Notes

1. One major exception to this trend is Kathleen Flake, "'Not to be Riten': The Mormon Temple Rite as Oral Canon," *Journal of Ritual Studies* 9, no. 2 (1995): 1–21.

2. Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 224.

3. Roy A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 166.

4. Bell, *Ritual*, 224.

Errand Out of the Wilderness

Matthew Bowman. *The Mormon People: The Making of an American Faith*. New York: Random House, 2012. 352 pp. Hardback: $26.00. ISBN 978–0–679–64490–3

Reviewed by Robert Elder

In Perry Miller's famous essay on the Puritans, he described how John Winthrop and his fellow dissenters left England in the hopes of establishing on the other side of the Atlantic a godly society that could serve as a model for the reformation of the mother country and its church. In the wake of the English Civil War and as the end of the seventeenth century neared, their descendants were plagued by the sense that the mission of their fathers had foundered. "Having failed to rivet the eyes of the world upon their city on the hill," wrote Miller, "they were left alone with America."[1]

It was a problem that at various times in their history many Mormons would have welcomed. As Matthew Bowman's *The Mormon People* makes clear, despite the striking similarities between the Puritan "errand into the wilderness" and the Mormon saga in America, for most of their history Mormons have suffered the opposite problem from the Puritans. The rest of the country watched, often intently, as Mormons undertook their errand into, and then out of, the wilderness. Bowman offers a timely account of this still ongoing process in a book that is clear-eyed in its approach to a church he clearly loves as well as beautifully written, braiding together a fascinating narrative with insightful analysis.

Bowman narrates the story of Mormon origins in a style remi-

niscent of the eminent Richard Bushman (to whom the book is dedicated). Dismissing portrayals of Smith as a "religious genius" whose fertile imagination gave rise to a new religion, Bowman relates Smith's visions, and the discovery and translation of the golden plates, through the believing eyes of Smith and his early converts. Acknowledging that his readers may find the story too odd or strange to believe, Bowman skillfully navigates the familiar shoals of Mormon origins by making Smith's claims intelligible within the cultural context of an era in which "the intellectual revolutions of the Enlightenment still stood locked in uneasy embrace with the intuitive and mystical world of the premodern age" (24). Here Bowman relies on the work of historians like Gordon Wood and Nathan Hatch, and he could have emphasized even more strongly that Mormonism was not alone during this period in combining what Wood called "subterranean folk beliefs" with the forces of democratic individualism and Enlightenment rationality. Nathan Hatch described how the eccentric Methodist itinerant Lorenzo Dow frequently and openly referred to visions and prophecies in his peripatetic movements throughout the country. Caleb Rich, the Universalist leader of the late eighteenth century, determined to reject all religious authority and work out the truth for himself, but he came to his belief in universal salvation through encounters with divine beings as well as his study of the Bible. However, these historians also make clear that the disintegration of religious and social authority in the wake of the Revolution and disestablishment was just as important as the ebbing tide of an enchanted world or Enlightenment rationality in making people willing to credit such signs and wonders and evaluate new revelations for themselves. Here we see more clearly than anywhere else that Joseph Smith and Mormonism were not just the meeting of two worlds but also the products of a uniquely American historical moment.

Early Mormonism combined the characteristics of several other contemporary movements, such as William Miller's prophetic and apocalyptic millenarianism and John Humphrey Noye's utopian communalism. Unlike these other movements, which addressed the concerns of early-nineteenth-century men and women piecemeal, Mormonism satisfied what Bowman terms "a whole host of hungers" (40), spiritual and social, that

men and women living in the midst of the clamor and ferment of the early Republic felt deep in their souls. From the start, the idea of the family as a spiritual community was central to Smith's religious vision. His religion spread first through his own family and friends, and then, rapidly, through the family and social connections of early converts. Bowman does a wonderful job holding on to this thread throughout the book, showing how the sacredness of the family lay at the root of plural marriage and then, following the discarding of polygamy at the turn of the century, to the reconceptualization of monogamy as a form of "celestial marriage" in the twentieth century. Another recent book, *In Heaven as It Is on Earth: Joseph Smith and the Early Mormon Conquest of Death* by Samuel Morris Brown (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), makes a complementary point: that dealing with the disorientation and loss of a loved one's death shaped nearly all aspects of Smith's revelation and early Mormonism.

Throughout the book, Bowman portrays the tension between Mormonism's distinctly American inheritance and the prophetic vision of its founder, a tension that would surface unpredictably throughout its history. Bowman captures the struggle Smith's early followers went through as they negotiated the tension between the democratic individualism of the Jacksonian era and the authority with which Smith's revelations imbued the emerging organizational hierarchy of the Church. An early convert, Methodist minister Ezra Booth, resented a revelation that commanded him to walk to Jackson County, Missouri, preaching all the way, and then to repeat the exercise in reverse (53). Bowman echoes here Terryl L. Givens's *People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), which identified a tension between individualism and authoritarianism as a defining characteristic of Mormonism.

It is interesting to note that Mormonism was different only in degree, not in kind, from Ezra Booth's erstwhile Methodism in this regard. For all the individualistic emphasis of evangelical Protestantism, Francis Asbury still claimed apostolic authority for himself and his Methodist lieutenants and constructed an ecclesiastical hierarchy that, in sharp distinction from the Baptists, wielded considerable power over a rapidly burgeoning movement in a manner that mirrored the tensions described by Bowman. Yet

there were important differences. Bowman observes that, while the Methodists, Baptists, and, to a lesser degree, Presbyterians sent out circuit riders and missionaries to build the kingdom of God by establishing a far-flung archipelago of Christian communities, for the first few decades of its existence Mormonism called converts to come together to build an earthly Zion. Furthermore, Mormonism challenged one of the central tenets of evangelical Protestantism: the centrality and ultimate authority of the Bible. As Booth complained, "When they [Smith's revelations] and the Scriptures are at variance, the Scriptures are wrongly translated" (53). Booth did not make the transition from Methodism to Mormonism gracefully, although many other Methodists did.

