

SHAKESPEARES OF OUR OWN

ARE MORMONS REALLY CHRISTIANS?: LEVI PETERSON AND THE PARADOX OF MORMON IDENTITY

By Michael Austin



Levi Peterson and grandson Lars Boettchen

Mormon writers shouldn't overemphasize LDS connections to the Christian tradition in the name of conformity, but they shouldn't shy away from those connections in the name of uniqueness.

About a month ago my driver brought back from a remodeling job two boxes of books and papers. I found in one of the boxes a copy of the *Confessions of Augustine*. It sits on my desk among whole-sale quotations and manuals for the grading of lumber. It is an incongruity, perhaps even a perversity, that I take pleasure in this book, because like most Mormons I have believed that very little of importance happened to Christianity between the death of the last ancient apostle and the restoration of the Gospel through the prophet Joseph Smith.

—LEVI PETERSON, "The Confessions of Augustine"

LEVI PETERSON'S "THE CONFESSIONS OF AUGUSTINE," the story of a young Mormon man who becomes sexually involved with a Baptist girl, revealed

two important things to me when I first encountered it during my last semester at Brigham Young University. First, it taught me that it was possible to use Mormon themes

and settings as subjects for serious literature. I know that Peterson was not the first author to do this, but his was the first work of serious Mormon fiction that I ever read, and his story alerted me to the possibility of a Mormon literature beyond the novels of Jack Weyland and Blaine Yorgason that I had devoured in high school. When I stumbled, quite accidentally, across *Canyons of Grace*, Peterson's collection of stories, I remember thinking (as only a know-it-all English major with delusions of competence can) how glad I was that my culture had finally gotten around to producing something worthy of being called "art."

The second revelation, which struck me with even more force, was the sudden realization that I knew absolutely nothing about the history of Christian thought. It pains me to admit this, but, when I first read "The Confessions of Augustine," I didn't have the foggiest idea who St. Augustine was. In fact, until I read Peterson's story, I had never heard the name "Augustine" uttered in my life—despite the fact that it is the Latin origin of my own last name. And Augustine was not the only Christian figure whose name meant nothing to me; other than Martin Luther and John Calvin—whom I knew only vaguely as the people God blessed with a few scraps of truth before he revealed it all to Joseph Smith—I could not have named a single Christian theologian or important historical figure not found in the New Testament. Despite having spent four years at the largest Christian institution of higher learning in the country, I did not know enough about the Christian tradition to understand even the most basic allusions in a relatively straightforward short story.

I cannot, of course, blame BYU for my ignorance of non-Mormon Christianity. I am responsible for my own education, and no institution could possibly teach all of its students everything worth knowing. There were certainly no rules against reading Christian history and theology at BYU, and, I have since discovered, Augustine's works were widely available at both the bookstore and the library. Had I been a little bit more inquisitive (and a little less addicted to paperback spy novels and bad science fiction), I would have certainly found my way to them before graduation. Nonetheless, I suspect that my experiences were not atypical. For as often and as loudly as Mormons protest that we "are Christians, too," whenever anybody suggests otherwise, we have not done a very good job of educating ourselves about the Christian tradition that we claim to belong to. "Of course we're Christians," we say to anyone

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who asks, "can't you read the words JESUS CHRIST in the name of our Church? If not, well then, we'll make them bigger."

Having a name is not the same thing as having a heritage, however, and what I value most about Levi Peterson's work is that it begins with the premise that Mormons are Christians, not as a matter of nomenclature, but as a matter of tradition and belief. In story after story, and in both of his major novels, Peterson confronts us—often without our knowing it—with the works of Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Bunyan, and other great Christian thinkers in an attempt to show us what it really means to claim a common heritage with Christianity. In order to assert this premise successfully, however, Peterson must grapple with what I call "the paradox of Mormon identity." Simply stated, the paradox of Mormon identity is this: the most central elements of Mormon theology are the Atonement of Jesus Christ and the reality of God's love. However, these are also the most central elements of every other Christian religion. This becomes a problem when Mormon writers use their literature to construct a unique Mormon identity because that which makes us most essentially ourselves is also that which most fails to distinguish us from others.

Mormon writers compensate for this paradox in many ways. Some focus, quite legitimately, on Mormonism's unique history. Others attempt to construct identity out of the peripheral elements of the Church: the Word of Wisdom, the Law of Chastity, genealogy, temple marriage, church callings, modern-day revelation, and dozens of other things particular to LDS culture and lifestyle. None of these things can even approach the importance of the Atonement in Mormon theology. But too many of our writers (like too many Latter-day Saints) minimize the Atonement—and the vital concept of divine grace—because they don't want to sound too much like Protestants. Theological distinctions, unfortunately, serve much better than close similarities when it comes to constructing an identity. What often happens, unfortunately, is that we overemphasize our differences with other Christians and portray ourselves as believers in an authoritarian, works-

centered religious system that cannot be supported from the Church's actual teachings.

