# The Search for Truth and Meaning in Mormon History*

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THE PHILOSOPHER PLATO, to whom dialogue was the highest expression of intellectuality, defined thought as "the dialogue of the soul with itself." It is thus altogether fitting that the editors of *Dialogue* should encourage Mormon scholars to conduct periodic soul-searchings regarding the relevance of their studies to the gospel. I am grateful for this opportunity of reappraising Mormon history and of relating historical studies to the church and its historic mission of building the Kingdom of God on Earth.

I

From its very inception, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints sought to leave an accurate and complete record of its history. On April 6, 1830, the date of the organization of the church, a revelation was given to Joseph Smith which began, "Behold, there shall be a record kept among you. . . .(D&C 21:1)" To accomplish this purpose, the second elder of the church, Oliver Cowdery, was selected to serve as Church Recorder. When Elder Cowdery was transferred to other work a year later, John Whitmer was appointed, by revelation, to "write and keep a regular history" (D&C 47:1). Whitmer served in this capacity until 1835 and wrote a brief manuscript narrative, which is now in the possession of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.[1]

Thus, from its earliest years, the church designated an official to record its story and preserve its records. Twenty-five men have been sus-

*This essay first appeared in Vol. 3, No. 2 (Summer 1968): 56.

1. *John Whitmer's History* (Salt Lake City, 1966). A similar history, overlapping the Whitmer account, is the "Far West Record" in the LDS Church Historian's Library and Archives, Salt Lake City. Parts have also been published in Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1902-1912).

tained during the years 1830 to 1968 as Church Historians and Recorders. In addition to the records kept by these men, each of the organizations of the church has kept minutes of its meetings and other documents, individuals have kept diaries and journals, and newspapers and magazines have published items of contemporary and earlier history. Thus, a surprisingly complete record of the church and its instrumentalities, from 1830 to the present, can be found in the Church Historian's Library and Archives in Salt Lake City. The records in the Church Archives appear to be "honest" in the sense of presenting the facts as nearly as the designated historians could determine them; no destruction of or tampering with the records or the evidence is apparent.

The second phase of official church historiography began in 1838 when Joseph Smith and his associates began the preparation of a documentary record entitled "History of Joseph Smith." This detailed chronology, written as an official diary of the prophet, appeared in serial form in the *Times and Seasons* (Nauvoo, Illinois), beginning in 1842. When that publication was discontinued in 1846, the remainder of the "History" was published in issues of the *Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star* (Liverpool), during the years 1853-63. A follow-up "History of Brigham Young" and other church officials covered the years to 1844 and was published in the *Deseret News* (Salt Lake City) and *Millennial Star*, 1863-65. In subsequent years church historians and assistant church historians worked through these manuscripts, corrected errors, added corroborative material, and "improved" the narrative. The result was the seven-volume *History of the Church*, edited and annotated by B. H. Roberts, which is still the standard "documentary history" of the church.[2]

A third stage in the recording of church history was initiated by Andrew Jenson at the turn of the twentieth century, when he commenced three important projects: (1) the preparation and accumulation of biographies of the founders and subsequent officers of the church, many of which eventually found an outlet in the *L.D.S. Biographical Encyclopedia*[3]—unfortunately, subsequent volumes have not been issued with information on church officials of the past thirty years; (2) the preparation of an encyclopedia of church history, subsequently published as *Encyclopedic History of the Church*;[4] and (3) the preparation of a massive multi-volume scrapbook record of the day-to-day activities of the church, with excerpts from available sources, both published and

2. Ibid.

3. Andrew Jenson, *L.D.S. Biographical Encyclopedia: A Compilation of Biographical Sketches of Prominent Men and Women in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: Andrew Jenson History Co., 1901-36 ).

4. Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1941.

unpublished. This "Journal History of the Church" now comprises more than 1,300 legal-size scrapbooks from three to five inches thick; it is being extended daily by the addition of clippings from Salt Lake City and other newspapers. Happily, there is an index to this mammoth collection so that one is able to trace references to individuals and organizations with considerable ease.

