

TEACHING HISTORY

ON BEING A MORMON HISTORIAN

by D. Michael Quinn*

Although Latter-day Saints have been trained as historians at universities outside Utah for half a century and have been publishing Mormon history during that entire period, only recently have prominent LDS general authorities publicly criticized the motivations and publications of Mormon historians. In part, this can be explained as a reaction to the increasingly "high profile" of scholarly and interpretative Mormon history during the past fifteen years.

At a time of phenomenal increases in the numbers of new conversions in the United States and throughout the world, there has been a growing crescendo of interest (particularly on the part of Latter-day Saints with generations of experience in the Church) in researching, writing, and learning about the history of Mormonism. Among the most significant examples of this trend are: the organization of the institutionally independent Mormon History Association in 1965 which has held annual conferences for the presentation of scholarly papers, and whose membership has grown from a few dozen to more than a thousand; the establishment of Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought in 1966 with its emphasis on interpretative Mormon history; the intensified historical focus of the periodical Brigham Young University Studies which began devoting whole issues to LDS Church history from 1969 onward; the gradual opening of LDS Church Archives to professional researchers by Church Historian Joseph Fielding Smith in the late 1960s, the acceleration of that trend by his successor as Church Historian Howard W. Hunter, followed by the unprecedented appointment by the First Presidency of a professional Mormon historian Leonard J. Arrington to the position of Church Historian in 1972; the launching of the exclusively historical Journal of Mormon History in 1974; the addition of Mormon history to the format of Sunstone Magazine in 1977; and the activity from 1972 to 1980 (under the official auspices of Church headquarters) of the professionally trained Church Historian, Assistant Historians, and a university trained staff who

UNIVERSITY OF UTAH LIBRARIES

published scholarly and interpretative books and articles about Mormon history. This explosion of professional, interpretative, and footnoted approaches to Mormon history not only reached out to the community of Mormon scholars and history buffs, but also has extended to the general membership of the Church through faculty members at Brigham Young University, Ricks College, and in the Church seminaries and institutes, as well as through scholarly historical publications by Deseret Book Company, the Church News, the Ensign and New Era magazines and their international counterparts.

Preoccupied with trying to assimilate hundreds of thousands of new converts annually into the LDS Church's present theological, social, and administrative identity, some Church administrators have viewed with understandable misgiving this burgeoning exploration of Mormonism's fluid past. The concern of these Church leaders has not been assuaged by the fact that contemporary with the proliferation of Mormon historians and histories there has been a shift in anti-Mormon propaganda from doctrinal diatribe to the polemical use of elements from the Mormon past to discredit the LDS Church today. In reaction to this confluence of developments, two members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles (Ezra Taft Benson and Boyd K. Packer) have specifically identified Latter-day Saint historians as the source of difficulty. Elder Benson gave two talks about this subject in 1976, one of which states:

This humanistic emphasis on history is not confined only to secular history; there have been and continue to be attempts made to bring this philosophy into our own Church history. Again the emphasis is to underplay revelation and God's intervention in significant events, and to inordinately humanize the prophets of God so that their human frailties become more evident than their spiritual qualities.¹

Five years later, Elder Packer expanded upon the point of view of Elder Benson in a detailed message delivered to religion teachers but directed to Latter-day Saint historians.² As part of his indictment against Latter-day Saints who write scholarly, interpretative history, Boyd K. Packer has told his 1981 audience:

Unfortunately, many of the things they tell one another are not uplifting, go far beyond the audience they may have intended, and destroy faith.

One who chooses to follow the tenets of his profession, regardless of how they may injure the church or destroy the faith of those not ready for "advanced history" is himself in spiritual jeopardy.³

In addition to these jaundiced ecclesiastical views of Mormon history writing by Latter-day Saints, Mormon historians have also recently received criticism from fellow academic Louis C. Midgley, political philosopher at Brigham Young University. Midgley concludes a 1981 presentation on Mormon historians with the following statement:

It is depressing to see some historians now struggling to get on the stage to act out the role of the mature, honest historian committed to something called "objective history," and, at the same time, the role of the faithful Saint. The discordance between those roles has produced more than a little bad faith (that is, self-deception) and even, perhaps, some blatant hypocrisy; it has also produced some pretentious[,] bad history.⁴

As one of those historians who have struggled to get on the stage Midgley describes, I would like to explore things that he and others have questioned: the motivations, rationale, intentions, and conduct of Latter-day Saints who profess to write objective Mormon history.