This is precisely the problem that Levi Peterson confronts head on in his most important novel, *The Backslider*. Frank Windham, the hero of the story, is a good-hearted, but all-too-human, Mormon cowboy growing up in the 1950s. In Frank's mind, "the gospel" means going to church, paying tithing, keeping the word of wisdom, following leaders, and obeying the law of chastity. And though Frank constantly tries to be a "good" person, he always seems to end up doing the things that, in his own mind, make him "bad." For most of the novel, Frank attempts to earn God's love by becoming perfect; predictably, he fails every time until he becomes obsessed with the guilt and self-loathing that, Peterson suggests, follow inevitably from such an approach to the gospel.

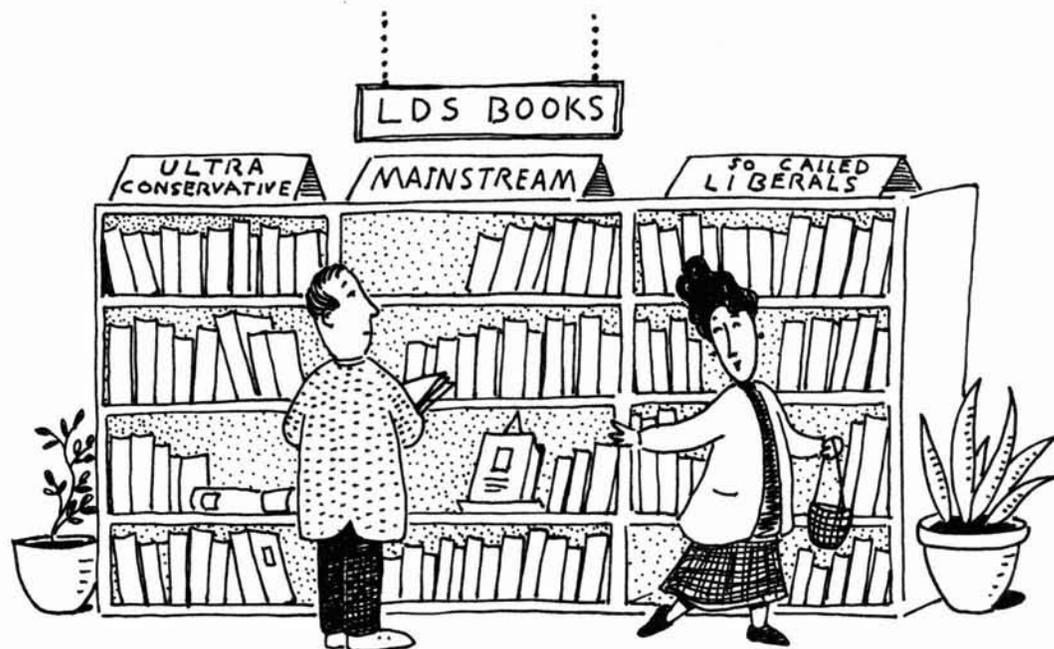
The cycle of self-reproach and depression that Frank goes through recalls John Bunyan's spiritual descent in his masterful *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*. Unlike Bunyan, however, Frank has a genuine modern-day revelation—a visit from Jesus Christ himself—that forces him to confront his own false perceptions of God. The Jesus that appears to Frank in chapter 10 of *The Backslider*, though, is not the one that most Mormons would be comfortable with: he is occasionally profane, dressed as a cowboy, smoking a cigarette, and unceremoniously standing in the place of a urinal. But the dis-

comfort that we feel in this scene is vital to the purpose of the novel: to teach Frank (and the reader) the difference between what is essential about the gospel and what is peripheral—and what is essential is the Atonement of Jesus Christ. The message that the Cowboy Jesus delivers—"Why can't you believe my blood was enough. . . . Why do you have to shed yours too?"—is simply a paraphrase of D&C 19:16: "For behold, I, God, have suffered these things for all, that they might not suffer if they would repent."

Predictably, many do not read the "Urinal Epiphany" as charitably as I do. Many readers have been offended by the portrayal of Jesus Christ as a smoking, swearing cowboy, and others have objected to Peterson's suspiciously Protestant emphasis on divine grace. Richard Cracroft, commenting on Eugene England's enthusiastic review of *The Backslider*, makes both criticisms of the work:

The Backslider is true and faithful to a Sophic and secular vision of literature. But my Mantic sensibilities recoil, as have so many Latter-day Saint readers who, approaching this work of Mormon literature touted by England and others, are shocked by this profanation of Christ, as they are by the grotesque God of Frank's strange, quasi-Calvinistic-but decidedly not LDS-theology.¹

That a careful and insightful scholar such as



"Now remember, Dave, President Hinckley said to stay in the mainstream."

CHRIS CHECKETTS

BOOK  NOTES

Richard Cracroft could dismiss a novel about Christ's Atonement as "secular" and label its theology "decidedly non-LDS" illustrates, I believe, just how problematic the paradox of Mormon identity has become in our community. Broken down into its theological essentials, *The Backslider* makes no argument that would not be acceptable in any sacrament meeting talk: that God is a loving deity, that he does not hate us when we sin, that the Atonement is real, that sincere repentance eliminates the requirement that we suffer physically and emotionally, and that excessive guilt and self-mortification are spiritually destructive. Mormons really do believe these things, and despite the fact that lots of other Christians believe them, too, they are central to who we are as a people. However, many of us become uncomfortable when we encounter these arguments in our literature because they do not emphasize anything unique about us, which is what, we imagine, our Miltons and Shakespeares ought to do.

