

RICHARD P. HOWARD. *The Church through the Years*, vol. 1, *RLDS Beginnings, to 1860*. Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 1992. 402 pp. Bibliography, index. \$27.50.

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One way of looking at this new book by RLDS church historian Richard Howard is to see it as the most recent survey of early Mormon history—three short chapters on the nature of history, twelve chapters on the events to 1844, and three chapters on the rise of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints as one of the varieties of Latter Day Saintism. While not dismissing the usefulness of the volume as a survey, I see its major significance rather differently: it is a fascinating example of the throes being experienced by the RLDS Church during the generation extending from the 1960s to the present.

To understand what is going on here, one should read very carefully the way in which the following are presented: the First Vision, the Book of Mormon, the Nauvoo period, the crisis of succession following Joseph Smith's assassination, and the establishment of the Reorganization under Joseph Smith III.

The First Vision. After noting that in 1838 Joseph Smith dictated an account of his early life, which was revised and published starting in 1842, Howard states that with the passage of time witnesses generally forget and embellish their accounts. The vision was not mentioned in published works until the 1840s, which, for Howard, "means that Joseph spoke very little about it during those early years" (92-93). However, Joseph's own account told of finding "none who would believe the heavenly vision" (93), which must mean that he was speaking of it. Howard believes that such rebuffs "likely drove Joseph to years of relative silence about it" (93). "Relative" silence is, of course, not absolute silence.

The 1842 published account of the vision is then quoted *in extenso* with the comment that Joseph Smith was choosing language for his later audience with a "desire to convey as clearly and powerfully as possible his claims to prophetic leadership" (97). Then there is a contrast with the 1832 diary account. One conclusion, perhaps necessary for some, is that there is a difference between an event and its recording in words. "It is useless for us to become

lost in a war of words over which version is correct," Howard continues. "We today simply accept our distance from the reality of Joseph Smith's boyhood vision. We truthfully affirm that it happened, but we openly confess the mystery of its specific content" (101).

One might think, so far so good. But at this point, recognizing that the attempt is "risky," Howard provides a composite or synthesis of the Sacred Grove experience. In the third person, he reviews Joseph's despair, his confusion "in a world of clashing values, contentions, and demands for his allegiance," his prayer, "deepening gloom and despair," and finally "a vision of splendor and light [that] enveloped his whole being in an aura of love and mercy." In this account, no personage is witnessed. Instead, "from the midst of that glorious light came a voice as clear as his own." Is this a suggestion that Joseph was providing his own answer? He "*felt that* he knew the truth about God and himself" (102; italics added). The two major conclusions "etched into his consciousness" were the promises of forgiveness and the belief that he could "trust that merciful God again and again for love and light to guide his life journey" (103).

This account is moving, but we must understand what Howard is doing—putting into his own words, into phraseology that he can relate to, a transcendent experience of someone else. (Vardis Fisher did the same thing in his novel *Children of God*.) Howard does not wish to deny that *something* happened, even that Joseph "actually encountered deity" (98). But his retelling dilutes the experience. I do not think I am alone in preferring Joseph Smith's own description (or descriptions) of the event to which he was the only eyewitness. If his 1838 account of the First Vision is more complete, I do not have to believe that he was contriving it, although I can accept readily enough the impossibility of adequately communicating such an experience in words.

The Book of Mormon. It is hard to deny the existence of the Book of Mormon. Howard describes its publication in 1830, tells of the testimony of the Three and Eight Witnesses, and recognizes that Moroni's promise has been fulfilled for thousands. But Howard's account is not exactly a believer's testimony of the book. There is a one-paragraph summary of the historical framework of the Book of Mormon but no appreciation of its doctrinal

riches, its textual complexity, or its rhetorical power. Instead, Howard goes over some of the early revelations having to do with the translation process. He draws these significant conclusions: “‘Translation’ in this light bears no relation to a linguistic exercise of conveying ideas to one language from another” (119). It was a “revelatory,” or “imaging,” process in which Joseph Smith’s “imaginative, intuitive mind” verbalized “a lengthy and varied text under the subjective impress of inspiration” (119). We do have “revelatory” and “inspiration,” which imply a divine source, but, if I am not mistaken, words like “imaging” and “subjective” suggest that Joseph Smith himself was the source.