A fourth stage in the setting down of Mormon history was the preparation of "synthesis histories." Overlooking the fragmentary histories of elders Cowdery, Whitmer, and Corrill,[5] and the publication of various missionary tracts with historical sections, the first attempt of Mormon historians to set down a synthesis history was that of Edward Tullidge, who was granted access to materials in the Church Archives for the preparation of his *Life of Brigham Young; or Utah and Her Founders*,[6] *The History of Salt Lake City and Its Founders*,[7] and *History of Northern Utah and Southern Idaho*.[8] Hubert Howe Bancroft also received extensive materials from the Historian's Office, and had the personal help of Orson Pratt, Franklin D. Richards, John Taylor, and Wilford Woodruff in the preparation of his *History of Utah*,[9] which might be said to contain the first "professional" history of the Mormons. Bancroft's one-volume history was followed by Orson F. Whitney's four-volume *History of Utah*,[10] which was written almost exclusively from Mormon sources. The next history was B. H. Roberts's "History of the 'Mormon' Church," which appeared in serialized form in *Americana*.[11] With some additions and changes, it reappeared in *A Comprehensive History of the Church: Century I*.[12] A one-volume synthesis history, originally prepared as a manual for priesthood classes and since reissued many times with additional material, is Joseph Fielding Smith's *Essentials in Church History*.[13]

With the exception of the Bancroft volume and some sections of Roberts's *Comprehensive History*, most of our Latter-day Saint histories, and the monographs which have been written from them, represent what might be called "documentary histories": They attempt to give an

5. A series of letters by Oliver Cowdery and W. W. Phelps in the *Latter-day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* (Kirtland, Ohio, 1834-37) contain much history. John Corrill published *A Brief History of the Church of Christ of Latter Day Saints (Commonly Called Mormons)* (St. Louis, Mo.: The author, 1839).

6. New York: Tullidge and Crandall, 1876.

7. Salt Lake City: Edward W. Tullidge, 1886.

8. Salt Lake City, 1889.

9. *History of Utah 1540-1886* (San Francisco: History Company, 1889).

10. Salt Lake City: George Q. Cannon & Sons, 1898-1904.

11. *Americana Illustrated* 4-10 (July 1909-June 1915).

12. 6 vols., Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1930.

13. Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1922.

account of the important events of the past without critical analysis or interpretation, and they depend, essentially, on the statements of participants and observers whose testimonies have been excerpted and combined, with due regard for their trustworthiness, and "compiled" into a narrative. Some of the histories have been written to prove a theological thesis, such as that the Lord looked after the Saints, punished them when disobedient, and frustrated their enemies. They have dealt primarily with the externals of the events which transpired, and have not concerned themselves with the internals, i.e., the underlying motives or thoughts of those who made the actions happen. Above all, our historians were perhaps unduly respectful of certain authorities, placing credence in accounts which should have been subjected to critical analysis.

This tradition of unquestioning "compiled external history" presented not only an authoritative narration of the succession of events, but also set the tone for a large proportion of the subsequent studies in Mormon history. These have dealt primarily with changes in the institutional structure of the church—with the development of its doctrine, program, and organization. Particularly popular objects of study have been histories of the missions, wards and stakes, auxiliaries, educational and cultural institutions and programs, and economic enterprises. One reason for the popularity of such studies is the survival and availability of the records of the organizations and programs. Personal records were hardly available to anyone outside a given family, and these were widely scattered. There was always a problem with family records because every family organization had at least one person who did not want anyone to know that grandpa once shared a bottle of wine with his Mormon Battalion buddies, or that Aunt Jane once served tea to an officer of the Relief Society. Thus, using organizational records rather than family records, scholars tended to describe the "outside" of the events.

