

Readers' Forum

No Stereotypes

My first and, in all probability, my last attempt to harrass a weary editor, finds me wandering in the shadowy worlds of "Iron Roders" and "Liahonas." A world created by Dr. Poll—Ref: "What the Church Means to People Like Me." To say that I agree or disagree is a moot question. But after much pondering, I would say that somewhere between the air of the prejudicial and opinionated "Iron Roders" and the bland egotistical air of the conceited "Liahonas" there walks another breed of Mormons. To label them I can not; that they exist is sure, for I am one of them.

Just thought you would like to know that all Mormons cannot be stereotyped.

Max H. Rammell
Driggs, Idaho

Has it occurred to you that you and others are doing the church and church youth a disservice with critical, even denigrating, remarks regarding quality of education available at the BYU? Unfortunately, it seems to have become an amusing pastime among Mormon "intellectuals" to be critical of academic opportunities offered there. I too used to be critical, but I have found my criticisms are outdated as the quality of education has improved steadily in the last decade.

While certainly in the interview with Gardner, the verb tense of the phrase "The best and brightest won't go there" is open to interpretation, coupled with the many other snide remarks we have heard about the Y, it only helps to discourage the "best and the brightest" from going there.

I was apprehensive about my own children's choice of BYU when accepted

at Harvard, Stanford, and Princeton. My fears were eliminated as through the Honors program, proper choices of classes and professors, they did find challenge and academic stimulation there. The education was also good enough to result in acceptance at top-ranked graduate schools of their choice.

It is certainly unfortunate for the school (not to mention the church's reputation) that the erroneous notion that "only those who can't get accepted at other universities go to BYU" still thrives and is perpetuated.

Anonymous
Pasadena, California

Orthodox Borrowing

The Robson article "Time and Omniscience in Mormon Theology" is perhaps the finest thing written "in the Church" in the last ten years.

Perhaps, now we can get someone to take up Sterling McMurrin's well-thrown gauntlet. When will someone write truly *Mormon* theology—without the wholesale borrowings from Orthodox Christian "absolutist" terminology? When will Mormons come to realize that the entire concept of the Atonement is *totally foreign* for Mormon theology? It is totally unnecessary in Mormon theology because mankind did not *faux pas* in the Garden of Eden. It did precisely what it was supposed to do. Mortality is *not* a mistake requiring supernatural "atonement" to patch up the error. Mortality is a standard examination given to all applicants for eternal life. "Atonement" is one of several

"orthodox" borrowed concepts which have no application to truly Mormon theology.

"Original Sin" is another. Despite superficial mouthing of the Second Article of Faith, Mormons do not understand that it is explicit rejection of the entire concept of original sin (and its manifold ramifications). Thus, we have Mormons who, inexplicably, believe *both* "man's inherent evil" and the Second Article of Faith without seeing their radical contradiction.

Now to Ms. Saderup's criticism of my "Periphery" (Readers Forum 5:2 Reply in 5:4). I dare because: 1) the First Amendment gives me the right, 2) I believe it (my article) to be true, and 3) if Ms. Saderup would get her mind away from the 'humility' of her 'fallen condition' long enough to realize that both those concepts are falsely borrowed from Orthodox Christian theology and not truly part of Mormon theology at all, she might come to agree with me.

I have not "denied" Christ; after all, I did place Him at the "periphery." What I denied was the *centrality* of Christ in the salvation process. Christ is important (no more so than Adam), but He is not *central* for salvation.

Saderup's "fusion" theory is simply the "beatific vision" of Roman Catholic theology. "Merely" following Christ's teachings is the most difficult task given us here in mortality and requires all our energies.

In Volume 5:4 the "Sunday School Supplement" quotes were exceptionally well chosen. Note the contradiction between your Talmage quote (p. 7), "advancement from grade to grade within any kingdom, and from kingdom to kingdom," and Elder McConkie's heresy of "progression between kingdoms in the next world" (p. 10). Also Richard D. Poll neglects to mention that it is more likely that Iron Rods will excommunicate their Liahona brethren than vice-versa.

