

The “New Mormon History” Reassessed in Light of Recent Books on Joseph Smith and Mormon Origins

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IN 1959, WHILE A GRADUATE STUDENT at the University of Chicago, I wrote a review of the historiography of Mormonism for *Church History* which incorporated the major books and articles from 1832 to 1959 in only eight pages. Now I am hard pressed to review as concisely the major books on just one topic. Despite a flood of studies on Mormonism since 1959, I do not believe that there actually exists an entirely “new Mormon history” in terms of the issues argued or the points of view expressed, and certainly not in the negative sense that some would describe it. In 1959 I found a group defending the Church on the right, writing faith-promoting history which affirmed the truth of Mormon historical claims. In the center was a group of professionals, some Mormon, some not, who focused on questions other than “Is Mormonism true?” And on the left was a group who insisted that Mormonism was historically untrue, a religious corruption, and a fraud. These general categories still tend to hold up, as we shall see, except that more Mormon scholars now fit into the center.

Moses Rischin, who apparently originated the term “new Mormon history,” correctly noted in 1969 that the last decade had seen scholars of every religious persuasion writing about Mormonism, providing a degree of intensive study “unparalleled for any religious group except the Puritans.” Rischin said that the new history constituted a “Mormon declaration of cultural independence,” evidenced by the appearance of *DIALOGUE* and the organization of the Mormon History Association. Rischin said these Mormons agree that Mormonism is fair game for examination and that “Mormon history and culture can be studied in human or naturalistic terms—indeed must be so studied.” But Rischin added significantly that Mormon historians believed this could be done “without thus rejecting the divinity of the Church’s origin and work” (p. 49). While Rischin’s appellation has stuck, much of his insightful characterization of the faithful aspects of the history has been forgotten.

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Robert Flanders (1974) picked up on the "new history" label and said that he believed that the new historians were existential in their beliefs, but he did not define what he meant by the term. Thomas G. Alexander wrote in 1983 of the "new history," arguing that the writing of Mormon history has gone through several phases. Initially, Mormons and anti-Mormons writing the "old Mormon history" battled without careful research, anxious only to find evidence to prove their case. A second phase saw "venerative scholars" writing to inform Latter-day Saints of some aspects of Church history but carefully choosing their topics. Progressive historians followed who were preoccupied with economic history and overlooked religious motives. Alexander contrasted these with the new historians who confront conflict within the Church readily and admit problem areas but deal with religious motivation.

While there are some good insights in these studies, I would question the appropriateness of the term "new history." Certainly the quantity of scholarly studies has greatly increased, and often the quality as well. Yet I still find, as I did in 1959, a difference between writers on the right, those in the center or "middle ground,"¹ and a small number on the left who reflect old antipathies, although I concede that differences are more subtle today.

On the right is a conservative type of writing which remains largely addressed to Mormon audiences, but is more sophisticated than in the past, faith promoting in purpose, and defends against any negative views expressed by non-Mormons. It is frequently nonprofessional in the sense that defenders often write outside their field of expertise. It tends to proclaim empirical proofs for Mormon claims, and generally ignores contrary scholarly opinion. Those who write in this way are usually motivated by powerful spiritual experiences which they consider to be final evidence of the truth of their claims. Their purpose is often moralistic and didactic, using the historical past to reinforce Mormon religious beliefs and values.

An example of such writing appears in Noel Reynolds' *Book of Mormon Authorship*, which is a collection of essays by scholars from BYU. Reynolds says in his introduction that the significant questions of today revolve around the existence of the supernatural, a belief in which modern society has mostly lost faith (1982, 1). He contends that the Book of Mormon provides solid evidence of the supernatural and of the divinity of Christ (pp. 1, 2, 5). He insists that "it would be a very simple matter for scientists to demonstrate" that the book is a fraud. There are, Reynolds holds, any "number of straightforward scientific tests which could help determine whether this book is . . . of ancient origin or whether it was written by nineteenth century Americans" (p. 3). I wonder after 150 years of arguments whether it is that easy to finally establish the historicity of the Book of Mormon, or to disprove it. Much depends upon the assumptions one brings to the effort in the first place.

