palmyra during the Smith era was not a frontier but rather an established sizeable community. He also tells us that Palmyra had a black population of forty-six but fails to comment on the significance of this information.

Other areas which should have been fleshed out are Taves's account of Joseph's leg operation. It is unfortunate that he did not read LeRoy Worthlin's research (1981) on Joseph's illness, the operating physician Dr. Nathan Smith, and the surgery itself. His treatment of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon and the Charles Anthon experience would have been enhanced had he studied Joseph Knight's journal (Jessee 1976) and Stanley Kimball's essay (1970) on Martin Harris's visit to New York's professors. As an added detail, I am confident the people in Clarkston, Utah, would be surprised to find that the amphitheater they constructed for the Martin Harris Pageant overlooks, according to Taves, Utah's Cub River, which, in reality, runs more than ten miles east of the site.

Taves's treatment of the Solomon Spaulding manuscript and the Book of Mormon would have profited by a thorough reading of Lester Bush's fine article (1977) on that subject. Taves, furthermore, cites and draws conclusions from Oliver Cowdery's "Defense in a Rehearsal of My Grounds of Separating Myself from the Latter-day Saints," even though Gerald and Sandra Tanner proved long ago that it was a forgery.

Taves's writing of the Kirtland experience is equally lacking in sound scholarship. He shows no evidence that he has read the prize-winning monograph Hill, Rooker, and Wimmer wrote on the Kirtland economy, nor Milton C. Backman, Jr.'s, *The Heavens Resound* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1983), or even Max Parkin's twenty-year-old master's thesis "Conflict at Kirtland" (M.S. Thesis, BYU 1966). *Zion's Camp*, by Roger D. Launius (Independence: Herald Publishing House, 1984) would have been a helpful resource, but Taves seems unaware of its publication as well. His chapter on the Book of Abraham is dated and displays his ignorance of Donl Peterson's research establishing the mummies' discovery, their arrival in the United States, and additional facts about both Lebolo and Chandler reported at Mormon History Association meetings (in Millet and Jackson, 1985). Stanley B. Kimball's fine article (1981) regarding the Kinderhook plates would also have impacted his treatment of that subject.

Taves's short chapters on the Missouri period show the same neglect. He seems unaware of Leland Gentry on the Danites (1974), and Gentry's thousand-page dissertation (1962) on the Mormons in northern Missouri. His failure to consult William Russell's *Zion Is Fled* (Ph.D., University of Florida, 1962) and Max Parkin's dissertation is an additional flaw in this volume.

So much has been written on Nauvoo, John C. Bennett, plural marriage, the Council of Fifty, and the martyrdom—

all of which Taves failed to research—that I wonder just why this book was published. It has very few insights, no innovative interpretations, and no evidence of new documents on the Prophet and the Latter-day Saint movement. It is unfortunate that, at a time when so many really fine studies of Mormonism are appearing, Taves wrote and Prometheus Press published such an inferior study.

Even before the Book of Mormon was published there were rumors and innuendos regarding its origin. For many years it was the consensus of non-Mormon writers that Joseph Smith was too unlearned, too mentally dull, to have written the book. The Reverend Solomon Spaulding has been, perhaps, the most popular candidate for such honors. However, Ethan Smith, the Vermont minister who entered Dartmouth College the year after Spaulding graduated, has been at least first runner-up in the balloting. Now, after a two-decade lull, David Persuitte, who has spent a decade researching and writing *Joseph Smith and the Origins of the Book of Mormon*, has revitalized the thesis that Joseph Smith's primary source was Ethan Smith's *View of the Hebrews*.

Here is Persuitte's reconstruction of the history of the Book of Mormon: Oliver Cowdery, a relative of the Prophet who lived in Poultney, Vermont, met that community's most illustrious leader, Ethan Smith, author of a manuscript entitled "View of the Hebrews." Fearing that the book's publication would detract from his scholarly reputation, he gave a copy to Oliver Cowdery who, some time in 1825, gave it to Joseph Smith. Joseph studied the manuscript, taking notes from it. At the same time, he did extensive research (again taking notes) from such newspapers as the *Wayne Sentinel*, the *Ontario Phoenix*, the *Palmyra Freeman*, and the *Palmyra Herald*. He also read the scholarly journal *Archaeologia Americana* and such books as Francisco Clavigero's *History of Mexico*, C. E. F. Volney's *View of the Soil and Climate of the United States*, *The Six*

Books of Proclus, *The Platonic Successor*, *on the Theology of Plato* (the latter titles were translated into English by Thomas Taylor), and Thomas Dick's *Philosophy of a Future State*.

Blessed with a fertile imagination and natural story-telling ability, Joseph Smith understood well the psychology of religion, having picked it up from revivals. Arming himself with Ethan Smith's outline, Joseph concealed himself behind a blanket and placed the outline in a hat, sliced to let light in. He then slowly dictated the Book of Mormon, one page per day, to a series of scribes including Oliver Cowdery, whom he pretended to have first met in 1829.

Again according to Persuitte, the first 116 pages were lost; and to persuade Martin Harris to finance the publication of the book, Joseph Smith turned what had been a secular story into a religious history, made a set of dummy plates for people to handle through a cloth covering, and finalized the hoax by publishing it in 1830.