Sherlock's painful conclusion ("the historian cannot know") is true only for absolute certainty; historical veracity, however, is seldom based upon "absolute" certainty—hence the need

More on Blacks

Watch for "The Fading of the Pharaoh's Curse" by Armand Mauss in the January-February issue of SUNSTONE. Mauss traces the portents and preparations for the 1978 revelation on priesthood eligibility.

for faith. But Sherlock's exaltation of faith at the expense of "irrelevant" historical evidence is cutting off his nose to spite his face.

Just because one cannot know with absolute certainty, it does not follow that faith is superior to historical knowledge, that any interpretation of the facts is as good as any other interpretation. Some probabilities are superior to others, and are demonstrably verifiable as such.

As I see it the Mormon gospel (especially the Book of Mormon itself, which is Smith's best "historical" evidence for his prophetic calling) is committed to a "particular view of past events" as Sherlock calls it. And it is historical research which will ultimately verify the truth/falsity of Mormon claims. By that same historical criterion we can demonstrate the error of non-Mormon religious claims.

Personal integrity requires that we "place our faith in hock to the historian" as Sherlock laments. Otherwise there is but the fideism of subjectivity. Real faith is always subservient to historical fact. But faith is necessary—as Nibley never tires of warning us—until all the historical data are in and analyzed.

Where faith is superior to fact, dishonesty inevitably results. The facts keep us honest. Sherlock's problem is not the probabilities of historical evidence, which he appears to understand, but rather the "certainty" of faith. The resolution is simple. Those who bear testimony with "absolute certainty" are probably liars—or woefully ignorant of the complete historical evidence involved.

Testimonies are, after all, merely conclusion (inferences) based upon historical fact. They are valueless for evidentiary purposes. But the historical evidence upon which testimonies (conclusions) are based is crucially important. Conclusions devoid of factual foundation are not more than wishful thinking, pure emotion.

Therefore, Sherlock's policy of shifting the basis of our testimonies from verifiable (although not absolutely) historical fact to something different, i.e. faith promotion, is tantamount to abandoning the quest for truth in any objective sense.

Is it not the strenuous objective search for truth which enables us to value the object when finally discovered? If the "truth of scripture lies in its relationship to faith, not history," as Sherlock states, then Mohammed's "sacred grove" is as valuable as Smith's. Scripture may be historically defective in part, and

therefore misleading. To that extent it should be disbelieved.

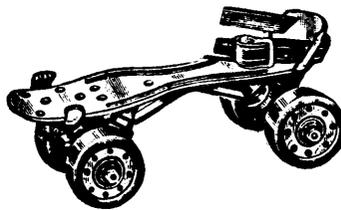
Gerry Ensley
Los Alamitos, California

River Running Backwards?

I enjoyed reading Edward L. Kimball's review in *Sunstone* of Eugene England's *Brother Brigham: The Man and the Prophet*, and noted that even the best of reviews overlook errors of history. Historians generally agree that it is difficult to place proper interpretations on events in history when so few facts are known. However, when the event is recent, it should be relatively easy to check the facts.

Writing about the 1976 Teton Dam flood on page 223, Eugene England states that "when floods from the collapse of a dam wiped out whole towns in Idaho's Teton Valley . . ."; the last line should read Idaho's Upper Snake River Valley. For the flood to have wiped out towns in Idaho's Teton Valley, the Teton River would have had to run backwards. Then again, stranger things have happened in history.