¹ I used the term "middle ground" to describe a position between those who said Mormonism is untrue and those who insisted on conclusive proof that it is true. In my article "Secular or Sectarian History? A Critique of *No Man Knows My History*" (1974, 96) I criticized Brodie for focusing on the question of Mormonism's truth or untruth, arguing to offset Brodie's thesis that Mormonism was a religious fraud.

In the center is a large group of professionals, mostly RLDS or LDS with a small number of non-Mormons, who write far more sympathetically toward the Church than most professionals did in times past. Of the Mormons who write in this vein, it is evident that despite their high degree of professionalism they are strongly committed to the Church, often have had spiritual experiences of their own, and yet do not base their work upon these. They find other reasons for faith and avoid "empirical proofs." In many ways Leonard Arrington best represents this group and is the very heart of the effort to write scholarly history that still treats Mormon religious claims with respect. Arrington stated his philosophical premises in his first major work, *Great Basin Kingdom* (1958). He said that he believed that any religion must be judged on its "capacity to attack ageless human problems" effectively and that the best evidence of Joseph Smith's claims "is the essential social usefulness of the church." A very important point for understanding Arrington's position is his belief that "the discussion of naturalistic causes of revelations does not preclude . . . [their] claim to be revealed or inspired of God," and that "in practice it is difficult, if not impossible to distinguish what is objectively 'revealed' from what is subjectively 'contributed' by those receiving the revelation" (pp. viii, ix). Arrington seems to be saying that as a historian he cannot prove or disprove Joseph's claims to divine inspiration but that he personally finds strong reasons for belief. This may have been what Robert Flanders meant when he called the new history "existential." However contradictory the evidence may be, a faithful member makes a commitment and tries his best to be true to his beliefs. I suspect that many Latter-day Saints, historians or otherwise, who have reflected upon the historical issues and have thought through the evidence have come to some sort of position like this, although this is a very personal thing and not talked of much in Church circles. Those who criticize the new historical writing from the far right may well misunderstand the affirmative character of the middle ground historian's commitment.

On the left are those almost exclusively outside the Church who more so than in times past are motivated by explicit and contrasting religious commitments. They tend to follow many of the arguments of Fawn Brodie, a disillusioned but scholarly ex-Mormon, and react very negatively and dogmatically to contrary studies. Rev. Wesley Walters, an ardent opponent of Mormonism,² fits this description, concentrating exclusively on the truth or untruth of Mormon religious claims. But to illustrate my point here, I would note the career of Jerald Tanner, who has written no narrative history but depends heavily on historical sources to write polemical works.

A former Mormon who is convinced that Mormonism is not true, Tanner wrote his earliest version of *Mormonism — Shadow or Reality?* entitled "Mormonism" (n.d.) before 1961, using as his biblical text I Thessalonians 5:21: "Prove all things." He offered historical examples of what he considered inconsistencies in Mormon doctrine and practice. He acknowledged candidly

² See my criticism of Walters, "The First Vision Controversy: A Critique and Reconciliation," *DIALOGUE* 15 (Summer 1982): 42-45.

that he lost his faith at about age eighteen when he read David Whitmer's *Address to All Believers in Christ* (1887) and found he could not disprove Whitmer's charges that Joseph Smith altered his revelations. Admitting shortcomings in his own personal life, Tanner felt great guilt but no forgiveness within the Mormon church. He learned that he needed a personal and forgiving Savior, found his needs met in another church, and reformed his life (n.d., preface, p. 236). It would appear that Tanner was obsessed with proving Mormonism, but when he could not he tried to disprove it. He assumes that proof or disproof is possible. In some ways his work is an exact counterpart to the far right, defensive Mormon studies, although recently he was one of the first to question the authenticity of the Hofmann manuscripts after employing them for many years to contend against Mormonism (Tanner 1986, 1).

In evaluating books published during the last two and one-half decades, I will consider one major category — Joseph Smith and Church origins. Then I wish to return to my original question: Is there a new Mormon history?

