

ogy. The section on "Faithful History" is particularly adept at offering insight into just why Mormon history provides fertile ground for controversy, both within the church and without. "There is a very real sense," the Ostlings explain, "in which the church's history is its theology" (245). No wonder, then, that the official church strives so mightily to maintain control over its own religious tradition.

Mormon America is not without flaws. A chapter on Mormon celebrities ("Some Latter-day Stars") feels superfluously fluffy. Occasional rhetorical questions masquerade as transitions and give the story a jerky, overly didactic feel (for example, 32, 41). Transitions continue to be a problem: though most chapters flow well internally, they are not always artfully integrated into the larger narrative. More editorial attention to that larger story might also have prevented noticeable repetitions: readers really do not need to be told more than once that the word Deseret refers to the honeybee (46, 114) or that sociologist Rodney Stark thinks Mormonism is the most important new world religion to arise since Islam (xvi-xvii, 217, 262, 375). As a result, readers may find the book more satisfying when digested in discrete, chapter-size chunks.

The Ostlings have supplemented their tale with a map of Mormon temples, a graph (strangely buried at the book's end), and eight pages of photographs. Joseph Smith's "King Follett Discourse," an important source for Mormon theology, appears in an appendix, and a second appendix explains how the authors estimated the church's finances. A brief but helpfully annotated list of resources for further reading completes the volume.

As visitors and reporters descend upon Salt Lake City for the 2002 Winter Olympics, Mormonism will have the public spotlight cast upon it as at no time since the nineteenth century. For this reason, *Mormon America* could not have arrived at a better time. Though breaking no new scholarly ground, the authors have proffered a responsible, accessible, and engaging account of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The Ostlings succeed admirably in their aim of providing a frank but fair account of this dynamic American tradition. Their book, the best contemporary introduction to those whom President Gordon B. Hinckley calls "a happy, go-ahead people" (375), deserves a wide audience among church members and gentiles alike.

An Excellent Survey of the Headlines, But Not of the Heart

Mormon America: The Power and the Promise. By Richard N. Ostling and Joan K. Ostling (New York, Harper-Collins, 1999), 454 pp., \$17.00.

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MORMON AMERICA IS A comprehensive and instructive overview of Mormonism "for non-Mormons and Mormons alike" (xi). Its scope, tone and readability reveal the best of Richard

and Joan Ostling's background in journalism. They cover most major topics in Mormon history, teachings, and culture, drawing from a large, well-selected array of scholarly studies and interviews with a variety of church members. They have an objective and fair-minded stance and often provide contextual understanding for issues they discuss. And each chapter is like a separate article, with an engaging beginning, readable middle, and summary statement at the end, usually positive but sometimes cautionary. For these and other reasons, this book deserves reading by all Mormon watchers in and out of the church.

However, it also has some key weaknesses. Principally, the book fails to cover topics that would help readers understand what has motivated the saints. The major methodological weaknesses tend to be the flip side of the strengths. The emphasis on controversy—the downside of a journalistic approach—tends to crowd out other important issues. The acknowledged reliance on secondary material (xiii) leads to omissions and debatable claims that could have been avoided with more interaction with practicing Mormons. And the deliberate focus on “what is distinctive” in the Mormon world (xi) downplays important similarities to other religious groups.

The book's strengths and weaknesses play out differently in its different parts. The chapters on church his-

tory are informative and interesting and include numerous details most members won't know. However, they do not offer a balanced diet: there is too much of controversy and not enough of Mormonism as a faith. For example, the discussion of polygamy (56-80, 84-90) focuses on its practice in secret (1840s Nauvoo and post-Manifesto), the government anti-polygamy crusade, and issues with modern fundamentalists—while only a couple of paragraphs discuss how polygamy was lived from the 1850s through the 1880s, or what it meant to its practitioners (69-70, 86). The most crucial absence is in the coverage of Joseph Smith: one gets little feeling for why the saints followed him then or honor him today. It's as if one were to teach American history by exploring the founding fathers' public and private lives without explaining the political ideas they espoused or the Constitution they wrote.²

The chapters on LDS scripture and doctrine are well organized and cover several important topics. Though not bad, these are the weakest chapters, due to numerous small errors and a few major ones that could have been corrected with more feedback from knowledgeable members. The biggest misperception concerns the LDS view of the atonement: the Ostlings perpetuate the error of *Newsweek's* Kenneth Woodward, describing it as an act of “empathy” and “example” (328), but

1. Edwin G. Budde, *Bigler's Chronicle of the West: The Conquest of California, Discovery of Gold, and Mormon Settlement as Reflected in Henry William Bigler's Diaries* (Berkeley, 1962), 79.

