

## Wayward Saints: The Conflict of Opposing Visions

*Wayward Saints: The Godbeites and Brigham Young*, by Ronald W. Walker (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 450 pp., \$49.95 cloth/\$25.00 paper.

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RONALD W. WALKER'S STUDY *Wayward Saints: The Godbeites and Brigham Young* is a valuable contribution to recent Mormon scholarship. Among other things, the book illuminates important questions and concerns of both past and present. Walker recounts the story of the Godbeite revolt, which broke out in 1869 and was led by two able and fascinating individuals: William S. Godbe and E. L. T. Harrison. The movement ultimately attracted a larger cast of characters to its banner, most notably Edward W. Tulidge, former apostle Amasa M. Lyman, Fanny and Thomas Stenhouse, Henry W. Lawrence, Eli B. Kelsey, and William Shearman.

Calling the revolt "an important event in the making of modern Mormonism," Walker notes that the movement appealed to those who:

believed that Brigham Young had gone too far in defending his Great Basin Kingdom during the crisis-filled months following the completion of the transcontinental railroads. Nor was the opposition of these wayward Saints confined to words. . . . [T]he men and women of the New Movement established a rival church, founded an opposition press, and built . . . the most comfortable lecture and meeting hall in the territory. . . .

As it turned out, the New Movement's threat to established Mormonism did not last long. Like a Great Basin thunderstorm, Godbeitism was sudden and menacing at first, but it quickly passed. In the process, however, it raised important questions (p.xiii).

Walker has raised important questions as well. Who were these dissenters? What issues did they raise? Why was their challenge so menacing? Why did it pass so quickly? How does their story help us better understand Mormonism past and present?

As Walker demonstrates, Godbeite leaders comprised a small group of intellectuals, representatives of 19th-century "British Mormonism" who prized city life, were drawn to ideas, relished public debate, emphasized a religious tradition featuring simple biblical doctrines and spiritual gifts, and came from a tradition which was used to challenging the status quo. These Saints found themselves uneasy with the Utah theocracy of Brigham Young, who envisioned an agrarian, practical kingdom stressing conformity, obedience, and unity. For Young, Zion constituted a "piece of practical social engineering" designed to improve and elevate immigrant converts "drawn from the lower and lower to middle classes of European Society" (p. xv). The Godbeites, however, were more representative of the Victorian age which prized freedom—where "every man and woman supposedly was the captain of his or her soul" (p. 77). As Walker realizes, while the Godbeite reformers may have overstated the differences between British and American Mormonism and overlooked the many "beliefs and prac-

tices" they shared, clearly the milieu of 19th-century England provided "the potential for making some British converts indigestible chaff for Brigham Young's Zion" (p. 78).

Having said this, what was the Godbeite vision? As with many dissenting movements, there was probably more unity in dissent generally than in a well-formulated world view. Still, the Godbeites were interested in the meaning of religion in the modern world, especially the question of religious authority. Central to this debate was the very presence of Brigham Young. Fundamentally, the dissenters "defended personal conscience in religious matters" while Brigham Young and other church leaders asserted "the claims of institutional authority" (p. xiii). In part their problems with Young were economic: many of the Godbeites were merchants, and Young's retrenchment policies hit them in the pocketbook. But the disagreement was cast in larger concerns. For Eli Harrison, the issue "in Utah's theocracy [was] where did Brigham Young begin and end and when did Gospel teaching take over?" (p. 61). When asked by Wilford Woodruff if he believed that Young had the right to dictate "to you in all things, temporal and spiritual," Godbe responded that he had:

followed Young's business advice in the past—sometimes against his own judgement—and matters had turned out badly. On theological questions, he said he was no more sure of the president's leadership. Rather than depend on the counsel of a single man for all of God's people, Godbe believed that a better guide might be found in the "light of God in each individual soul" (p.8).

This was an important denial of institutional authority. Godbe's assertions, Walker realizes, raised generic questions that confront all religious organizations: Did God's voice come only to leaders? Could followers listen, learn, and act on the light of their own revelatory knowledge? What role did reason play? In the final analysis weren't people personally responsible for their own actions? Obedience, William Shearman asserted, must be thoughtful and complex, not lockstep (p. 179). "I do not believe in going along without asking any questions," argued Henry W. Lawrence, "I do not believe in being forced" (p. 173). Moreover, the Godbeites realized that there must be a recognition of the respectability, even necessity, of dissent. Without it, thinking men and women became "alienated and frustrated" (p. 179).

What then were the Godbeites' methods? Initially, they represented an effort of internal reform to purify Mormonism. Eventually, the dissenters called for a new Mormonism, a second birth blending the old and the new into a new church. The Godbeites also realized the power of the spoken and written word to convey their dissent. Indeed, one of their real contributions was the creation of publications like the *Peep O'Day* whose columns articulated their views and polemics.

I must confess all of this had a familiar ring. While the situations are not completely similar, the issues, methods, and goals of the Godbeites resemble the various efforts at internal reform within Mormonism in the last two decades. During that time, too, there were challenges by intellectuals to the notion of authority; these issues found expression in new publications and forums; the question of individual conscience was at the center; and the

dissenters often struggled with whether or not to remain within the fold. As was the case in the 1870s, a century later there were calls for a new church. Some dissenters, then and now, cared so much they couldn't leave the faith. Others took the course expressed in the lines of an old country

song: "We didn't know what to call it, so we just called it quits."

Well researched and clearly written, *Wayward Saints* is an important and insightful look at tensions within Mormonism. It deserves a wide and thoughtful reading.