Milton Backman, a member of the religion department at BYU, trained in American history at the University of Pennsylvania, represents the conservative right. He wrote *Joseph Smith's First Vision* in 1971, largely as a corrective to Rev. Wesley Walters' article which said that there were no revivals in Palmyra in 1820, and therefore Joseph's story of the first vision was untrue. Backman affirmed that "sacred history clearly testifies that God periodically directed his children through prophets." He included also what he termed "several distinct evidences of the divine calling of Joseph Smith" (pp. xi, xiii). Backman insisted that when Joseph Smith described local revivals he was speaking of those in the "religion of country" around Palmyra and not in Palmyra itself, as Walters maintained. Backman presented evidence that there were many revivals within a fifty mile radius of the Smith residence (pp. 84-87).

Hugh Nibley's *Abraham in Egypt* (1981) is another conservative work which defends the historicity of the book of Abraham. Nibley addressed the problem created by the discovery by University of Utah Professor Aziz Atiya of Egyptian papyri which once belonged to Joseph Smith and which one eminent Egyptologist from the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago contends were the source for the book of Abraham (see Wilson 1968). Another Oriental Institute scholar argued that the fragments were Book of the Dead materials and had nothing to do with Abraham (Baer 1968). Nibley responded by citing the first description of the book of Abraham in the *Times and Seasons*, which said that the book was a "translation of some ancient Records from catacombs of Egypt, purporting to be the writings of Abraham" (5 March 1842, 704). Nibley took this to mean that Joseph did not say for certain that they actually were Abraham's writings and argues that "we already know Joseph Smith had power to translate ancient records with or without possession of the original text." Thus, Nibley contends, "it is the Book of Abraham that is on trial, not Joseph Smith as an Egyptologist" (1981, 3-4).

Nibley uses several purportedly ancient sources dealing with Abraham which have appeared since Joseph Smith's time to find parallels with the book

of Abraham text, and thus to argue for its historicity. Yet he admits that these sources date at least hundreds of years after Abraham. One of these, the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, he indicates dates from the time of Christ (1981, 9). Furthermore, as he says, no one is certain when Abraham lived. Estimates differ as much as two thousand years (p. 8). Despite this, he contends that to determine the authenticity of the book of Abraham we have only to compare sources from the *same time and place* and weigh the points of conflict and agreement (p. 8). Just how this can be done when the dates of his new sources are very late and the time of Abraham indeterminate he does not say. Also, he never compares these elements in the book of Abraham and his new sources which do *not* match, thus failing to meet his own essential criteria for proof. It might be better simply to accept the book of Abraham on faith rather than trying to prove its historicity by faulty logic and questionable evidence.

In the volume by Noel Reynolds mentioned earlier, Truman Madsen, who holds the Richard L. Evans Chair of Christian Understanding at BYU, fills a gap in a biography of B. H. Roberts which he wrote in 1980. Madsen argues that Roberts was playing the devil's advocate in presenting the General Authorities of the Church with a study which raised several questions as to the Book of Mormon's authenticity, including the point that there are actually thousands of dialects among the Indians in America which could not have evolved from a single Hebraic language in as short a time as the Book of Mormon allows.³ Madsen maintains that Roberts came to see that Book of Mormon peoples represented one migration among many who came to America.⁴ Madsen says that there has been an avalanche of evidence that the Hebrews had influence on pre-Columbian America but cites none of it. His contentions also run contrary to what qualified Meso-American scholars maintain, even at BYU.⁵

In another essay John Welch, a member of the BYU law faculty, seeks to establish the Book of Mormon's authenticity by citing examples of the Hebraic poetic form chiasmus. Noel Reynolds, a specialist in law and philosophy, makes a similar type of argument in another piece, saying that this pattern was not recognized in Hebrew literature until the middle of the nineteenth century. In light of these literary forms he concludes, "it seems impossible

³ See Reynolds (1982, 23). Madsen skims over this problem which Roberts thought enormous. For a better understanding see Roberts's original manuscript (B. Madsen 1985, 72-82).

⁴ See Reynolds (1982, 23). If this is so Roberts was no doubt aware that it ran counter to the thinking of most Latter-day Saints and perhaps Joseph Smith, who wrote to the editor of *The Saxton* in Rochester that the "Book of Mormon is a record of the forefathers of our western Tribes of Indians," suggesting that he considered all of the western tribes had the Lamanites as progenitors (see Jessee 1984, 273).