Ultimately, what works such as *The Backslider* and "The Confessions of St. Augustine" do is force Mormons to take seriously the claim that we are Christians. Christianity is a tradition that includes thousands of denominations and billions of people, and when we claim to be "Christians, too," we necessarily include ourselves in that larger tradition. And just as it would be a mistake for Mormon writers to overemphasize our connections to the Christian tradition in the name of conformity, it is a mistake, and an all-too-common one, for them to shy away from those connections in the name of uniqueness. In embracing these connections, Peterson has, paradoxically, written a body of work that is more "essentially Mormon" than that of any other writer I can think of. While there are plenty of writers in the Mormon universe who deal with what is most unique or most controversial about Mormonism, Peterson deals with what is most important. 

BOOKS BY LEVI S. PETERSON

The Canyons of Grace, stories. Orion Books, 1982.

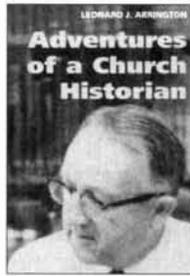
The Backslider, novel. Signature Books, 1986.

Night Soil, stories. Signature Books, 1990.

Aspen Maroonery, novel. Signature Books, 1995.

NOTE

1. Richard Cracroft, "Attuning the Authentic Mormon Voice: Stemming the Sophic Tide in LDS Literature," *SUNSTONE*, July 1993, 55.



ADVENTURES OF A CHURCH HISTORIAN

by Leonard J. Arrington
University of Illinois Press, 1998
249 pages, \$29.95

Reviewed by Cherie Woodworth

his tenure as Church Historian during a watershed decade, 1972–1982.

Arrington's account of his childhood love for family history, his service in World War II, his graduate training and eventual appointment as Church Historian manifest his spiritual and professional progress as a historian who, he recounts, felt repeated and undeniable spiritual confirmation of his calling and mission. The scriptural epigraphs he chose for these first chapters are clear signposts of his journey: the divine injunction to study and understand "things both in heaven and in the earth . . . things which have been and which are . . ." (D&C 88: 79); to "teach, expound, exhort, baptize, and watch over the church . . ." (D&C 20:42); to "seek . . . out of the best books words of wisdom . . ." (D&C 109:7).

Most readers will bring to the book enough foreknowledge to cast a pall on Arrington's determined optimism to build the Lord's kingdom through faithful history. He tells with moving enthusiasm of the decision in early 1967 by First Presidency counselors—Joseph Fielding Smith, Hugh B. Brown, and N. Eldon Tanner—to allow professional researchers into the Church archives, "holdings . . . so vast, so unbelievably complete and rich" (76), that Arrington declined an offer to remain permanently at UCLA in order to work in them. Just five years later, President Tanner issued a call to an astonished Arrington to head the newly restructured and empowered Church Historian's Office. The revamped Church Historical Department soon had a staff of professionally trained historians and within a few years had produced works of unprecedented quality. The most glorious season for the Historical Department may have been the summer of 1976, when both *The Story of the Latter-day Saints* and *Building the City of God* were published within a few weeks of each other.

Produced through exceptional teamwork by historians under Arrington's patronage, both books were unalloyed successes with scholarly critics and general readers. Yet de-

LEONARD ARRINGTON is the greatest historian Mormondom has yet known, deeply rooted in the American West, in Mormon culture and community, and in its faith. He is perhaps the Church's most accomplished and loyal defender to the larger world.

Yet a quarter century after its inception, the great historical enterprise that he initiated and inspired is forced to the margins; official Church publications such as the Gospel Doctrine manual on Brigham Young have little content in common with such pioneering works as Arrington's *Brigham Young: American Moses*. Has the Church squandered this hard-won historical heritage and failed to learn the lessons of the History Division?

Arrington's memoirs force the reader to face difficult questions dead-on: Is professional history traitorous to the faith? How did history fall under such suspicion? And who was to blame?

Those who remember the meteoric brilliance of the Church History Department in the late 1970s will find Arrington's account passionate and, at the same time, balanced. Though he was himself the brightest star in that firmament, and one that kindled so many others, Arrington describes his own role with humility. Arrington's memoir also achieves a forgiving distance, a magnanimity that many in his audience may find, even these many years after the events, still beyond their grasp.

Throughout, the mettle of Arrington's professionalism shines through, and he does not treat his own story with any less professional rigor than he accorded other subjects or demanded of other historians. His father called him "Honest Leonard" (22), and his integrity is evidenced by both his writings and his actions. Arrington's straightforward character and unpretentious style belie events almost operatic in their drama and denouement. His purpose and method is transparent: to relate in the most accurate and evenhanded detail the context and events of

spite the fact that *The Story of the Latter-day Saints* had received the full backing and approval of President Spencer W. Kimball, Apostles Ezra Taft Benson (then president of the Twelve) and Mark E. Petersen went to great lengths to attack the work in closed meetings among the Quorum of the Twelve. As became apparent when Arrington was finally allowed to defend his staff and his profession, Elders Peterson and Benson were unfamiliar with the book itself and had been acting on anonymous and inflammatory denunciations from informants (148).