The next section on the Book of Mormon lists topics that “addressed many concerns of nineteenth-century New York people” (120). The chosen land, the religious utopian ideal, a self-supporting lay ministry, anti-Catholicism, the Millennium and the gathering of the Jews, anti-secret society sentiment, and preference for democratic rather than monarchical rule—these (along with the faith-works controversy, sectarianism, original sin, and trinitarianism/unitarianism) were all popular themes and obsessions of the time. Such listings are not new. The footnote cites sociologist Thomas F. O’Dea and an article by Susan Curtis Mernitz. Of course Alexander Campbell started this game in 1831. Howard gives no indication of the scholarship in support of the Book of Mormon. It is not simply that the continuing publications by the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, for example, are criticized or dismissed; they are totally ignored. Howard makes no effort, in other words, to inform the reader of the range of opinion, even within the RLDS tradition, about the Book of Mormon.

Howard’s words are carefully chosen. His paraphrase of Moroni’s promise is especially interesting: “If they will read it in the spirit of honest seeking and pray to know whether the Book of Mormon is a true witness to God’s redemptive work, they will be blessed with that conviction” (113).

Nauvoo and Polygamy. Chapter 15 on “Nauvoo and Metamorphosis, 1839–1846” is, of course, crucial to any RLDS interpretation of Church history. We read that “understanding Nauvoo has been a major stumbling block for Latter Day Saints of whatever

persuasion" (273). The Utah Mormons, he writes, "see Nauvoo as the primary stimulus for all that has been meaningful in their theology and history" (273-74). I might quarrel with that word "all." RLDS history, on the other hand, has been "disjunctive with the meaning and purpose of Nauvoo for Utah Mormons" (274), for the RLDS Church "came into being largely as a reaction to what were felt to be Nauvoo's excesses" (274).

Howard then goes over the origins of the Council of Fifty, insists that Joseph Smith and his followers really thought he would become president of the United States in 1844 (I remain unconvinced), and describes the development of the holy order, prayer circles, baptism for the dead, and the temple endowment. Polygamy at Nauvoo is discussed in less than two pages. From being sealed to a new spouse after the death of one's first spouse, it was a short step to the conclusion that "what will prevail in celestial glory should also be permissible in this life" (293). But, the reader cannot help but ask, did Joseph Smith have anything to do with it? The closest we get to an answer is the following:

Several RLDS leaders during the 1850s and 1860s remembered the plural marriage system at Nauvoo. Some, notably William Marks and Isaac Sheen, wrote that Joseph Smith bore responsibility for the start of Nauvoo polygamy. They noted, however, that shortly before his death Joseph saw the error of plural marriage, and tried to end it, to save the church from ruin. (293)

That's it. No details. No indication of Joseph Smith's own plural wives. No indication that the convenient memory of Marks and Sheen was contradicted by all of the Council of the Twelve Apostles and even Joseph's brother William Smith. It is not even clear whether Howard here accepts the accuracy of the Marks-Sheen statement. Elsewhere, he frankly accepts the fact that Joseph Smith both taught and practiced plural marriage.

Nauvoo is seen as a major dividing point in the history of Latter Day Saintism:

Many [in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints] accepted the new temple ritual system, the political kingdom of God, militarism, the exaltation of priesthood, and other theological and doctrinal innovations [and] extended and amplified all of these things during the ensuing generations. (298-99)

Many others [the RLDS Church], however, either were opposed to much of the cultic trappings that accrued to Mormonism from 1840 to 1846 or had serious misgivings about them. (298-99)

The expression “cultic trappings” contains a heavy value judgment, playing into the hands of the hatemongers who denounce Mormonism as a non-Christian cult. It is also inaccurate to leave the impression that “all of these things” have been extended and amplified down to the present, for a great watershed around 1890 led to the abandonment or reinterpretation of political, social (polygamy), and economic programs.