⁵ See Reynolds (1982, 23). Madsen says, "Roberts felt he had established beyond doubt that there is enough independent evidence for . . . Jewish or Hebraic influence on native American races to make the Book of Mormon credible. The evidence was accumulating rapidly in the last decade of Elder Roberts' life (it has been an avalanche since)." For a top archeologist's contrasting perspective see Coe (1973). Ray Matheny, a Mormon archeologist who has done diggings at important central American sites, also does not agree with Madsen's unsupported contentions (1984).

that any modern man could have written the Book of Mormon" (1982, 73). But neither Welch nor Reynolds consider whether this literary structure appears in any of Joseph Smith's other writings⁶ nor how much he was influenced by King James' literary style.

A volume which is more difficult to categorize but which seems to belong in the conservative mold, is Richard Bushman's *Beginnings of Mormonism* (1984), which I would say exemplifies Mormon conservative writing at its best and constitutes one of the few conservative works which tries to bring Church opinion of Joseph Smith up to date with new sources and new historical insights. Bushman indicates that he believes Joseph Smith's account of his revelations (p. 3), yet also acknowledges some connections between Joseph's writings and the beliefs and culture of his immediate society. Perhaps Bushman's conservative inclinations are most clearly illustrated in his contention that Joseph "is best understood as a person who outgrew his culture." Clarifying this Bushman said, "The viewpoint of this book is that parts of Mormonism did resemble aspects of the environment; other parts were alien and peculiar" (p. 7). Bushman is leaving room here for uniqueness based upon divine revelation, a worthy purpose from the Mormon perspective.

Sometimes Bushman overstates his case, as when he argues that Mormon theology "shows few signs of having wrestled free of Calvinism," and that by Joseph's time "the family could scarcely connect with mainstream Protestantism" (pp. 5, 6). This is hard to accept when the revolt against Calvinism was almost universal in the United States in the 1830s (Sweet 1952) and the Smith family was reared in a Congregationalist environment where Calvinist proclivities were strong. Also, Asael Smith and Joseph, Sr., had been Universalists, a denomination that broke free from Calvinism. Lucy Mack Smith and most of her children joined the Presbyterians in 1824, and their church was strongly Calvinist.⁷ Bushman contends that Lucy was never converted to this church, but Alexander Neibaur indicates in his journal (24 May 1841) that when Joseph attended the revivals he wanted to "feel and shout like the rest" of the family who joined, showing a strong emotional commitment by some members of the Smith family. Bushman's conservatism is also manifest in his failure to treat Book of Mormon themes, except to argue that Book of Mormon theocratic tendencies hardly match Republican values in 1820 America (pp. 132-33). Nonetheless, where Bushman deals with environment he does so superbly and adds significantly to our knowledge.

Also on the conservative side, yet very important, is Truman Madsen's edited volume of essays by nationally known biblical and religious scholars entitled *Reflections on Mormonism: Judean Christian Parallels* (1978). These various specialists treat Mormonism and the Book of Mormon as worthy of their scholarly attention, a situation that has not always been the case but which may well be a by-product of the recent more professional style of Mor-

⁶ Blake Ostler comments on chiasmus in the Doctrine and Covenants and the book of Abraham and denies that it was an exclusively ancient literary form (1987, 101).

⁷ Bushman himself is aware of these points but brushes them aside (pp. 4-7). On the Calvinist inclinations among the Presbyterians see Marty (1984, 124).

mon history writing. Thus Krister Stendahl, dean of the Harvard Divinity School, is one of the first ranking New Testament scholars to look at 3 Nephi in the Book of Mormon. He compares 3 Nephi with the Sermon on the Mount and argues that Joseph Smith targumized the text, that is, read his own theological viewpoints based on the King James version back into the Book of Mormon translation. He says that 3 Nephi quotes Jesus, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled with the Holy Spirit." But he indicates that the word in the Greek original is "chortazo" (not "pleroo") and that chortazo can only mean "to fill the stomach." Stendahl says that 3 Nephi ignores Jesus as social critic and follows John where Jesus is Christ and center of salvation, not Matthew where Jesus is the teacher of righteousness (1978, 151). David Noel Freedman (1978), who edits the *Biblical Archeologist*, describes the discovery of the Ebla Tablets, some 1500 tablets dating from 2500 B.C., which include references to Sodom and Gomorrah, and names like Abram, David, Esau, and Israel. These lend support to the biblical story and suggest that Abraham may have come from Syria rather than Ur of the Chaldees in the south.