The crucible of Arrington's professional and personal life follows hard upon these shining successes of the Historical Department. The pivotal tenth chapter of the book begins with the sudden announcement to Arrington and his staff in April 1977 that Elder Joseph Anderson had been released as their managing director and Elder G. Homer Durham appointed in his stead. What had begun as individual attacks on the Historical Department from a small faction within the Quorum of the Twelve became a campaign to break the department through institutional and bureaucratic maneuvers, carried out silently but with surprising swiftness and efficiency.

Elder Anderson had been a friend and supporter, a man Arrington characterized as both an able administrator and a "sweet and kind and helpful" man. Elder Durham, by contrast, took control of the department, cut off the historians' access to the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve, and demanded obedience and the right to prior censorship over everything the department produced. In essence, Elder Durham held that these strictures were necessary to protect the historians from themselves and to redeem their work from the justified suspicions and displeasure they had elicited from some general authorities. Durham's chief ally in this was Apostle Gordon B. Hinckley, with whom Durham had served a British mission in the 1930s. President Kimball and his first counselor N. Eldon Tanner had stood behind Arrington steadfastly, but by this time both were in poor health.

Despite the loving support he had always received from President Kimball, despite confirmation from the scriptures of the need to record the history of

the Church, and despite his own spiritual conviction of his calling to write a faithful history of the Church (85), Arrington writes, "In many ways I felt defenseless" (162) in the face of the antagonism, suspicion, and distrust of those who seemed determined opponents. It is a tribute to his professionalism, however, that here, as throughout the book, Arrington does not allow the pain of this experience to override his duty to give both sides of the story: "Of course, Durham was entitled to do what he did," Arrington tells us. "He was doing his job in a way he understood to be for the good of the church. . . . This is no doubt what his advisors had asked him to do" (162, 160).

Elder Hinckley argued that the way to protect the historians after Elder Benson became Church president was to take them out of the official Church structure altogether. (165, 215) Together, Elder Durham and President Hinckley engineered the removal of the Church Historian's office to Brigham Young University, where, Arrington notes, "if awkward facts were presented and questions raised, they could be ignored or repudiated or reinterpreted" (215). Just to be on the safe side, the chairman of the Committee for Strengthening Members (whom Arrington discreetly leaves unnamed) asked two students to spy on Arrington's lectures at BYU in the fall of 1979 (193).

But directly following Arrington's tale of the institutional dismemberment of the

Church Historian's office are two other stories which underline Arrington's essential testimony. As the Church Historian of the time, in the fullest account yet, he chronicles the story of President Kimball's 1978 revelation on the priesthood. Set against the disheartening details of his own experience, the 1978 revelation reaffirmed his testimony that the Church is indeed led by inspiration and is not bound by the shortcomings of its past. Second, Arrington tells of writing and publishing *The Mormon Experience* with Davis Bitton and his newfound determination to press on with his work: "I resolved not to be defensive (about the book)," he writes, and at the same time to "not be swayed by 'expediency' or points of view that in the short run might serve our interests but would not serve the long-run interests of scholarship or the Church" (189-190). Although the *Church News*, the *Ensign*, and other official Church publications were prohibited from reviewing or even mentioning the book (192), *The Mormon Experience* sold over ten thousand copies in its first three months and became an emissary of the Church to the world. By 1992, thirteen years after its publication, *The Mormon Experience* was a frequently cited reference in the semi-official *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*.

The most bitter lesson of history that Arrington relates is the Hofmann crimes, beginning in the spring of 1980, just a few months before Arrington and his staff re-



"Welcome back. This round is double jeopardy. We'll see if Mike can keep his lock on the celestial kingdom and whether Pat can climb out of the telestial kingdom. We'll start with Tony, trying to avoid outer darkness."

ceived final word that the History Division was being dissolved. Before Mark Hofmann's forgeries and murders, to which he pled guilty in January 1987, he was already fabricating history, justifying himself by his conviction that the Church was guilty of institutional hypocrisy (221). Hofmann's carefully designed forgeries struck to the heart of the weaknesses created by the attempt to control the Church's past, and only further proved the need for openness and candor.

Openness is one of the three pillars of principle on which this eloquent, gracious, and generous memoir stands (7). First, it is the duty and responsibility of the institutional Church to be honest and open about its past; it is also in its interest to do so. Second, a historian of any religious tradition has a duty to consider naturalistic explanations along with divine influences. Third, it is the responsibility of Latter-day Saints to recognize that the leadership of the Church is not monolithic and that not all decisions or policies are unanimous and equally inspired. Individual members of the Quorum of the Twelve or the First Presidency sometimes assert their own agendas, even implementing them as policy, without the approval, consent, or even knowledge of their colleagues.

