Fitting Comfortably: Mormonism and the Narrative of National Violence

Patrick Q. Mason. *Mormonism and Violence: The Battles of Zion*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019. 75 pp. Paper: $18.00. ISBN: 9781108706285.[1]

Reviewed by Frederick W. Axelgard

This is an important, accessible book that should be in the hands of everyone who thinks deeply about Mormonism's place in the world. Writing for the Cambridge *Element* series on religion and violence, Patrick Mason has produced a crisp, wonderfully written, and, for its size, surprisingly thorough treatment of a vital topic. Interestingly, though, he feels a need to distance himself from the book's premise.

> An Element titled "Mormonism and Violence" comes with a predetermined narrative, and it is not a happy one. The danger of any sustained treatment of "X and violence" is that it inextricably links X with violence in the mind of the reader. . . . At its worst, a book like this can actually be misleading. Even if all the facts are correct, applying the "and violence" filter to one's subject will necessarily highlight certain aspects while entirely obscuring others. (77)

Mason offers as an antidote to this "predetermined narrative" an epilogue highlighting aspects of twenty-first-century Mormonism that show its peacebuilding potential. But he is constrained to acknowledge in the same breath "the very real strain of violence that runs through Latter-day Saint scripture, history, and culture" (78).

This "very real strain of violence" is the theme of Mason's book. He presents it lucidly in each of its four sections, beginning with a thorough discussion of the pervasive and "captivating" narrative of murder

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1. The page numbers cited in this review refer to the Kindle edition of the text. ASIN: B07S6BT2BY. Page numbers source ISBN: 1108706282.

and warfare that haunts the Book of Mormon (6). The next three sections move at a brisk, even pace through a violence-strewn history that reaches from the 1830s to the early twenty-first century. Although much of the material will not be new to careful students of Church history, there are many moments in his account that are no less gripping for their familiarity. These include a piercing overview of the rhetorical violence associated with polygamy (37–38) and skillfully composed summaries that round off each section and subsection, like this one:

> Once the embers of the Mormon Reformation had cooled . . . the appetite for using violence as a legitimate method of building the kingdom of God seems to have waned. Out of both principle and pragmatism, the next generation of Latter-day Saint leadership undertook the project of renouncing the violence that their forebears had selectively embraced and replacing it with violence of a different kind. (57–58)

This passage caps off the unsettling essay on the 1850s, which Mason terms "the most lethal decade in Latter-day Saint history." It touches on an extermination campaign against Ute warriors and atrocities against Paiute men, women, and children. His handling of Mountain Meadows is a model of vivid concision that effectively weaves in context about longstanding conflict with the "gentiles" and tensions surrounding the Utah War. The section concludes with an insightful summary of vigilante violence against "apostates" during the Mormon Reformation of the mid-1850s. Mason neatly qualifies this dense depiction of frontier violence with this observation: "The remarkable fact that historians can name virtually every instance of violence by church members against their opponents in the movement's early decades suggests the relative infrequence of such episodes" (40).

The last main section of the book assumes a large burden. It seeks to explain how the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its people, after almost half a century of fundamental hostility and outright war with the American nation, eventually came to terms with ceding sovereign authority to the US government. It offers more thoughtful

analysis than preceding chapters but is still replete with important historical tidbits. One is a heretofore little-discussed 1889 First Presidency declaration embracing the sovereignty of the American nation several years before Utah statehood, which reads in part: "Church government and civil government are distinct and separate in our theory and practice, and we regard it as part of our destiny to aid in the maintenance and perpetuity of the institutions of our country" (61). This adjusted posture set the stage for a new century in which American warrior-Saints met their commitment to nationalism by fighting in two world wars and conflict arenas like Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq.

As Mason points out, it was also a century in which a philosophical undercurrent emerged to question that commitment. This undercurrent found expression at the highest echelons of Church leadership in J. Reuben Clark and Spencer W. Kimball, and among intellectuals such as Eugene England and Hugh Nibley. But such objections have done little to affect the predisposition among the American Church at large that today still "accepts and even privileges the state's right to summon them to violence" (77). Meanwhile, the Community of Christ, a "denominational cousin" to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, made a major shift to adopt the pursuit of world peace as a defining principle of its identity and mission (18). Bringing us up to the present, Mason concludes: "Since 1898 Latter-day Saints have fit comfortably into [Catholic theologian] William Cavanaugh's thought experiment: killing in the name of religion is abhorrent and unthinkable, while killing in the name of the state seems to be a perfectly reasonable and even sacred duty" (71).