Gaining access in the Church archives to richly varied sources on the prophet's life, Andrew Ehat and Lyndon Cook edited *The Words of Joseph Smith* and stated in their introduction that in the restoration "no one stood taller than Joseph Smith, the Lord's prophet" (1980, xv). Using diaries kept by his closest associates, Ehat and Cook have provided scholars with the original reports of all of Joseph's sermons and addresses. Some insight into the potency of the prophet's public speaking (and why gentiles feared him) comes in Levi Richards' recording of an address to the Nauvoo Legion in May 1843. Joseph declared:

Speaking of power in relation to our country & the innocent,—he said that those who held power when applied to by those who were suffering, received in answer "We cant do any thing for you," *damn such power*,—if I have power & am called on by the innocent Sufferer I swear I will use by the great God I will use that power for them —& not Say I cant do any thing for you—I can do something —& I will! (p. 199)

After Missourians endangered his life in June 1843, Joseph declared:

If our enemies are determined to oppress us & deprive us of our rights & privileges as they have done & if the Authorities that be on the earth will not assist us in our rights not give us that protection which the Laws & Constitution of the United States & of thi[s] State guarantees unto us: then we will claim them from higher power from heaven & from God Almighty & the Constitution & I *SWEAR* I will not deal so mildly with them again for the time has Come when forbearance is no longer a virtue, And if you are again taken unlawfully you are at liberty to give loose to Blood and Thunder But act with Almighty Power" (p. 217).

Using the unpublished diaries of Willard Richards, William Clayton, Wilford Woodruff, and many others, Ehat and Cook have given scholars and Saints an indispensable collection of sources about Joseph Smith.

The substantial works by Madsen, Bushman, Ehat, and Cook suggest that the distinctions between right and center blur at times, a trend which I see as

desirable as more and more conservative Mormon scholars write or edit substantial works.

In looking at the historical works in the center, one of the earliest significant studies comes from Richard Howard, RLDS Church Historian, who wrote *Restoration Scriptures* in 1969, a study of the textual development of Joseph Smith's revealed scriptures. Howard said that his volume was designed for the "serious student seeking to grasp the relationships between church history, revelation and scripture" and that many of the "documents published in this volume were revised extensively to accommodate . . . the enlarged historical understanding of Joseph Smith Jr." (p. 8). Affirming that the RLDS tradition denied what Howard called the "plenary inspiration" thesis—that by supernatural means prophets can fully communicate God's truth without error—he stressed that the RLDS church held that inspiration is "conceptual" and that the Holy Spirit works through the natural facilities of the recipients. He quoted an RLDS authority saying, "What is seen is always to some degree distorted" (p. 13). That being so, Howard felt free to show evolutionary changes in his texts without challenging the faith of his readers.

Howard traced changes in the Doctrine and Covenants and the Inspired Version texts, but his most provocative analysis was a comparison of the various texts of the Book of Mormon from 1829 through 1840, showing how Joseph Smith revised passages rather freely as his insights and understandings changed over time. In comparing the early MS "D" text, dictated by Joseph Smith to several scribes in 1829, MS "E", an amended transcript used by the printer, and the 1830 printed edition, Howard found stylistic changes, as well as paragraph and punctuation changes introduced by the printer. Howard concluded that the texts do not support the David Whitmer, Martin Harris, and William Smith contention that Joseph received a word-by-word translation by inspiration which required none of his own conceptualization. If this theory were valid, he said, "there would have been no need to improve the text" (p. 40). Howard said Joseph continued to make improvements between 1830 and 1840, some with doctrinal import. There were over two thousand alterations in the MS "E" text and a thousand more in the published version of 1837.