Jerry L. Glenn
Rexburg, Idaho



Verify Book of Mormon

I think the tendency of some Mormon scholars to assume the Book of Mormon can't be verified as a product of ancient America and the Old World is premature. In 5:3 Ashment doesn't seem to take Fell's translation of the Anthon Transcript seriously but since Fell renders it as the first verse of the Book of Mormon I don't find it improbable that scripts from North Africa in general could be termed "reformed Egyptian." In any event, California's Jet Propulsion Laboratory is analyzing the transcript by request of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies. FARMS is, I believe, the most important development in the history of Mormon scholarship. It plans numerous research projects that will give legitimacy to scripture. More information can be obtained by writing John Welch c/o the BYU Law School. Noel Reynolds at BYU also will be helping add to serious Book of Mormon scholarship with the editing of a book to which several eminent LDS

writers have contributed—to be published, hopefully, by the end of 1981 (it will contain significant support for the Book of Mormon).

In the Thomas article in the same issue is the statement that "no archaeologist has ever been able to locate a single Nephite text or city." Inasmuch as we cannot translate most ancient American languages it would be doubtful that we would even recognize a "Nephite text." However, important breakthroughs have been made in archaeology. John Sorenson has tentatively identified about two dozen cities by checking dating, archaeology, and geography. Kirk Vestal will be publishing his startling findings on the subject in a book with Dr. Arthur Wallace, *The Firm Foundation of Mormonism*. One thing Vestal points out is that the critics have been as uninformed as the apologists up to now—for example, the best critiques of Book of Mormon archaeology, by Fraser and the Tanners, are laughingstocks scientifically. Vestal also plans to publish an in-depth guide to Book of Mormon archaeology later.

Scott S. Smith
Thousand Oaks, California

Errata

Linda Wilcox, author of "The Mormon Concept of a Mother in Heaven" (Volume 5:5), received her MA from Stanford in education (not history as indicated in the bio). She also received an MA in history from the University of Utah and presently lives in Salt Lake City, where she is a research historian.

Committed to History

Richard Sherlock (July/August *SUNSTONE*) claimed that the Book of Daniel "makes documentable errors which would be similar in magnitude to claiming that George McGovern won the 1972 presidential race." I am aware of a number of problems that remain, such as the name of the Persian Governor of Babylon. However, one past incident in the history of Daniel studies makes me hesitant to make snap judgments about documentable errors in the book. A number of nineteenth century biblical scholars felt that Daniel had erroneously made Belshazzar the last king of Babylon when all the king lists and so forth put Nabonidus last. Nabonidus had a son named Belshazzar, but there was no indication at that time that Belshazzar had ever ruled. Daniel was clearly wrong. The discovery of new texts in the twentieth century, however, demonstrated that it was the scholars who had been wrong. In the third full year of the reign of Nabonidus, his son

Belshazzar was invested with royal dignity and reigned in his father's stead while he was off in Arabia (cf. Montgomery, pp. 66-67). We who accuse Daniel of not knowing Babylonian culture and history well enough may only be demonstrating our own ignorance of that very culture. Thus, I am cautious in this area and would think that Sherlock would be too. Sherlock correctly argues that if an account has been proven wrong in some historical areas that we should question the historicity of the rest. I think, however, that we should take this one step further. If an author has been proven demonstrably wrong in verifiable historical areas, why should we trust the spiritual message of the work, the claim to revelation, which is most generally unverifiable? I think we should not. If every grove is a sacred grove and every person a Joseph Smith, then there is no true Sacred Grove and no need for a Joseph Smith. If such were the case, all that has been constructed is a high and holy myth. If all that Scripture is intended to do is provide psychological and spiritual insights into ourselves, why did its authors not write depth psychology instead of Scripture? In short, chaos ensues whenever we put a greater value on what Scripture does for us, than what it originally meant to portray. We cannot rest on our testimonies. The Scriptural writers always gave us the historical setting as a part of the record. If it was that important to the Scriptural writers we dare not ignore it. For better or worse, we are committed, then, to historical methodology and we must be satisfied enough to accept without hesitation the results. Anything less would be a cop out.

John E. Thompson
Lancaster, California

Liberals

I am enclosing my personal check to cover the issue of your magazine containing the interview with Wayne Owens, a great American.