A chapter on “Dispersions from the Early Restoration” claims that more than 150 groups have resulted from dividing and subdividing. A dozen or so are briefly described. A conflict between the text and the boldface headings occurs in the section entitled “Schismatic Developments after Joseph Smith’s Death.” Listed as one of those developments is “Brigham Young/Council of Twelve, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1844”; in contrast, the text concedes that “Utah Mormonism hardly qualifies as a schismatic group” and that a “large majority” of the Nauvoo Saints followed Brigham Young (310). A later contradictory sentence reverts to the negative label: “It is impossible to understand early RLDS development apart from its rootedness in and disenchantment from Nauvoo (Utah) Mormonism and the many other schismatic groups” (352).

Howard concludes with two chapters on the emergence of the Reorganized Church and the coming to its presidency of Joseph Smith III. The complete text of an 1851 vision of Jason Briggs is given along with helpful commentary. Common to the founders of the Reorganization, prior to Joseph III’s arrival, was abhorrence of polygamy. In 1853, Zenos Gurley proclaimed an anti-polygamy revelation, which is quoted on pages 345-46. A conference was held that effectively began the RLDS Church, and an invitation was sent to young Joseph III, who finally responded affirmatively in 1860. While at the Amboy conference to assume the leadership, Joseph III said, among other things:

There is but one principle taught by the leaders of any faction of this people that I hold in utter abhorrence. That is a principle taught by

Brigham Young and those believing in him. I have been told that my father taught such doctrines. I have never believed it and never can believe it. If such things were done, then I believe they never were done by Divine authority. I believe my father was a good man, and a good man never could have promulgated such doctrines. (372)

Here is Joseph III's implicit reasoning:

1. Joseph Smith was a good man and would not therefore have promulgated an evil doctrine or practice.
2. Polygamy is evil.

Therefore, Joseph Smith did not teach or advocate it.

The logic of the Utah Mormons was of course, from their point of view, equally compelling:

1. Joseph Smith was a good man and would not claim that something was sanctioned by God if it was not so sanctioned.
2. Joseph Smith introduced polygamy and claimed a divine authorization for it.

Therefore, polygamy was divinely sanctioned.

While the major premises may be subject to discussion, the demonstration by historians that Joseph Smith did in fact originate polygamy leaves one of these arguments in shambles.

Chapter 3 tells of "Using History Creatively," including a touching, if partisan, overview of "the story" of RLDS history, beautifully told in the first-person plural. Howard contrasts the good practice of "using history to expand self-understanding" with the undesirable practice of using history as self-justification. For Howard the example of the latter is Joseph Smith's 1838 dictation of his personal history. That may be, but if I am not totally tone deaf, there is more than a little self-justification in Howard's entire interpretation.

This book can be read simply as a fresh treatment of early Mormonism and the origins of the RLDS Church. It is, however, as Richard Howard would be the first to recognize, an interpretation; it has a spin to it. To my mind, it is especially revealing as an

example of the Reorganization's effort to redefine itself, or, more correctly, an example of that effort as represented by Howard and those who agree with him. For a valuable essay on this whole question, see Howard's article on the Reorganized Church in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, with its conclusion: "The RLDS church seems intent on shedding many of the vestiges of its sectarian background of early Mormonism. To what extent it can discard these while retaining its identity as a recognizable part of Latter Day Saintism remains to be seen."¹ For those who approve of this "shedding," *The Church through the Years* may well become a classic.

NOTE

¹Richard P. Howard, "Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS Church)," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 5 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 3:1216.