

Mormon Studies: A Critical History

By Ronald Helfrich Jr.

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Reviewed by Roger Terry

This short but dense critical history of Mormon studies¹ is unique in several ways. First, author Ronald Helfrich Jr. is a self-described “Gentile” scholar who spent “probably far too many years,” including a year as a visiting professor in the Department of Sociology at Brigham Young University, researching and writing this history. Second, the book is surprisingly thorough. I have been the editorial director at BYU Studies for the past sixteen years and thought I had a fairly decent grasp of Mormon studies, past and present, but Helfrich repeatedly describes the work of historians and other scholars with whom I am not familiar. These writers have tackled the movement Joseph Smith started in one way or another, and Helfrich is aware of both their work and how it fits into the framework he has constructed to examine the origins and history of this movement. Third, this book is not just a description of who has written about the Latter-day (or Latter Day²) Saint movement and what they have said; Helfrich also presents his own theory on some of the major underlying questions. Finally, this book is forthright in addressing certain tensions that exist both in Mormon studies and in the Latter-day Saint religion—between anti- and pro-Latter-day Saint apologetics (our views are true) and polemics (your views are false), between “old” (hagiographic) and “new” (scholarly) Mormon studies, between Church leaders and

1. While this book is primarily an analysis of the work of scholars who study The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Mormon studies” is a field of research and publishing that extends beyond the Salt Lake City-based organization. Consequently, the book’s author and this review use the terms *Mormon* and *Mormonism* when referring to this broader field of study and to the many branches of the movement launched by Joseph Smith.

2. The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and some other branches of Mormonism use this spelling.

intellectuals, and between the New Mormon Studies (launched primarily by Leonard Arrington) and what Helfrich calls the New Mormon Faith Studies (anchored largely by the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies [FARMS], now reborn as the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship).

Helfrich, a retired professor who taught history, cultural anthropology, and sociology, is admittedly “old school” (x) and is heavily influenced by Max Weber; consequently, he looks at The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints through sociological, cultural, political, and economic lenses, but in describing the theories regarding the Restoration movement espoused by various scholars, he inevitably finds them all lacking. As Helfrich puts it in his conclusion, “Yes, humans and human social groups are impacted by economic factors. Yes, humans and social groups are impacted by political forces. Yes, humans and social groups are impacted by geography. Yes, humans and social groups are impacted by biological or demographic factors. Yes, humans and social groups are impacted by social and cultural psychological factors. All of these forces have impacted and currently impact human life everywhere at every time. . . . But none of these alone or in combination can fully help us understand the rise and culture of social and cultural movements such as Mormonism” (147).

While Helfrich sees the organization Joseph Smith founded as “the product of a number of geographic, economic, political, and demographic factors including the intersection of the economic transformations wrought by the Erie Canal, the rise of Jacksonian democratic politics, the mostly New England and New York backgrounds” of Joseph’s followers, “and the varying class and status backgrounds of . . . believers” (148), he seems quite unaware of what is undoubtedly the primary factor in explaining the rise and shape of the movement—a shared spiritual conviction that Joseph Smith was telling the truth about his visions, his revealed texts, and his translations of ancient documents. Other factors certainly influenced how the culture of the unfolding Restoration took shape, but overwhelmingly it was and is a spiritual movement bound together by beliefs and confirmations regarding events that took place in the 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s.

Still, Helfrich’s history is a valuable summary of the expanding discipline that has come to be known as Mormon studies. Chapter 1 explores apologetics and polemics among those who defend the Church as well as among its critics. Chapter 2 discusses the intellectuals and academics who, while not viewing themselves as apologists or polemicists, “have

also waded into the normative debate about how to classify” both the Church and its members (36). Chapters 3 and 4 contrast the “old” Mormon studies with the “new,” Leonard Arrington being the pivotal figure in the transition. In chapter 5, Helfrich discusses social theory, social movements, and Church origins, viewing the Restoration through economic and political approaches to explaining social movements. Chapter 6 explores “the cultural approaches that practitioners of the New Mormon Studies . . . have applied to the study of” Church origins (92). Chapter 7 addresses Mormon studies and its discontents, focusing on what Helfrich calls “the ‘new’ Mormon culture war” (127) between “New Mormon Studies” (Arrington and those who populated his “Camelot” years in the Church Historian’s Office) and “New Mormon Faith Studies” (primarily FARMS).

At the end of his exploration, Helfrich concludes with the question “Whither Mormon Studies?” (146). His answer is both safe and imprecise. Borrowing a metaphor from Armand Mauss, he expects “the tensions between the angel of [Latter-day Saint] distinctiveness and the beehive of [the Church’s] wish to fit in in broader American society, to continue to ebb and flow, and, as a result, I suspect that this cultural schizophrenia will continue to produce tensions within [Latter-day Saint] culture” (147). This is somewhat akin to predicting that the sun will continue to rise and set.

On a final note, as an editor I have one quibble with this book: it seems that the text has somehow found its way into print largely unedited. Many of the sentences could be made more readable; there are a significant number of misspelled words and names; and the random absence, misuse, and overuse of commas are distracting. But if a reader can ignore these textual speedbumps, the book does contain a wealth of valuable information and insight.

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