It is refreshing to say the least that there remains at least one person who has the personal decency to speak the truth openly. I was once labeled a "liberal" in the church and my reply was that I was proud. As anyone who knows anything about the gospel of Jesus Christ would know that he is the greatest "Liberal" who ever lived.

Cecil A. Gilbert
Panama City, Florida

Universal Answers

My faith has been rewarded in reading your down-to-earth messages.

I received great encouragement from "What the Church Means to People Like Me" by Richard D. Poll.

"The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine—From Joseph Smith to Progressive Theology"—by Thomas G. Alexander—is what I have wished to learn! How can the doctrines taught by the Prophet of the Restoration be deleted from the curriculum of church doctrine, and approval obtained from the First Presidency to canonize theories of progressive theology which refute his teachings, rather than accept Christian evidence of the truthfulness of his teachings?

I prefer the teachings of Jesus Christ to theories of evolution! It is vital to my faith to believe truth as it is revealed from God. The questions Joseph Smith asked are universal, and the answers he received to satisfy his soul are likewise universal to those in search of the truth.

I love the Lectures on Faith. They answer many vital questions and I cherish them as revelations of truth. So does Franklin D. Richards in his Compendium of the Gospel.

The effort to deny that Adam is the Patriarch and Father-God of the human family is futile! Joseph Smith revealed Adam to be the father of our spirit and body, and there is a throne for Eve as well as for Adam, as the Father and Mother of us all!

Ask any man who is a dedicated, loving father to his family, what his relationship is to his family after death, and he will answer that his love for them is stronger than the bonds of death, and the children feel the same toward their parents. Why is it so hard to give Adam and Eve this same privilege, appreciation and respect? Rather than accept the theories of evolution in any form?

Joseph Smith revealed Elohim to be God, the Holy Ghost, and he fills this mission in the Scriptures! I love this concept as much as I love the knowledge that I am a child of God through the Atonement of Jesus Christ!

Joseph A. Seiss, a Christian, speaks of Adam as coming out of the hands of his Creator indued with innate science, the first man endowed with all the philosophical and mathematical knowledge. "Adam was the greatest among mortals that ever the world possessed—and Eve was his equal in nobility and intelligence."

If some Mormon leaders cannot accept this kind of knowledge, I prefer Christians who can!

Thank you for a great reading experience.

Rhoda Thurston
Hyde Park, Utah

Response to Smith

Mr. Smith's review of my article concerning the translation process of the Book of Mormon is comprised of three sections: a two-page enumeration of his objections; a nine-page supporting document; and a 19-page appendix containing, inter alia, numerous quotations of statements about the translation process of the Book of Mormon, the urim and thummim/seer stone being a common feature among the majority. Only the first part of his review is published in *Sunstone*; but my response, though of necessity brief, must occasionally refer to the supporting arguments of the second segment of his tripartite review.

Mr. Smith accurately observes that Emma was only 74 when she was interviewed by her son. I had nothing to do with the illustrations or their captions.

In most respects, it seems that Mr. Smith misunderstands the intent of my article: the extent to which the Book of Mormon translation was "literal" or "formal" was the issue, not the use made of a seer stone/urim and thummim; and no attempt was made to impute senility to Emma, Harris, or Whitmer. In this regard the "numerous primary and secondary accounts" of the translation process which Mr. Smith includes in his appendix still are quite removed in one way or another from the event which they attempt to describe. He has overlooked an important historiographical principle: "Because reliability is, in general, inversely proportional to the *time-lapse* between event and recollection, the closer a document is to the event it narrates the better it is likely to be for historical purposes." (Gottschalk in *The Use of Personal Documents*, p. 16.)

An appeal to the synoptic gospels as a parallel phenomenon with the variations among translation accounts of the Book of Mormon is fraught with unresolvable difficulties.