2. By comparison, Leonard Arrington and Davis Bitton's *The Mormon Experience* has two chapters on Smith and two thematic chapters discussing both early persecutions and the appeal of early Mormonism. In *Mormon America*, the two chapters on Smith discuss persecutions (33-36) but not why people were attracted to the movement.

not a literal expiation for sins.³ The biggest omission is all that Mormonism shares with mainstream Christianity: the reader is not told where the similarities lie, much less their relation to the differences or their relative importance. When even mentioned, similarities are described as boring.⁴

There are other problems, such as a tendency to detail criticisms of doctrine and scripture while at best summarizing defenses. The Book of Mormon's teachings are never explained: quoted passages are nearly all about controversial topics, not passages the members cherish; the chapter on the Book of Mormon focuses entirely on its historicity. This is no more helpful than explaining the Bible to non-Christians by discussing only higher criticism and Biblical archeology. Also, some crucial definitions are omitted. The chapter on the LDS beliefs about God uses the terms "finite," "limited," and "contingent," which have precise theological definitions that many readers will not know. The discussion of

whether Mormons are Christian is flawed from the lack of a definition of "Christian."⁵

The chapters on Mormon culture are the strongest part of the book. All major aspects of the culture are covered, from church governance to personal lifestyle, missions and temples to celebrities and dissidents. These descriptions are the most accurate, perhaps because the journalist's tools are better suited to current events than to history or doctrine. The balance here is the best, too, covering strengths as well as concerns. (For example: "Anyone who notices the regimentation at the MTC and omits the palpable excitement of the students misses the story" [214].) While some members may feel uncomfortable with discussions of church finances or the temple endowment,⁶ my own concern is that there is little mention of spiritual life: experiences of comfort, healing, guidance, and witness. A few short testimonies are quoted, but the role of testimony is not understood.⁷ The Ostlings refer to the belief in mod-

3. The authors cite several mainstream Mormon works that embrace a literal view of the atonement, so this claim is baffling.

4. For example, much of the Book of Mormon "seems tedious" (27); the early missionary discussions (which discuss God and Christ) are "bland" (213); General Conference talks are "routine, even banal" (202).

5. Mormons tend to use the term more broadly than do Evangelical Protestants, to mean a belief in Jesus Christ as the savior rather than an embrace of a traditional creed. The charge that they are not Christian, thus, sounds to Mormons like a denial of their belief in Christ though Mormons claim to have the only true church, the authors, thus, err in saying they claim to be the only true Christians (316).

6. While detailing an extensive estimate of church holdings (by methods explained in an appendix), the authors note that the LDS church runs its finances with "scrupulous integrity as well as business acumen" (120). The description of the endowment is drawn partly from church sources (though which sources is not clear since the book has topical reference notes rather than detailed citations). The rest comes from comparison with the Masonic ceremony, an issue they acknowledge to be sensitive. (193-195).

7. Descriptions of the missionary discussions and temple recommend interviews fail to mention the emphasis on having a testimony (213, 187-8). The authors apparently equate

ern prophecy and quote President Hinckley about receiving revelation at the highest levels (149); unfortunately they miss the equally important belief in personal revelation at the lowest levels and the part it plays in members' commitment, optimism, and support of church leaders.

Notwithstanding my reservations, I greatly enjoyed *Mormon America* and cared deeply about it, writing many reflections in the margins (as well as corrections). There is much to think about here, and even the mistakes reveal opportunities for better communication. I especially liked the occasional comparisons to other churches and wished for more detail. The Ostlings are candid in their praise of the church's strengths: committed living of beliefs, virtuous individuals, strong communities and families, a unique welfare program, high standards for youth and opportunities for their service.⁸ They are also candid in their assessment of its weaknesses: struggles to adapt church programs in foreign cultures, lack of a contemplative side or intellectual tradition, absence of training for clergy, a defensive posture towards criticism and dissidents. The final chapter looks to the next century, with such notable comments as: "Mormon administrative style is inspired by corporate America, not democratic America" (374); "Mor-

monism may appeal precisely because of its authoritarianism" (383).

Because of the book's weaknesses, I worry about its reception among the stated target audiences. On one hand, many non-Mormons may be content, thinking they understand more than they actually do. This can be helped by further reading, as the authors hope (xi) –Jan Shipps' recent *Sojourner in the Promised Land: Forty Years Among the Mormons* (University of Illinois Press, 2000) would make a good companion. On the other hand, many Mormons may be overly upset or dismissive. This can be helped by a realization that as the church grows, it will get more attention, so we should welcome all fair-minded approaches. The book ends with this gracious tribute: "The Mormon people encircle each other in a loving community, seeking to make sure that everyone has a divinely appointed task and that no one's needs are overlooked. In modern, fractionated American society, those are accomplishments as impressive as building a city-state on the Mississippi, hauling handcarts across the prairies, or making the arid Salt Lake Basin bloom" (385). Only an atmosphere of mutual respect will enable the dialogue that furthers understanding, which in turn helps the church fulfill its mission to serve the world.

"testimony" to the verbal expression rather than the spiritual experience: "like the Mormons, Evangelicals uphold traditional morals and encourage personalized testimonials" (384).

8. The high praise of the character of the LDS people, though gratifying, is rather two-dimensional. Some discussion of the struggles of individuals and congregations would give a fuller picture and added credibility to the obviously sincere praise. See "Those Amazing Mormons: The Media's Construction of Latter-day Saints as a Model Minority" (*Dialogue* 32, no. 2 [Summer 1999]: 107-128) about the problems with the "model minority" label, which *Mormon America* uses (xxiv).