There is, of course, another kind of history: the type which the British historian and philosopher R. G. Collingwood has called the history of the "inside" of an event. This history seeks to determine and expose the thoughts in the minds of the persons "by whose agency the events came about."[14] The historian does this by creatively re-thinking the thoughts of the participants in the context of his knowledge, analyzing them, and forming his own judgment regarding the validity of their explanations. He invests the narrative with meaning by consciously selecting from the sources that which he thinks important, by interpolating in the reports of the participants and observers things which they do not explicitly say, and by rejecting or amending what he believes is the result

14. R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), 215. The first English edition was 1946.

of misinformation or mendacity. Above all, he puts his sources in the witness-box, and by cross-examination extorts from them information which in their original statements was withheld, either because they did not wish to give it or because they did not realize they possessed it. In other words, the Mormon historian, like other historians, must read contemporary accounts with a question in his mind and seek to find out, by inference and otherwise, what he wants to find out from them. Every step in his research depends on asking a question—not so much whether the statement is true or false, but what the statement means. Obviously, since his informants, by and large, are dead, the historian must put the questions to himself.[15] The historian, as with scholars in other disciplines, must engage in the continuous Socratic questioning described so well by Plato in the quotation at the beginning of this article as "a dialogue of the soul with itself."

This kind of history, which we may call Socratic or interpretive history, must by its very nature be a private and not a church venture. Although this history is intended to imbue the written record with meaning and significance, the church cannot afford to place its official stamp of approval on any "private" interpretation of its past. Interpretations are influenced by styles and ideas of the times, not to say the personalities and experiences of historians, and the church itself ought not to be burdened with the responsibility of weighing the worth of one interpretation against another. Contrariwise, the historian ought to be free to suggest interpretations without placing his faith and loyalty on the line.

Fortunately, the Church Historian's Library and Archives is now admirably arranged to permit responsible historians to get at the "inside" of the events in our history.[16] Materials are filed in three separate sections, each of which has its own card catalogues and indexes:

1. *Library Section.* This includes a nearly complete library of books, pamphlets, tracts, and periodicals published by and about the church, including "anti-Mormon" works. There are also newspapers and maps, films and filmstrips.

2. *Manuscript Section.* In addition to the "Journal History of the Church" initiated by Andrew Jenson, there are similar journal or manuscript histories of each of the wards, stakes, and missions; "Name Files" of several thousand church officials and members (and some non-members as well); and the diaries and journals of several hundred persons.

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15. Compare Collingwood, 255-37, 269, 273-75. This paragraph is very close to a paraphrase of Collingwood.

16. Certain materials are not in the Church Historian's Library and Archives. For example, minutes of meetings of the First Presidency, certain diaries of members of the First Presidency, certain financial records, etc., are in the vault of the First Presidency.

3. *Written Records Section.* This section features tens of thousands of minute books and other records of wards, stakes, priesthood quorums, auxiliary organizations, and missions, as well as emigration records.

The alphabetically arranged Name Files in the Manuscript Section, which are now in the process of being indexed, are of particular value in the rewriting of our history. Typically, they include autobiographical sketches, newspaper clippings, letters to and from a given person, and other personal records and documents. Thus, these files permit us to look at the record from the standpoint of many individual participants. These records must be examined with care and, because of the intimate family information which they contain, can often be made available only to professional historians who are accustomed to handling confidential data.

After working through several hundred of these Name Files, I do not see any major revisions of our history, that is, revisions of conclusions to which sophisticated historians have come in years past. Indeed, on some of the conclusions reached long ago by our historians (but doubted by some recent historians), there is a wealth of material, heretofore unused, which corroborates the "official" point of view. For this reason, it is fortunate that this material is now more generally available. The records contain numerous accounts and evidences of individual greatness, heroism, and sacrifice. My own impression is that an intensive study of church history, while it will dispel certain myths or half-myths sometimes perpetuated in Sunday school (and other) classes, will build testimonies rather than weaken them.