Mr. Smith relies on an article by G. D. Mendenhall about an inscribed spindle whorl from Catal Huyuk in an effort to support his contention that the language of the Book of Mormon was "local" and "non-professional." (Cf. *Kadmos* 14, No. 1 [1975], 48ff.) But Mendenhall's arguments are not applicable, because the Book of Mormon did not originate from one of the "early stages in the history of writing" (Mendenhall, p. 51)

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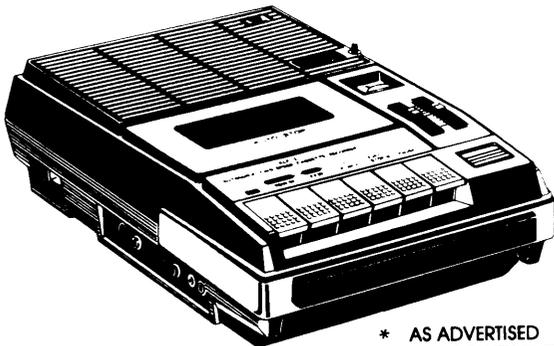
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in an economic or private matrix. (Mendenhall, p. 49.) The selections in the Book of Mormon from Isaiah and others quoted from the brass plates are virtually the same as the parallel passages in the King James Version. Thus, it would seem that the Book of Mormon language was at least as sophisticated as that which later emerged as Masoretic Hebrew, for the "Egyptian" which Lehi learned was that which enabled him to read the brass plates (Mos 1:4).

Mr. Smith's perspective about Hebrew and Egyptian grammar could be broadened by a thorough research of Hebrew syntax and by a critical analysis of the Book of Mormon text. Moreover, while he concedes a rigid syntax in earlier forms of Egyptian, he is apparently unaware of the

strictly-defined nature of the Demotic verbal system. (Cf. J. A. Johnson, *The Demotic Verbal System*, SAOC No. 38 [1976], 391f.)

The word-print analysis of the text of the Book of Mormon no more solves the problem of authorship than an earlier study in which Rencher was involved solves the authorship of the Isaiah text. (Cf. *BYU Studies* 15 [Autumn 1974], 95ff.) However exciting it may be, at best this study must be regarded as preliminary and as representing only one approach. The only conclusions that ultimately can be valid will result from holistic research.

Mr. Smith's claims about LCD and LED-display instruments must stand for themselves.

Edward H. Ashment
Salt Lake City, Utah

BYU Student Body President Jeffrey Duke and Vice President Thomas Peterson later issued a formal apology to Mrs. Matheson. "We were appalled that any Brigham Young University student should be so inconsiderate, and we express our deepest regret at the lack of respect shown by some to you personally and as the first lady of Utah," the letter said.

A statement issued by Governor Matheson's campaign headquarters stated that although BYU was not at fault, "It is too bad that the campaign has been permitted to reach such a low level."

Mr. Wright stated that he felt he was also owed an apology by BYU, "The speech I gave is the same speech that I have been giving for weeks in this campaign."

ERA Demonstrations Nationwide
Mormons for ERA has been staging pro-ERA demonstrations at LDS Church sites and meetings from coast to coast, including weekly picketing at the location of the new Mormon temple in Bellevue, Washington.

Recently, Southern California Mormons for ERA protested the installment of replicas of the Nauvoo women's statues on the Los Angeles LDS temple grounds. After carrying such signs as "Women don't belong on pedestals; they belong in the Constitution" and "A statue patronizes, ERA equalizes," the group held a candlelight vigil outside the temple gates while the statue dedication ceremony took place in a sunken garden in front of the temple's visitors center.

In Utah, about 75 picketers organized by the newly formed Ex-Mormons for the ERA marched on the sidewalk outside Temple Square during October conference. The group's organizer, a former missionary to England, Mary Jean Uebelgunne, said that it had been a "painful experience to have the church we've been born into and loved betray us." Although Church spokesperson Jerry Cahill declined to comment on the protest, he did say that the marchers "have a perfect right to do what they want to do. They haven't disturbed the conference."