Persuitte's book is more than a superficial comparison of *View of the Hebrews* with the Book of Mormon. He has put together the early history of the Smiths gleaned from non-Mormon sources. He has, moreover, given additional, valuable information regarding the controversial 1826 trial and has provided biographical information on Ethan Smith, Solomon Spaulding, and the juggler, (con man) Walters, whom he identifies as Winchell, a counterfeiter and money digging friend of Joseph Smith's, that has not previously been published. His appendices, in four parts, have additional insights regarding the rodsman of Vermont, the Book of Mormon and modern archaeology, the Spaulding theory, and the book of Abraham controversy. This is a serious work, moderate in tone and thoughtfully written.

Unfortunately the author spent too much time consulting with the Reverend Wesley P. Walters and Michael Marquardt, both of whom have spent a great deal of their energy attempting to discredit both Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon

origins. Thus, the book is seriously flawed, presenting a slanted picture of Joseph Smith and Mormon origins. The publication would be far better if the writer had spent the same time and effort studying Mormon sources, thereby avoiding questions that have already been answered.

The very first sentence in the volume rehashes the issue of Joseph Smith's signing the title page of the Book of Mormon as "Author and Proprietor." Persuitte says this means Joseph was admitting he was the writer, not the translator of the book as the Latter-day Saints claim. The fact is, Joseph Smith was complying with federal law (see 1 *Statutes* 124, 1790, as amended by 2 *Stat.* 171, 1802), which dictated the words the district clerk had to write when a person was taking out a copyright on a book. It can be demonstrated historically that many translators, including those who produced the 1824 edition of the King James Version of the Bible, were listed as "Author" to conform to this law ("Joseph Smith: Author and Proprietor," *FARMS Update*, Aug. 1985).

John L. Sorenson in *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1985) answers many of the questions raised by Persuitte regarding language, culture, food, weapons, animals, location of Nephite and Lamanite lands, pre-Spanish horses, wheels, methods of warfare, and Quetzalcoatl. (See also Joseph Allen, "A Comparative Study of Quetzalcoatl, the Feathered Serpent God of Meso-America, with Jesus Christ, the God of the Nephites," Ph.D. diss., Brigham Young University, 1970). While his book was published about the same time as Persuitte's, many of Sorenson's scholarly articles have been available for more than two decades.

Eugene England answers the objections raised regarding the route Lehi and his family took from Jerusalem to the sea ("Through the Arabian Desert to a Bountiful Land: Could Joseph Smith Have Known the Way?" *FARMS* pamphlet, 1982, pp. 1-14). Literally hundreds of

scholarly articles have appeared showing that the Book of Mormon is a very complex document. Some illustrate Near Eastern culture, Jewish law, and ancient patterns of treaty making. Others illustrate a writing style known as chiasmus, and another even shows throne theophany in the book. It is regrettable that Persuitte refers to none of these documents.

Such deficiencies, glaring as they are, are not the most serious weakness of this book, however. Barbara Tuchman tells us that good historians do not go beyond their evidence (*Practicing History*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981, p. 18). Persuitte's book is fatally flawed because he constantly goes beyond available documents, even those that can be classified as anti-Mormon. He fails to produce any evidence that Joseph Smith met Oliver Cowdery before 1829, or that Joseph Smith ever read *View of the Hebrews*. Also, proof is lacking that Joseph Smith ever knew about Solomon Spaulding or Elias Boudinot, who wrote the book *Star of the West*, espousing also a Hebrew origin for the American Indian. Furthermore, he consistently uses such sentences as "Contemporary newspaper accounts of the digging activities would, of course, verify the later reports. Unfortunately, there are none that are known" (p. 38). Also, "At this point, Joseph's active imagination would have taken over and begun to consider the possibilities" (p. 118). On still another page the writer in a single paragraph uses the following phrases, "by assuming," "we can only speculate," "we can perhaps perceive" (p. 128). Yet no evidence is cited as to why we must assume, speculate, or perceive. These sentences appear with no supporting evidence or footnotes. They are strictly conjecture.

Unfortunately most of these leaps beyond the documents occur where Persuitte is attempting to verify his thesis that Joseph Smith got his ideas for the Book of Mormon from *View of the Hebrews*. Perhaps it is Persuitte who is the born storyteller with the fertile imagination and not Joseph Smith.

Thus, while the book has an interesting theoretical construct, it fails to substantiate its major thesis and must be classified as only the latest in a long line of anti-Mormon books that fail to provide a more plausible story than that traditionally accepted by Latter-day Saints.

Persuitte's book does, however, point up the need for competent historians to explore the New England of Joseph Smith's day and the possible environmental impact it might have had upon the Prophet and the early Saints. Richard Bushman suggests the need to explore Mormon origins. We also need a historical treatment of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, as well as a study of Joseph Smith's library, the Palmyra library, and the intellectual ideas among New England's common folk. There is much new ground to be plowed regarding Joseph Smith. Moreover, some of this plowing is already beginning. For example, FARMS researchers have recently completed a study of *View of the Hebrews* documenting many instances of radical differences from Ethan Smith's book ("View of the Hebrews: An Unparallel," *FARMS Update*, Oct. 1985). Other studies will be forthcoming as this interest continues.

Both William of Occam and David Hume wrote that one credits a miraculous explanation only if alternatives are more miraculous (Daniel McDonald, "Occam's Razor," *The Language of Argument*, New York: Harper and Row, 1983, p. 29). In the case of Persuitte's book, one comes to the conclusion that it is a greater tax on human credulity to believe his thesis than to believe the story the way Joseph Smith told it.

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