Just as the Erie Canal shaped the emergence of Mormonism in upstate New York, the transcontinental railroad, completed at Promontory Point, Utah, in 1869, reshaped the Mormon experience in the West. Yet the railroad only deepened, and did not precipitate, the Americanization of Brigham Young's western Israel. Bowman's narrative makes clear that the westward trek, which transformed Mormonism from a sect into a faith tradition with its own history, did not eradicate the deep pulsing of American individualism. Try as they might, Young and the other leaders in Utah could not convince Mormons to embrace "consecration," the communal ownership of property that Joseph Smith had attempted to institute back east. Apostle Orson Pratt denounced the "Gentile God of property" (113) and distributed printed forms for Mormons to deed their property to the church, but most of the faithful preferred to retain their property and pay a 10 percent tithe. The railroad, and the flood of cheap goods and tenets of capitalism that came with it, made the establishment of a self-sustaining Zion a fading dream. The U.S. government's infamous crackdown on polygamy during the 1880s, known as "the Raid" to Mormons, and Utah's statehood in 1896, finally precluded the possibility of a separate Mormon Zion in the wilderness.

One of the most welcome aspects of this book is Bowman's focus on the contours of twentieth-century Mormonism, often given brief attention in the rush to examine the Church's dramatic early history. In an innovative chapter titled "Eternal Progression," Bowman examines the affinities between Mormonism and Progressivism in the early twentieth century. Here, more than anywhere else

in the book, the confluence of American and Mormon identity is evident. The enduring optimism about human ability that Mormonism had absorbed from the reverberations of the Enlightenment in upstate New York found a natural partner in Progressivism's reforming spirit and unshakeable belief in the possibility of progress. Mormon theology during this period easily took on the tenor of the age. Theologians like James E. Talmage renovated the notion of celestial marriage to accord with monogamy, and B. H. Roberts and John A. Widstoe wrote about the harmony between religion and science, and the "comprehensible nature of the universe and humanity's godly ability to act on that comprehension" (165). Bowman only briefly addresses how these developments played out among everyday Mormons, but his treatment of Church leaders and intellectuals is fascinating nonetheless.

Yet even during an era Bowman describes as the greatest convergence between Mormonism and mainstream American culture, Mormonism retained its stubborn distinctiveness. Bowman points out that while Talmage, Roberts, and Widstoe shared some of the characteristics of their liberal Protestant counterparts in the Progressive era, they remained committed to the primacy of revelation and the literal truth of scripture—commitments that set them apart and marked them as distinctly Mormon. "Mormonism," writes Bowman, "existed on a much narrower theological scale" than American Protestantism, which could encompass Harry Emerson Fosdick alongside Bible Belt fundamentalists (181).

Bowman's ability to weave the Mormon story instructively into larger American patterns while at the same time showing how it retained its singular character is showcased again in an illuminating discussion of the work of Mormon theologian Bruce R. McConkie. McConkie turned aside from the broad and inclusive scholarship of his Progressive era forebears in favor of a tighter focus on the Mormon canon, and Bowman places him in the context of the conservative Protestant Biblicism of the same era. Yet instructive though the parallel is, Bowman makes it clear that McConkie cannot be called a "fundamentalist Protestant in Mormon clothing" (201). To prove his point, he quotes McConkie's reply to a Mormon academic opponent: "It is my province to teach to the church what the doctrine is. It is your province to repeat what I say or to remain silent" (202). It is a risible understatement to say that such an asser-

tion of doctrinal authority would not have been well received by McConkie's fundamentalist Protestant counterparts.

Bowman's book contains an implicit warning to those who believe they can accurately predict Mormon political behavior. In the last few decades, Mormons have often been considered one of the most reliably Republican political constituencies, yet Bowman demonstrates that in matters where religion and politics differ the Church has often been willing to break ranks with its political allies. In 1980 Ronald Reagan won more than 70 percent of the vote in Utah. The next year Reagan announced that the military would construct an experimental missile system in the state's southern portion. Mormon president Spencer W. Kimball immediately announced, much to Reagan's surprise, that the Church was opposed to the proposal. Kimball consistently preached against Cold War militarism as a "False God," and saw the missile program as a manifestation of American idolatry (212). Reagan eventually abandoned plans to base the system in Utah, and no doubt came away a little puzzled about the strength of his support in Utah. Bowman uses this episode, along with others throughout Mormon history, to make one of his central points. Despite its transformation into the most American of religious traditions, Mormonism retains the prophetic strains of Joseph Smith's religious vision, a vision that could not have blossomed elsewhere than in American soil and which still continues to set his followers apart.

Bowman brings his history up to the present day but wisely refrains from trying to fully assess what all this might mean for the presidential candidacy of Mitt Romney, whose great-great-grandfather Parley P. Pratt was one of Smith's earliest followers. Even as Romney's role as the Republican nominee appears certain, it remains much less certain what role his faith will play in the contest. However, one thing is certain: Americans remain intensely interested in Mormonism's errand into the wilderness; and in this book, Bowman has fully taken advantage of a golden opportunity to educate them.

Note

1. Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1956), 15.