"That the Lord is in charge does not mean that he inspires or approves everything done in the church," Arrington concludes judiciously, but adds, "That he is in charge does mean that our leaders will get a lot more right than wrong. In the meantime, a follower like me, trying to do a job under conflicting instructions or pressures, was like a mouse crossing the floor where elephants are dancing" (144). The title and epigraph to Arrington's pivotal tenth chapter adeptly hint at the agonizing position the Church historians, and especially Arrington as their leader and protector, found themselves in. At the beginning of this painful chapter, Arrington echoes for us the counsel in Proverbs: "My son, despise not the chastening of the Lord, neither be weary of his correction. For whom the Lord loveth he correcteth" (Proverbs 3:12). But the uncharacteristically enigmatic chapter title, "A New Pharaoh and New Directions," alludes to a different scripture, one that Arrington leaves unquoted: "Now there arose up a new king over Egypt, which knew not Joseph. . . ." In the twilight years of President Kimball, a new administration arose who were harsh taskmasters, determined to cut back on resources, support, and access to archives. In doing so they demanded that Church historians both press forward in building the kingdom and that they make bricks without straw.

WHAT is Arrington's legacy? Though his memoir is marked by tragedy and loss, we need only turn again to those allusive verses from Exodus to find a different perspective:

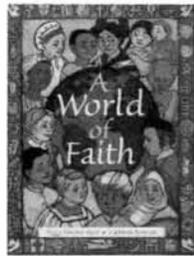
Now there arose up a new king over Egypt, which knew not Joseph. And he (Pharaoh) said unto his people, Behold, the people of the children of Israel are more and mightier than we. Come on, let us deal wisely with them, lest they multiply, and it come to pass that, when there falleth out any war,

they join also unto our enemies, and fight against us . . .

"Therefore they (Pharaoh's men) did set over them taskmasters to afflict them with their burdens. And they built for Pharaoh treasure cities. . . . But the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and grew. . . ." (Ex. 1:8–12)



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A WORLD OF FAITH

by Peggy Fletcher Stack and Kathleen Peterson

Signature Books, 1998

55 pages, \$19.95

Reviewed by Robert A. Rees

A WORLD OF FAITH, a collection of brief sketches of most of the world's major (and some minor) religions, makes a valuable contribution toward interfaith understanding and religious tolerance. Designed for children ages eight through ten, the text summarizes the basic beliefs and practices of worshipers from the Amish to Zoroastrians. At a time when religious conflicts and holy wars rage over much of the world, parents can be grateful for a book that stresses the positive beliefs and contributions of believers of different persuasions.

Such a book should be welcomed by Latter-day Saints who have been the object of religious persecution but who have also had a tradition of religious intolerance. Thankfully, both of these trends are changing. In general, especially in North America, other believers look on Latter-day Saints more favorably than they did in the past. In turn, a trend is growing among Latter-day Saints to be more tolerant of other religions. In the past several decades especially, the Church has encouraged acceptance and understanding of other faiths. In the April 1999 general conference, President Gordon B. Hinckley stated, "We must never forget that we live in a world of great diversity. The people of the earth are all our Father's children and are of many and varied religious persuasions. We must cultivate tolerance and appreciation and respect

one another."

Peggy Stack's text strikes the right balance for pre-adolescents: it is interestingly written and, at the same time, challenging for young minds. Kids this age can be easily bored by anything religious, as most parents know from sitting through years of sacrament meetings with their children. I doubt that any young person (or parent!) would be bored by the book's array of facts about what people believe and how they worship. Occasionally, the text seems over the heads of young readers, or at least portions may be quite difficult. The preface acknowledges that "the language may occasionally seem difficult or too 'insider' to those not of the faith, but we believe it is important that children from each group recognize themselves and their faith in familiar words." In places, the text could have been clearer without sacrificing content. Stack often explains terms young readers are not likely to know ("guru" or "ch'i"), but sometimes she does not. For example, those unfamiliar with Judaism might not know what a "menorah" is and therefore could not readily guess which object it is in the illustration.

Commendably, Stack summarizes each religion fairly in its short, one-page space. Certainly, it is a daunting task to get all the facts right about so many religions. For the most part, Stack's thumbnail sketches are ac-

curate, but some statements might need correcting in subsequent editions (of which I hope there are many). Here are some for a few of the traditions:

Hindus: Rather than saying that all the Hindi gods are "part of Brahman, the spirit of the universe," it is more accurate to say the Hindi gods and goddesses are faces of the formless, faceless, nameless Brahma.

Lutherans: Lutherans do not believe "that the bread and wine [of the Lord's Supper] are mysteriously transformed into Christ's body and blood." Transubstantiation is exclusively a Catholic doctrine. Also, saying Luther's actions "launched the Protestant Reformation" is an exaggeration; the causes of the Reformation were widespread and firmly established long before Luther. Saying he was the central figure in the German Protestant revolution is more accurate, although his influence obviously spread beyond his own country.

Unitarians. While William Ellery Channing was certainly the guiding force in establishing the Unitarian church, he was not "the first to use the word 'Unitarian.'" That term originated during the fourth-century Nicæan-Arian controversy to distinguish believers in the unipersonality of God from the orthodox Trinitarians.