Inside the tabernacle during the conference's second session the usual unanimous vote to sustain the leaders of the LDS Church was neither usual nor unanimous. When the time came to sustain President Kimball, three women—Sarah Campbell, Tucson, Arizona, Cheryl L. Dalton, California, and Marty LaBrosse, Kingston, Washington—voted no in protest of the Church's stance against passage of the

Update

Mormons in Power

The recent landslide victory for Ronald Reagan swept several Mormon Republicans into positions of prominence as well. Jake Garn won reelection to the Senate from Utah with over 70 percent of the vote. With Republican dominance in the Senate, he will become chair of the Banking committee.

Utah's other Senator, Orrin G. Hatch (see interview in SUNSTONE 5:5), will become chair of the Labor committee. *The Washington Post* noted ironically in its post-election analysis (November 6) that Hatch is the "man organized labor loves to hate." In fact, in an attempt to scare its members to the polls, the Public Employees Department of the AFL-CIO ran a fake headline that read: "Republicans Take Over Senate; Hatch Chairs Labor Committee."

A win for Mormon Paula Hawkins in Florida added one more Senate seat to the new Republican majority. During the campaign she sharply differed with her Democratic opponent William Gunter on social issues. She opposed the ERA and called for abolishing the president's Office of Consumer Protection and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. She supported constitutional amendments to allow prayers in the school and to halt abortions and called for more defense spending. Courting the important

Jewish vote (*Time*, November 17), she told members of a synagogue: "There are twelve tribes of Israel, and the Mormons happen to be one of them. That's my belief."

Governor's Wife Heckled at BYU

Norma Matheson, wife of Utah's Democratic Governor Scott Matheson, left BYU's "Speak Off" political forum lecturn in tears October 22 after student outbursts interrupted her closing statement. Earlier in the forum gubernatorial challenger Bob Wright had sharply criticized Governor Matheson for his stands on such issues as the ERA and abortion, according to an article in the *BYU Daily Universe*.

"This was not supposed to be a debate," the First Lady responded after Wright's comments and then referred to a letter sent by the ASBYU Academics to each candidate prior to the meeting, requesting that each refrain from attacking the opponent's positions and instead articulate his or her own stands. Wright said that he had not seen the letter.

Mrs. Matheson, representing her husband who had previous commitments in northern Utah, held to the letter's rules, but requested and was granted time to rebut the GOP challenger. "I expected this to be a positive dialogue," she said as she left. "I'm sorry it's deteriorated."

ERA. The women, all members of Mormons for ERA in their respective states, later said they support President Kimball as their religious leader, but do not support him as their "political leader." Ms. Campbell reported, "The decision (to protest) was not lightly undertaken," and Ms. LaBrosse added that the trio had fasted and prayed two weeks prior to the conference. After the vote, Elder Bruce R. McConkie requested that the women meet with Elder Gordon B. Hinckley. The meeting, which took place in Elder Hinckley's office, was considered private and, according to Church spokesperson Don LeFevre, no Church statement would be made concerning the matter.

Utah Target for Civil Disobedience

"The time has come for civil disobedience, for people to demonstrate and riot, to take personal risk and sacrifice and even to die in the name of equality for all," Sonia Johnson, co-founder of Mormons for ERA, said while addressing an overflow crowd at Utah State University in early October. Soon thereafter, local and national feminist groups began planning a campaign of civil disobedience aimed at breaking Mormon resistance to the Equal Rights Amendment. Lee Anne Walker, president of the Equal Rights Coalition of Utah, said the campaign will focus on Utah and might include blocking the roads to ski resorts during the ski season and having women chain themselves to the entrances of public buildings. The strategy pinpointing Utah for civil disobedience was endorsed at the National Organization of Women's convention in San Antonio. NOW president Eleanor Smeal hoped the proposal would attract enough national publicity to bring significant pressure on the Mormon church, which she described as a "religious establishment, a political force, and a multibillion dollar empire that is systematically blocking ERA ratification in several states, including Utah, Arizona, Nevada, and Florida."