## II

The more one works with the materials of Mormon history, the more one becomes aware of certain built-in biases which have influenced our impressions of church history. Let me suggest five of these:

1. *The theological marionette bias.* One gets the impression from some of our literature and sermons that the prophets and their associates in the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve were pious personages who responded somewhat mechanically, as if by conditioned reflex, to explicit instructions from On High, and that God manipulated the leaders much as marionettes in a puppet show—that church leaders themselves were not significant as agents of history. While this may very well have been the case in some instances, all developments did not come about "naturally" or even "supernaturally," nor can we describe innovations naively as "expedients necessitated by the times." The introduction of theological and organizational changes is done by people, by learned scripturists, talented organizers, and energetic innovators. They may have operated individually or in groups; they may have been motivated

by ambition, prestige, or the good of the church. In any event, they introduced new programs and organizational instrumentalities, and assumed the responsibility for the adjustment to external circumstances without which the programs would not work. To study the mentality, personality, and character of our leaders is to study the activators of history. Biographical and psychological studies are an indispensable but little-used vehicle for the study and comprehension of our history.

2. *The male bias.* This is the notion that because men hold all the important policy-making positions, they are the ones who determine the course of events. The priesthood holds the key leadership offices, we reason, so the priesthood is responsible for everything that happens. We are inclined toward a male interpretation of Mormon history. A few years ago, Gospel Doctrine classes studied a manual prepared by Dr. Thomas C. Romney entitled *The Gospel in Action* (Salt Lake City, 1949). Each week we studied the life of one historic Latter-day Saint, and we discussed some truly interesting and inspiring lives. Forty-five biographies were given in the manual; and while half of the persons attending Gospel Doctrine classes were presumably women, forty-two of the biographies were of men, and only three were of women. We studied the life of Angus M. Cannon, who was a long-time president of Salt Lake Stake; but we did not study his fascinating wife, Martha Hughes Cannon, who was the first woman state senator in the United States. (As a matter of fact, when the Republican Party nominated her husband for the State Senate, the Democratic Party could find no one who thought it worthwhile to run against him until some party member conceived the idea of running Sister Cannon. She won against her husband, served two terms, and proved a brilliant and resourceful senator.) We also studied Orson Spencer, the president of the University of Nauvoo, but we did not study his equally intelligent and fascinating daughter, Aurelia Spencer Rogers, the founder of the Primary Association of the church. This pattern of assumed male dominance is characteristic of all our histories. Edward Tullidge gave biographies of thirty persons in his *Life of Brigham Young*, all men. The fourth volume of Orson F. Whitney's monumental *History of Utah* contains the biographies of 351 persons, only twenty-nine of whom were women. One section, entitled "First Immigrants," presents biographies of thirty persons, but in only two was any attempt made to recognize the fact that women also came to Utah. (As a matter of fact, eighty-three women had arrived in the Salt Lake Valley by the end of July 1847: three from the original "pioneer" company, sixty from the Mormon Battalion, and twenty with the "Mississippi Saints.")

Another category in the Whitney biographies is entitled "Farmers and Stockraisers." Sixty-two biographies are presented, but in only two instances does the biography make any attempt to identify and describe the history of the wife (or wives) along with that of the husband. This,

despite the fact that the men were away on missions so often that in many cases the women were the effective farmers of the family. This was even more true in the case of polygamous households where the husband could not possibly manage on a day-to-day basis the farms of his various families. It may well be true, as some historians have asserted, that the Mormons were the best farmers in the West, but very often Mormon farms were managed by women, not men.

In any event, anyone who spends a substantial amount of time going through the materials in the Church Archives must gain a new appreciation of the important and indispensable role of women in the history of the church, not to mention new insights into church history resulting from viewing it through the eyes of women.[17]

3. *The solid achievement bias*, with emphasis on the word "solid." We have tended to remember the tangible, the material, the visible, simply because these have had greater survival value. We have tended to measure the accomplishments of the pioneers by such durable achievements as the construction of canals and dams, temples and meetinghouses, houses and cooperative stores. We have forgotten that the pioneers also made contributions in thought, in human relations, in education. From the evidence of pioneer life still surviving, we are led to conclude that the Mormons were good farmers and engineers, but poor poets and philosophers. By thus giving emphasis to the achievements of the more active members of the community, we have overlooked the quiet and immeasurable achievements of the reflective and contemplative. An extended experience among the Name Files has convinced this historian that the role of the writer and the intellectual was greater than we have ever acknowledged. These contributions are more subtle–more difficult to discover and to trace—but they are nevertheless there.