Episcopalians: Contrary to the entry, American colonists did not establish their own bishops. In fact, when bishops in the Church of England denied its members in the colonies the right to appoint their own bishops, the Americans went to the Scottish church for ordination of its bishops instead of appointing them themselves because this allowed them a line of apostolic succession. While one can understand the necessity of simplifying history in such a book, it might help young people to know that some things were more complex. For example, the Church of England actually had its origins during the War of the Roses (under Henry VII) and was influenced as much by Henry VIII's wish to consolidate ecclesiastical and political power (including the great riches of the monasteries) as by his wish for a male heir.

A little perplexing is Stack's inconsistency in stating things as fact or belief. At times, she qualifies a statement of doctrine, as in, "God is not revealed in religious ceremonies but in quiet prayer and with the help of gurus or teachers, say the Sikhs"; or "Catholics believe the bread and wine are mysteriously transformed into the body and blood of Christ" (emphases added). But at other times, she presents belief without qualification. Regarding Mary Baker Eddy: "In the sacred book she discovered a clear, scientific

method of Christian healing." And "Pentecostals can be healed by the Holy Spirit through their faith." For children who have difficulty distinguishing between belief and fact, such inconsistencies might be confusing.

These quibbles do not lessen my enthusiasm for *A World of Faith*. Stack has done an excellent and admirable job on a most difficult task. I hope young Latter-day Saints will read this book and realize how much they have in common with other believers.

A World of Faith is handsomely illustrated by Kathleen Peterson. Facing each religion's summary, a full-page, color illustration incorporates its important people, places, and symbols. Each drawing is framed by a border of religious emblems and icons peculiar to that faith. While Peterson includes the dress, skin color, and religious symbols that demonstrate the distinctiveness of the respective religious traditions, her use of similar facial and body characteristics in all the drawings conveys a sense that believers throughout the world are part of the same family. The illustrations' soft lines and rich but muted colors lend dignity to each visual story.

Parents of all faiths should welcome *A World of Faith*. Its major contribution is that it can open young hearts and minds to the rich diversity of religious expression and, I hope, bring more unity in the next generation among the world's believers. Parents who would like to read stories that will make the brief portraits in *A World of Faith* fuller and more vivid might consider *Out of the Ark: Stories from the World's Religions*, written by Anita Ganeri and illustrated by Jackie Morris (Harcourt Brace & Co.: New York, 1995). 

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INVISIBILITY

"To write we must disappear."
—Deena Metzger

Merton knew—
looking down into the monastery
at a procession of monks—
how those most holy
know how to disappear
just as Thomas in his gospel
looked for God
under a stone,
inside a piece of wood.

The ancient Mimbres knew
before they disappeared—
skilled potters,
they killed their pots
by breaking a hole
in the center
so the pot's spirit
could follow over land
to their burial grounds.

The dying know—
how the fontanelle
in the top of the skull
reopens
as if at birth
and the spirit escapes
through the crown,
what disappears more important
than what remains.

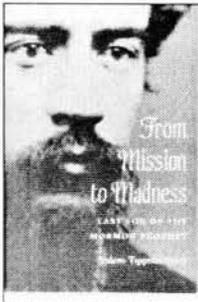
Sacred mountains know,
even those unheard, unnamed,
unsung
at the top of the sky.
One goes alone
both in the climbing
and the coming down,
traveling with one's eyes closed.

—ANITA TANNER

FROM MISSION TO MADNESS

by Valeen Tippetts Avery
University of Illinois Press, 1999
357 pages, \$19.95

Reviewed by Marvin Hill



I HAVE mixed feelings about this work. We are indebted to Val Avery for providing a biography of David Smith, a little-known son of the Prophet Joseph, who experienced a tragic but largely insignificant life. I am not sure young Smith's life warrants a full-scale biography. An article or two might have done just as well. The book has long periods that are downright dull, simply because nothing significant is happening. Telling over and over that David Smith went from this town to that doing missionary work is too tedious.

Avery shows good judgment in not trying to decide the cause of David's insanity. She is right that we do not have enough information. She doubts that by themselves his trips to Utah were sufficient to cause his dementia. But David did learn what many RLDS people now admit, that his father, the Mormon prophet, was a polygamist. David challenged his mother on this point when he returned to Nauvoo.

Not enough space is devoted here to David's ideas. I would have liked to know more about his arguments with Latter-day Saints in Utah. And sometimes Avery's handling of ideas is not adequate. She says, for example, (198) that because David Smith sided with the Godbeites against Brigham Young, he left himself with no defense for his own, but she does not elaborate. Later, she says David said, when faith must reside in infallible human beings, it alone is insufficient for salvation. This may be what she means in contending that David had no defense for his own church, but she needed to spell it out when she first generalizes.

She says (97) some Mormons in Utah thought David would have a leading role in their church. But of course, as Michael Quinn has shown, expectations of people like Brigham Young went much farther. Avery first says Brigham had said he would accept one of the prophet's sons as head of the Utah church if he would come and present himself to it. Later Avery corrects her initial understatement by saying Brigham

Young stated after David's second visit to Utah in 1972 that David had the right to preside over the Utah church if he would do his duty (168).