Noting how changes were made concerning the nature and person of Christ, Howard said it can "be demonstrated that theological considerations were operative" (p. 47). He alluded here to initial passages which referred to Christ as the Eternal Father and everlasting God, which were changed in 1837 to read, "son of the Eternal Father" and "Son of the everlasting God," seeming to accommodate Joseph's repudiation in the middle 1830's of the orthodox trinitarian Godhead.

The 1977 Donna Hill, a librarian at Hunter College and a Church member, published the first major biography of the Mormon prophet since Fawn Brodie's. Acknowledging herself "a descendant of Mormon pioneers who crossed the plains in faith and hardship," Hill said her "sympathies lie with the Saints." But she quoted Joseph Fielding Smith that "No historian has the right to make his prejudices paramount to the facts he should record." Making

extensive use of original letters and diaries in the LDS church archives, Hill sought to present for the first time by any biographer, "the dramatic and human elements of his story, to show the warmth, spirituality and joyousness, for which his people loved him, his foibles, his implacable will and something of his complexity" (pp. ix, x).

Taking issue with Brodie, Hill traced the deep religious disposition of the prophet's parents. Hill also used Joseph's 1832 account of his first vision, unknown to Brodie, to argue that the 1820 experience was deeply personal and that his understanding of its theological implications may have grown over time. She said that all the varying accounts of the vision agree that he had a moving religious experience in his adolescence after being disturbed by sectarian agitation. Hill differed sharply with Brodie on this, who had contended that the vision was a half-remembered dream, or else fabricated.

Hill questioned the significance of the 1826 trial for "glass looking," which Brodie saw as powerful evidence that Joseph Smith was a money digger. Hill pointed out the differing accounts of what happened at the trial, who testified and what was said, and whether or not Joseph was found guilty. Yet she acknowledged that Joseph was most likely a money digger, as were many of his friends, since other evidence supports this. But she suggested that magic and religion were linked in the minds of many of them, such as Oliver Cowdery, whose father had belonged to the primitive Christians' money digging sect, which mixed magic and Christian millennialism.

Hill recognized conflicting testimonies attributed to the witnesses of the Book of Mormon and suggested several possible interpretations of their experience as witnesses, but concluded that "however others might judge . . . it was real to the three witnesses. The closest scrutiny of their testimonies can leave no doubt that their faith in the Book of Mormon was based upon what they believed to be a manifestation from God" (1977, 94). This contrasted sharply with Brodie's argument that Joseph Smith had the power to make men see visions. Reviewing some of the arguments as to the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon, Hill affirmed that new converts were unconcerned with the issue, that they cared more that America, due to its sectarian antagonisms and materialism, was doomed unless the nation speedily repented. This too contrasted with Brodie, who developed an extensive argument that Joseph had written the book.⁸

Another work of great value from the center is Dean Jessee's *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (1984), edited from unpublished holographs, dictated manuscripts, and rare printed materials. Jessee asserts that too much of our assessment of Joseph heretofore has come from writings that were not his and that we cannot know him on this basis. "Although," says Jessee, "final answers to the question of Joseph Smith's religious claims do not lie within the framework of the historical record," yet we can only know his true personality when we can read what he wrote or dictated (pp. xiii-xix). These sources show us a strong spiritual side of Joseph Smith from his handwritten diary, his millen-

⁸ Compare Donna Hill (1977, 15-31, 38, 41-52, 65-69, 93-94, 104-5) with Brodie (1945, 1-49).

nialism, his inclination to forgive those who wandered in their loyalties but with honorable intentions, his hopes to frighten the Missourians with a military task force to redeem the Saints' holdings in Jackson County, Missouri, and the moral dilemma that plural marriage provided when so many in his own family, in the church, and in the community opposed it.⁹ We get more than a glimpse here of the human struggles Joseph experienced and can identify with him on those grounds.