Caffeine-free Cola Drink

Skip Brooks, president of Brooks Industries of Salt Lake City, hopes people will spend billions of dollars guzzling his new caffeine-free cola drink, "Catch." Brooks, a BYU graduate, has been selling "Catch" at that university's athletic events and has apparently gained an enthusiastic following among members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who generally stay away from cola drinks because of their caffeine content.

Now ready to make the leap into mass local distribution, Brooks says bottlers and distributors throughout the Mountain West are being contacted.

Church Outbids Billionaire for Farm

The LDS church outbid Nelson Bunker Hunt, the Texas oil billionaire, for a 2,755-acre tobacco farm near Hopkinsville, Kentucky. Paying \$4,275,000, the Church topped Hunt's best offer by \$25,000.

According to Robert Fears, a Hopkinsville lawyer who represented the Church, the land will be used to raise wheat, soybeans, and corn since Mormons condemn the use of tobacco. The profits from the farm will go to the "Church treasury in Salt Lake City," said Fears.

Mormons and the New Right

The Mormon-New Right connection is continually surfacing in the national news media. According to a recent article in *Harper's* (October 1980) detailing evangelical New Right activities, Mormon support is being increasingly sought by conservative Christian leaders. The article stated that the "chosen instrument for bringing in the Mormons is Senator Frank Church"—not by enlisting the Idaho senator's support but rather by demonstrating mutual opposition to him.

In February 1979, a coalition of evangelical ministers called Christian Voice was formed, and Utah Senator Orrin Hatch served on its original congressional advisory committee. According to the article, the abortion issue was "an ideal way to hook the Mormons" into joining with the evangelical coalition. Hatch recorded an anti-abortion radio spot for the Stop the Baby Killers project of Americans for Life, whose honorary chairman is Congressman George Hansen of Idaho—another Mormon and a bitter enemy of Frank Church. "I personally believe Frank Church is a baby killer," commented Terry Dolan, head of the National Conservative Political Action Committee.

In a McNeil/Lehrer Report on public television entitled "Politics and the Pulpit," Jerry Falwell, Moral Majority leader, also mentioned the Mormons in connection with the Right-to-Life movement. "I began preaching on my national television program about the atrocity of this (abortion) genocide," said Falwell. "The Mormons began to rally beside me. Roman Catholics. Right-to-Life people began to come. And

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I began to realize that there is a coalition in this country of moralists. . . . They are pro-life and pro-traditional family. Pro-moral, meaning anti-pornography, anti-drug scene. Pro-American, meaning strong, superior national defense, pro-Israel."

Following the Falwell interview, a spokesperson for Moral Majority told

one of SUNSTONE's associate editors that although many individual Mormons had joined their organization, the Moral Majority's only connection with any formal group of Mormons was through a Freeman Institute Constitutional Seminar held in Tulsa last September; Falwell was the featured speaker and guest of Cleon Skousen.

A Mormon Associations

THE QUESTION OF RLDS IDENTITY

By Bill Hartley

At the impressive RLDS meetinghouse of the Council Bluffs Central Congregation, the John Whitmer Historical Association, composed primarily of members of the RLDS church, gathered for its annual meeting to consider the theme: "The Question of RLDS Identity: A Sesquicentennial Assessment." The sessions (September 26-28) attracted between 60 and 100 attendees.

Friday night Dale Broadhurst's opening paper, based on his 800 hours of word study, argued that comparisons of the Spaulding Manuscript and the Book of Mormon showed some "surprising similarities" in words and themes and that the Spaulding Theory is not dead yet. Commentator Wayne Ham praised Dale's labor but faulted the methodology. Wayne, based on experience as an editor, said the books sound and feel very different: if Mark Twain felt the Book of Mormon is chloroform in print, Spaulding is cyanide; Spaulding makes the Book of Mormon "Chauceresque, Shakespearean" by comparison.