There are some mistakes. Avery has Illinois Governor Thomas Ford sending two agents to Nauvoo after the murder of Joseph Smith but ignores the fact that Ford himself was in the city when the murder occurred (17). She cites an article I wrote on the First Vision controversy as "Controversy over First Vision Accounts," which is not the title.

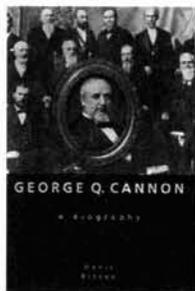
There is an unfortunate problem with sequence. She discusses the 1837 Kirtland Safety Society bank failing (5) and then goes back to tell of the 1832 tarring and feathering of the prophet. These mistakes could have been avoided if editors at the University of Illinois Press had been better informed in Mormon history and read the text more carefully. ☞

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GEORGE Q. CANNON: A BIOGRAPHY

by Davis Bitton
Deseret Book, 1999
357 pages, \$19.95

Reviewed by Fred K. Christensen



WHEN George Q. Cannon died, in 1901, the obituary in the San Francisco Examiner simply read: "George Q. Cannon, one of the most widely known men in America, banker, statesman, politician, missionary, railroad director, apostle and recognized brains of the Mormon Church, is no more." Stating only the facts, it left the interpretation of this controversial Mormon to the reader. Davis Bitton's biography does much the same thing.

It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of George Q. Cannon during the formative years of the LDS church. Davis Bitton has produced a well-researched and engaging biography of Cannon's accomplishments. Born in Liverpool, England, he joined the Church as a thirteen-year-old. At age sixteen, in compliance with the doctrine of gathering, his family emigrated to Nauvoo. After his arduous journey to Salt Lake Valley in 1847, he was sent on a "gold mission" to

California in 1849, and from there as a proselyting missionary to Hawaii. He mastered the Hawaiian language, and later produced a translation of the Book of Mormon in Hawaiian. Although largely unschooled, his native intellect was recognized, and he later became editor of the *Desert News* and editor/publisher of the *Juvenile Instructor*.

In 1860, at age thirty-three, he was ordained an apostle and called to serve as mission president in Great Britain, where he spent much of his time supervising the emigration of converts to Salt Lake Valley. Later, he was the territorial delegate to Washington, D.C., and senior advisor and counselor to four Church presidents. He was instrumental in many enterprises, including water management, power generation, railroads, and sugar production. All chronicled in Bitton's biography, although the reasons for of Cannon's personal financial successes are never explained.

Polygamy permeates the entire biography is plural marriage, as it did Cannon's life. The nation was obsessed with expunging polygamy, and the Mormons were intent on practicing it, and herein lay Cannon's torment. How could the judgements of Congress supercede the commandments of God, particularly in light of First Amendment protection? Cannon is presented by Bitton as a religious patriot willing to make unqualified sacrifices for principle, but he is also able to retreat from the barricades when the battle is lost.

Cannon's retreats, however, were gradual, pragmatic. For example, when it became obvious that the Utah economy could not to sustain the continuous addition of emigrants, he deemphasized the gathering as a fundamental doctrine.

The text of the biography offers little interpretation of this complicated and controversial Church leader during pivotal events in Mormon history. Bitton takes the safe ground by having the book read much like a journal, chronicling things through the eyes of the energetic optimist, George Q. Cannon. This approach is sympathetic, even apologetic. Nevertheless, Bitton includes and fairly represents the issues of conflict in which Cannon fiercely contended, but he seldom emphasizes them.

It is only in his insightful epilogue that Bitton overtly becomes author/interpreter as well as chronicler. Quite clearly Bitton intends the book to be about George Q. Cannon, not Davis Bitton. ☞

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KOSOVO

Parade day, booted feet stomp unrhythmically,
 fife & drum tears air as generals with dyed
 hair and foreign whores sip lemonade
 under the cedars and officials glow
 from the offices of fresh war ideas:
 the air smells of shattered trees,
 the woman in the next to the highest
 chair remains mostly beautiful although
 her eye is patched. We're jealous.
 "Where'd you get that marvelous
 eye-patch, Lily?" Now here come
 the dead to complain about
 conditions—vines fall from
 their sockets and from a distance
 resemble worms. The dead are selfish—
 they should go away or turn themselves
 into food. Change escapes them,
 nonchalant birds on wire,
 as peace avoids us, the living. When
 you enter war you abandon the crisis
 of language for shells, shots, charges
 over the laid-out mushing under your boots,
 eyes on the cannon-ridge, gibberish panting
 from your throat.