4. *The centrifugal bias*—the notion that the important influences and forces in Mormon history originated in the center and moved outward from there. This bias, which results partly from the greater survival value of materials collected and protected by the central church, has had a discernible effect on our attitudes. Some Latter-day Saints apparently believe their primary task is to sit down and wait for instructions from 47 E. South Temple Street, Salt Lake City. This was clearly not the attitude of earlier generations, who were told by revelation that they were personally invested with the responsibility of contributing toward the building of the Kingdom and did not wait on anybody to tell them when to start:

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17. A good example of the "new look" at the inside of church history by viewing it through the life of a woman is Katherine Kemp Thurston, *The Winds of Doctrine, The Story of Mary Lochwood Komp in Mormon Utah during the Last Half of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Exposition Press, 1952). An interesting recent essay emphasizing the role of women is Kenneth Godfrey, "Feminine-flavored Church History," *Improvement Era* (Jan. 1968): 52.

> For behold, it is not meet that I should command in all things; for he that is compelled in all things, the same is a slothful and not a wise servant; wherefore he receiveth no reward.
>
> Verily I say, men should be anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of their own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness;
>
> For the power is in them, wherein they are agents unto themselves. And inasmuch as men do good they shall in nowise lose their reward.
>
> But he that doeth not anything until he is commanded. . .the same is damned (D&C 58: 26-29).

Clearly this revelation had an impact, for a large share of the creativity in thought and practice in the church came from what might be called the "private sector," or from the geographical and organizational periphery, and moved centripetally toward the center and universal adoption. To give some examples: The Relief Society originated as a voluntary ladies' aid society in Nauvoo and was quickly reconstituted by the prophet Joseph Smith as an official organization. *The Woman's Exponent*, first magazine for women west of the Mississippi (with one fly-by-night exception), originated as a semi-private venture in which the leading part was played by a twenty-two-year-old girl journalist from Smithfield, Utah. After many years of splendid service, it came to be recognized as the official organ of the Relief Societies. *The Contributor* and the *Young Woman's Journal*, the two periodicals which later formed *The Improvement Era*, were both initiated by the altruistic desire on the part of young men and young women writers to make a literary contribution to the church. The United Order, as established by the church in 1874, was modeled along the lines of cooperative general stores established in Brigham City, Utah, in 1864, and in Lehi, Utah, in 1868. The Welfare Plan, as introduced in 1936, was built on experiences in St. George Stake, in southern Utah, and Liberty Stake, in Salt Lake City. All missionaries know of "good ideas" which were tried in one mission and quickly spread to others. All of this is quite "natural" and, upon reflection, is what we would expect; an examination of the Church Archives helps demonstrate its validity. Brigham Young used to say that more testimonies were obtained on the feet than on the knees. What he obviously meant was that we must all be "about our Father's business."

5. *The unanimity bias.* This is the notion that Mormon society has, from the earliest years, been characterized by concert in thought and behavior, by cooperation, concord, and consensus. In this respect, our historians have been so charmed with the unity of the Saints after they have decided on a course of action, that they have neglected to inquire into the process by which they made up their minds what to do. As with other peoples, the Saints have had their controversies, conflicts, and questionings. The substantial disagreement on doctrine, practice, and collective policy becomes evident when one leaves the "official" sources to focus on

the minds and careers of individuals. While the records of the church emphasize the triumphs of union and accord, individual diaries often dwell on the difficulties of resolving differences. When one intensively studies certain controversies—whether doctrinal, economic, or political—one occasionally uncovers widely disparate positions, both among general authorities and among the "lay" members of the church. The Saints were not without opportunities for criticism and the free expression of opinion in general priesthood meetings, in quorum meetings, and in other encounters; and sometimes opinions were articulated with considerable vigor and determination. Then, just as the divisiveness threatened the unity of the Saints, the prophet spoke, conflicts were resolved, and the Saints closed ranks to get the job done. Such debate apparently occurred over proper policy preceding the exodus from Nauvoo, before the coming of the railroad to Utah, and during the anti-polygamy "Raid" of the 1880s and the Depression of the 1930s. In each instance, a few "diehards" could not reconcile themselves to the "final" solution and left the church.