The Saturday morning audience, including local RLDS members and two LDS missionaries, first heard Norma Hiles quote extensively from Joseph Smith III's letters to his children, which gave insights into the "royal family." Then my paper, "The Historical Development of Priesthood Offices in the LDS and RLDS Churches: A Call for Comparative Studies," noted the need for and possible benefits from detailed LDS and RLDS studies of priesthood offices (deacon, high priest, etc.). RLDS commentator Ken Stobaugh supported

the call for more studies but reminded the audience of troublesome priesthood differences between the churches. The RLDS audience seemed most disturbed by two particular LDS priesthood changes: giving boys the Aaronic Priesthood instead of men as in Joseph Smith's day, and ordaining the First Council of the Seventy as high priests in 1961.

That afternoon we heard short papers on the 1846 Iowa trek by Bruce Graham; on Mormon camps along the Missouri River by Lewis Weigand; and on RLDS beginnings in the Omaha-Council Bluffs area by Jim Doty. We visited the Mormon historic site at Florence Cemetery. There, LDS missionary "Elder" Davis, in his sixties, greeted the group, told "trek west" stories about his family, and defended his family's polygamists. "Does he defend polygamy to everyone, or just RLDS?" one JWHA member asked me.

Clare Vlahos' presidential address, "Moderation as a Theological Principle in the Thought of Joseph Smith III," posited that President Smith, basically a legalist, moderated his beliefs in fixed principles in order to allow for pluralism and to avoid division among his diverse followers. His moderation was "restraint in the face of unorthodoxy."

A Sunday morning panel tackled the topic of "The Question of RLDS Identity." Tom Morain, on the topic of authority, explained that the RLDS church recently disclaimed being "the one true church" because supports for that position have eroded. What good is an authority claim back to Adam if you no longer believe in Adam? What good is

scriptural argument about authority when new concepts of scriptures demand historical relativism? Or what if the Book of Mormon is nothing more than a nineteenth century tract? Authority, he said, is existential, not concrete. Barbara Higdon, pushing Tom's thoughts further, proposed that the RLDS must now reassess the salvation role of ordinances and of priesthood. Hiroshi Yamada, a Seventy and the national RLDS minister for Japan, saw authority claims as abrasive and preventing the church from penetrating non-Christian cultures. Bill Russell, on revelation and scripture, said Joseph Smith was a biblical literalist, who framed his revelations and teachings accordingly, because he lacked the insights of modern biblical scholarship. Joseph's literalism, therefore, is no longer justified. The LDS scriptures need context studies, the panel agreed, to show them to be the *word* of God but not the *words* of God.

Panelist Patricia Roberts summarized how the RLDS concept of Zion has changed; once a "place," now Zion is "process." Barbara Higdon, on RLDS beginnings, questioned if the Reorganization began as a throwback to the pre-Nauvoo church or developed as a new alternative? More needs to be known, she said, regarding why RLDS founders rejected, ignored, or repudiated many Nauvoo practices.

The main concern of the panel, and of the entire conference, seemed to be what the RLDS Christian identity should be *in its own right*, instead of its traditional counter-LDS identity, and in spite of its early history and unusual modern scriptures.

At the meetings the JWHA announced publication of an annual journal, the *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal*, starting in 1981. Members elected W. Grant McMurray as JWHA president for 1980-81, Paul M. Edwards as vice-president, and Betty Winholtz, Ruth Wildermuth, and James Elliott as board members. Officers announced that the 1981 JWHA meeting site (September) will be Lamoni. The 1980 JWHA awards went to Alma Blair (Best Article) for "Historical Models of the Restoration"; to Harold Schabeck (Best Lecture Paper) for "The Kirtland and Independence Temple Lot Suit"; and to the Liberty Hall Restoration Project (Special Merit Award) for restoration work. No book award was given this year.

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