As an account of where things stand, this book is a compact, useful, and at times even brilliant statement. As a roadmap for what lies ahead, it raises many questions. Such as: How does the thick thread of violence that weaves through Latter-day Saint history, scripture, and culture affect the Church's ability to take different direction? Is the weight of its history so heavy and its reading of the Book of Mormon so firmly

militaristic that it precludes envisioning—let alone building—a future where Latter-day Saints help tip the balance away from "the violence that lies at the heart of the human condition" (6)?

Unfortunately, it would appear that the answer to this last question is likely to be "yes." For one thing, the critical undercurrents Mason speaks of were/are probably even shallower than he suggests. It has been almost fifty years since the US bicentennial, when Spencer W. Kimball told the Saints and American society, "We are a warlike people."[2] Nothing remotely like this has been said since at the general level of the Church, and reference to President Kimball's prophetic perspective in Church publications is virtually non-existent. Similarly, almost twenty years ago then-Elder Russell M. Nelson expressed his belief that peace on earth can actually be achieved and called on Latter-day Saints to be peacemakers; these teachings have also passed quietly into obscurity.[3]

Meanwhile, efforts by Latter-day Saint thinkers to develop a theology on war and violence have been paralyzed for years because (among other things) US-based specialists and academics cannot get beyond their competing pacifist vs. militarist readings of the Book of Mormon. This debate, which has been carried out primarily in articles and book chapters, has also suffered from a certain fragmentation and lack of attention. The Latter-day Saint literature on violence and war urgently needs fully developed, book-length treatments—particularly by authors

2. Spencer W. Kimball, "The False Gods We Worship," *Ensign*, June 1976, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1976/06/the-false-gods -we-worship?lang=eng. President Kimball went on to add, "we train a man in the art of war and call him a patriot, thus, in the manner of Satan's counterfeit of true patriotism, perverting the Savior's teaching: Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you."

3. Russell M. Nelson, "Blessed Are the Peacemakers," Oct. 2002, https:// www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2002/10/blessed -are-the-peacemakers?lang=eng.

who are not tied in knots by the polarization of US politics—to deal with a topic so complex and globally significant.

It is my sense that this small volume by Patrick Mason can be read as evidence that the culture of the present-day American Church has little to contribute to a moral quest against war and violence. Mainstream American Mormonism is imbibing fully of the crisis in US political life and mired in a single-minded Book of Mormon exegesis, neither of which positions it to help address the geopolitical tensions or meet the theological needs of a pre-millennial world.[4] There is also the seemingly irresistible appeal of history to consider. Mormon studies has an enduring obsession with telling and re-telling the Mormon story that leaves little space for meaningful attention to the ethics of issues seemingly outside the cultural boundaries of the Church—issues such as violence, war, and peace. There is a genuine need for creative, new thinking that focuses on discovering whether and how Mormonism might help make the wider world of the present and future a better place to live.

The message between the lines of Mason's book is that the time has come to draw on the largely untapped moral resources of Mormonism's global (i.e., non-American) community. A basic reorientation away from US-centric approaches to Mormon history, ethics, and scriptural exegesis is overdue. With respect to the issue of violence, I adopt a point made by Mason and take it a step further. In the present book, he writes delicately of the Saints being influenced by "the pull of religious nationalism," but his writing makes clear that it is the embrace of *American* religious nationalism that has led the Church and its members to accept state power and the violence associated with it (71). In his recent book *Restoration: God's Call to the 21st-Century World*, Mason similarly asks

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4. For robust frameworks that use scripture in pursuit of ethics, see Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996), and N. T. Wright, *Paul and His Recent Interpreters* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015).

Latter-day Saints of the twenty-first century to shed some of the "excess baggage" of nationalism and to

> think harder than we typically do about what claim the nation state has on our loyalties and affections. Are we Americans (or Mexicans, or Filipinos) first, or citizens of the kingdom of God? Is it possible to be "subject to" secular governmental authorities without uncritically worshiping at Caesar's altar? The restoration does not call us to withdraw from political society but neither does it consider the nation holy.[5]

Mason rightly directs his admonition first and foremost to "we Americans," and parenthetically to Saints from other countries. Yet his point can be made more directly. Since Mormonism in the United States appears unwilling to distance itself from the toxic political culture that surrounds it, should American nationalism continue to shape the religion's place in the world? Sadly not, as the faith's longstanding identification with American exceptionalism is proving to be not only parochial but harmful to the quest for a globally relevant Latter-day Saint ethics on violence and war.

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5. Patrick Q. Mason, *Restoration: God's Call to the 21st Century World* (Meridian, Idaho: Faith Matters, 2020), 63.