On the left is the work of Dan Vogel, a disaffected Mormon, who in his recent *Indian Origins and the Book of Mormon* (1987) traces what he considers the actual historical background of the Book of Mormon. Convinced that Joseph Smith wrote the volume, he attributes some of its ideas to Joseph Smith's money digging experiences and much of the rest to his desire to answer questions about the Indians that had been hotly debated in America since the sixteenth century. These issues included whether the Indians were Hebrews or refugees from Babel or the northern kingdom in 700 B.C.; whether they were initially white; by what route and means they came to the new world; and the level of their civilization, including the state of their metallurgy. He argues, much as Fawn Brodie had, that these questions were widely discussed. He contends that Ethan Smith argued that the Indians were the lost tribes to offset the Puritan notion that they were savages unworthy of missionary effort. He says that the relationship between Joseph Smith's environment and the Book of Mormon is the central issue for students of early Mormonism to consider in coming years. Vogel has done some research well but tends to depend heavily on Wesley Walters at key points. He describes Joseph Smith's 1929 trial, for example, as though we have one impeachable source to tell us what happened. He tends at times to be dogmatic, a characteristic of many of the far left opponents of Mormonism.

If there is anything really new or remarkable about the historiography of Mormonism since 1960 in the area that I have treated here, it comes in the number of solid works which have come from the right and center. Much of the impetus for scholarship has come from more readily accessible Church Archives, under Church management, and also from financial support by BYU, suggesting that more than a few Mormons have wanted a more mature written history. What has been accomplished is a monument to a people seeking truth about their past and facing that past with courage and with faith.

Of late some critics have charged that the "new history" undermines faith (Bohn 1983), but personal conversations with administrators and faculty members at both BYU and at the University of Utah (where I would expect such a movement to begin) have convinced me that this is not so. Those who thus criticize often have done no historical research, read few significant historical works, and written none. They are outsiders who argue ad horrendum that the very church is endangered if their viewpoint does not prevail. Some have said that the authors of the "new history" are positivists, doctrinaire in their certainty of the truth of their history (Bohn 1983; Kramer 1983). But

⁹ See Jessee 1984, 16-18, 20-21, 27-28, 238, 323-24, 472, 538-39.

as I have shown here, dogmatism seems to come from the right or the left. Historians in the center have made their existential position clear — Mormonism can be neither proved nor *disproved* by historical means. The irony is that those in the center affirmed their existential faith long before certain critics seized upon historical relativism and nihilism to criticize them. It would seem that somehow critics have not been listening, that they are caught up in their own inner perplexities and turmoils.

Yet from one perspective the historical relativists may have gone too far. If those who doubt the possibility of an objective history had thought their position through, they would have perceived that if it is not possible to say anything truthful about the past, the missionary message of the restoration would be included. A position so cynical would destroy all Mormon claims to historical truth. At the end of his article Bohn disclaims this degree of cynicism, but in light of his argument that historians can never escape their own culture and personal biases, no other conclusion is possible. If it is possible to know something about the past, then historians are justified in trying to recover it in an objective way. If it is not, then Mormons should not present historical arguments to the world in favor of Joseph Smith and contend that they are true.

Bohn, however, affirms that only the faithful Mormon historians have stated their premises forthrightly. Obviously he has not read very widely in the recent history. In my own case I stated emphatically in an early criticism of Brodie: "Nothing which I suggest below is intended to render any final resolution to the question which I think she tries to answer — is Joseph Smith a prophet of God? . . . I do not believe that question can be finally answered by historians who deal with human artifacts left from a hundred and forty years ago" (Hill 1972, 72). Some of the critics on the right tend to distort or oversimplify the positions they are attacking, which makes seeming refutation much easier.

The issue between Mormons writing their history today and those who criticize them is not between those who believe and those who do not, but between those who think that old words and old interpretations are sacrosanct and that any changes may somehow destroy the faith, and those who contend that making concessions where evidence requires merely shifts the way we perceive some things and not the substance of the things themselves. A recent poll of *DIALOGUE* readers shows strong faith among those subjected to differing points of view when those viewpoints are expressed in a general context supportive of the Church. A very high percentage of readers attend church every Sunday. Even among those who question the historicity of the Book of Mormon (27 percent of total subscribers) nearly half believe in its divine origin. Thus 77 percent would at least agree that "its theology and moral teachings are authentically of divine origin" (Mauess, Tarjan, and Esplin 1987, 47).

Many scholars who write Mormon history believe that some recognition of contradictory evidence is necessary if the Church is to maintain its credibility against the allegations of historical distortion made by its enemies. Thus, writing scholarly history can be Church-supportive and true to the highest Church values of openness and honesty.

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