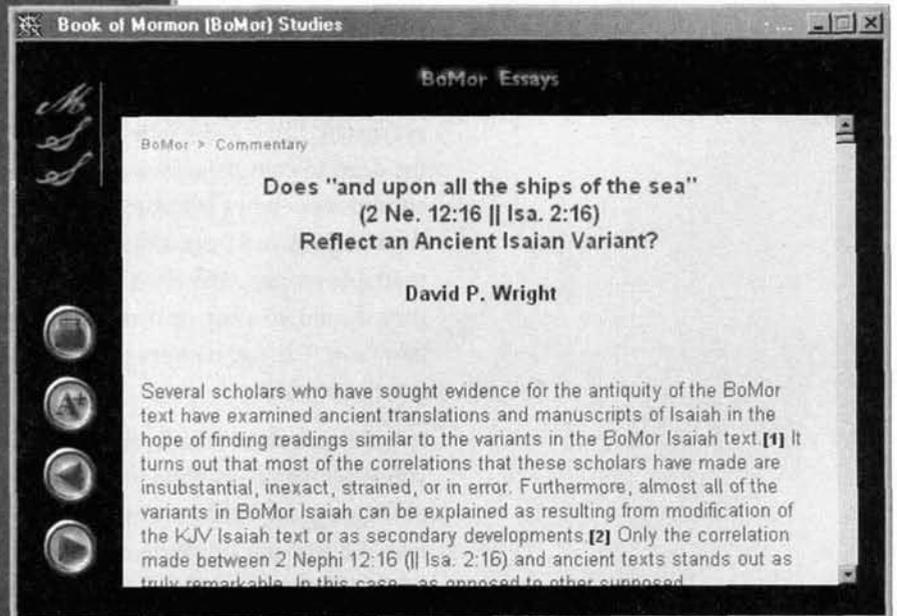
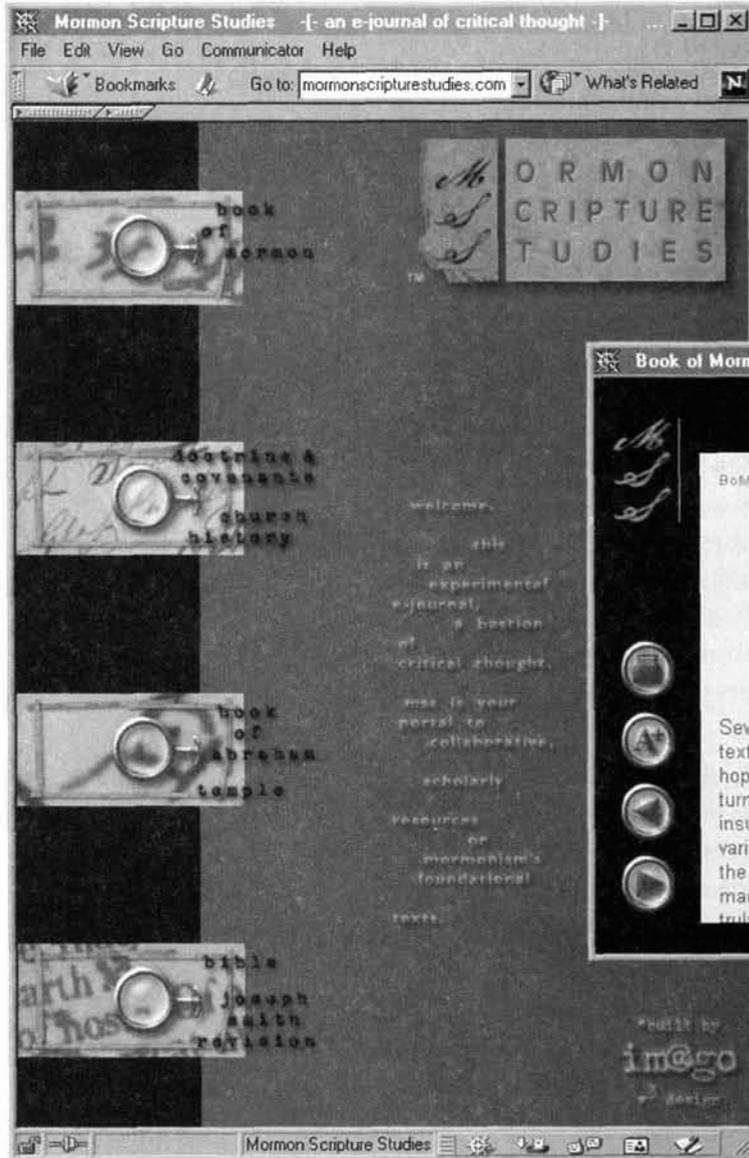
Midnight now, pine-knots sputter
 firebrands across pantaloons, up skirts
 and over bonnets of tiger-stripe camouflage.
 Bodacious P.I.G. raps "mo plump rump hump"
 and we dance without movement, snapping
 our fingers, neither deserters nor victors
 but discharged by shock. Temporarily mindless;
 nothing to benefit by heartfelt this
 or soul-struck that. The lovely aging Jewess
 who taught me French is missing, her flower-
 rich casements blown, her mulch cups burned.

—SEAN BRENDAN-BROWN

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← the fine print

System requirements: 800 x 600 (or higher) screen resolution, version 4.x (or higher) Netscape Communicator or 5.x (or higher) Microsoft Internet Explorer, 28.8 (or higher) Internet connection, and an open (or higher) mind. MSS is looking for volunteers. Want to help? Email hacker@mormonscripturestudies.com for info. MSS was built and is maintained by im@go.w3design (<http://www.w3imago.com>). im@go.w3design is Brent Lee Metcalfe.