III

It is with respect to the last bias, perhaps, that the historian can make his greatest contribution to the church today. There is now, as in early epochs, a certain amount of dissent. Some of it has to do with the church's role in politics, some with the church's business operations, and some with the emphasis on certain doctrines and practices such as "the Negro question" and the Word of Wisdom. We cannot deny the uneasiness which these strains and conflicts produce, but anxiety seems so much easier to bear when we understand the magnitude of the tensions and challenges of earlier generations. Indeed, one might make a very good case for the fact that the church has grown and prospered precisely because of the dissent and discord, the obstacles and difficulties. Just as the Book of Mormon peoples seemed closest to God when they were meeting the greatest trials, the saints of the latter-day have also felt his presence most intimately when their individual and collective problems seemed so insurmountable that they were forced to call upon him for help. For our pioneer ancestors, worship was not a running away or withdrawal from the battles of the world; neither was it an ostrich-like refusal to look problems in the face. They could not, even if they had wished, gloss over their many obstacles, physical and human, external and internal.

In his autobiographical recollections and reflections, *Little Did I Know* (New York, 1963), the great Jewish novelist and Zionist, Maurice Samuel, asserts that the "authentic Jew" is "the one who understands and is faithful to his own personal and social identity. One who, in short, accepts his

history."[18] May we not make an analogous definition of the Latter-day Saint? Are we authentic Latter-day Saints (i.e., real Mormons) unless we receive messages from our collective past? And who but the historian is prepared to relay authentic messages from the past? Our individual and collective authenticity as Latter-day Saints depends on historians telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth about our past. This includes the failures as well as the achievements, the weaknesses as well as the strengths, the individual derelictions as well as the heroism and self-sacrifice.

History can give meaning and purpose to life; it can help to formulate attitudes and policies for the future. As we prepare to celebrate the sesquicentennial anniversary of the church in 1980, we must intensify our historical inquiries. My hope is that the images conveyed by our historians help us to continue the restoration of the Gospel of the Master and assist us in building the Kingdom of God on Earth.

18. See the review by Daniel Stern in *Saturday Review*, 25 Jan. 1964, 35.

*Vielen Dank*

*Dialogue* is a great source of information for me which shows me more about the American society the church mainly is involved with. It's good to get a magazine which is not one-sided like the four major church periodicals, which are actually good, but not enough for my widespread interest. (In Germany we nickname the *Church News* "Mormon Pravda"—we Europeans are pretty liberal.) Especially the volume 14, number 2 issue was interesting, because we don't get that information in Germany by official sources in such full details. I would like to encourage *Dialogue* to continue its efforts to clarify the complexities of Mormonism, and it has got my support already. *Mit Freudlichen Grüssen geduldig verbleibend.*

Peter C. Nadig
Duisburg, West Germany
from Vol. 15, No. 3 (Autumn 1982)

Those of us who comprise the body of Mormon readers for whom *Dialogue* (with surgical precision) probes, dilates, stimulates, and refreshes our intellectual/spiritual circulatory system (on occasion, even preventing a thrombosis) extend our thanks!

Bouquets also to your dedicated staff. As editor of the *CSUF* General Catalog for eleven years, I have had intimate experience with unreal deadlines, last-second administrative revisions, politically sensitive copy, format changes that looked stunning on the drawing board and ghastly in the print, etc., etc. We learn, don't we, to rely heavily on those precious few who come early and stay late.

Ruth B. Thornton
Fresno, California.
from Vol. 17, No. 1 (Spring 1984)

I would like you to know that I am very impressed with *Dialogue.* I am now living and quietly going crazy in Laie, Hawaii, which, as you probably know, is a predominantly Mormon community. Your journal is very much appreciated here, not only by me but by many faculty members at the Church College of Hawaii where I am teaching. Yours is an intelligent voice many of us are eager to listen and respond to. Let nothing silence that voice.

Steven Goldsberry
Laie, Hawaii
from Vol 8, No. 3/4 (1973)