I would not claim to speak for anyone aside from the one Mormon historian I know best. His biography is of no interest to anyone but himself, but elements of his background are important to understand his activity as a Mormon historian, his motives, and his reactions to the criticisms by his ecclesiastical superiors. To begin with, he was born with a split-identity: seventh generation Latter-day Saint on his mother's side, but of Roman Catholic, Mexican origin on his father's side. Since his earliest childhood, however, self-identity was not the most important emphasis of his life, but rather an intense personal relationship with God. As long as he could remember, he knew God as personage and immediate influence, and on occasion he had heard His voice. Long before he had ever heard

much about the Holy Ghost, this young man had what seemed to be constant experience with a presence from God in comfort and revelation "like a fire burning" within him, and as an adolescent he was surprised to discover in scripture descriptions of others' experiences with the Holy Ghost that he had thought were God's special gifts to him alone. Although he had always known God as Father, Christ as Savior, and the Holy Ghost as Comforter and Revelator, at the age of eleven the young man realized that he had been a member of the LDS Church for three years without specifically asking God about its validity. Therefore, he sought and received knowledge through the Spirit that the Book of Mormon was the word of God, that the Church was true and necessary, and that its president was indeed a prophet of God.

Although his relationship with God and the Spirit was the primary dimension and sufficient epistemology of his life, the young man felt impressed that it was necessary to explore the temporal manifestations of God's dealings with His people and prophets, as well as their conduct. By age fifteen he had read all the Standard Works (except for half of the Old Testament), and at seventeen he was reading the seven volume History of the Church and Journal of Discourses. To the occasional discomfort of his LDS Seminary teachers, he subjected any religious proposition to rigid analysis, particularly with reference to the complete scriptural context. By age eighteen, he had read and made his own card index of the Old Testament and other Standard Works, had written independent studies of misconduct in Roman Catholic popes from Marcellinus to Leo XII and of unfaithfulness in LDS general authorities from Sidney Rigdon to Richard R. Lyman, had compared all proper names in the Book of Mormon with the Bible, and had conducted a line-by-line comparison of the 1830 and later editions of the Book of Mormon. "I will not accept any criticism of the Church on face value," this eighteen-year-old wrote in his personal journal, "but, instead, search and study (and if need be, pray) to find the truth."⁵ During these adolescent years, the young man not only prayed, but often went on food and water fasts of more than three days to draw close to the comfort, strength, and guidance of the Spirit

as he confronted the difficulties of maturation at the same time he submerged himself in the intricacies of scriptural study and the diatribes of anti-Mormon literature.

A few months before his nineteenth birthday, the young man wrote:

At present my evaluation of what I am going to have to do to be spiritually educated in the Gospel is to become extremely well acquainted with the Standard Works, Journal of Discourses, Times and Seasons, History of the Church, and the discourses and writings of the Prophets. It is a monumental task at this alone, which requires more than a cursory reading or even a single, very detailed reading of these materials. I can now see clearly, for really the first time, that such a task will take a lifetime to encounter, and longer to master...⁶

Over the next decade, a series of unforeseen circumstances (which he now regards as divine intervention) caused him to abandon his life's ambition to become a medical physician, and in turn abandon his second-best decision to complete a doctorate in literature. Instead, after much prayer and soul-searching, he decided to turn his intense avocation of scriptural and Church history research into a life's work. He began graduate study in history, even though he had enrolled in only a couple of undergraduate history courses and had never taken a course in LDS Church history.

Since that time, this junior historian has played a minor role in the development of Mormon history writing since Leonard J. Arrington was appointed Church Historian in 1972. This young historian has spent a decade probing thousands of manuscript diaries and records of Church history that he never dreamed he would see. He has published a score of articles about LDS Church history, several of which have been described as "controversial" by some people. He has always researched and written about Church history with a continual prayer for the Lord to guide him in knowing what to do and how to express things in such a way that they might be beneficial to the understanding of the Latter-day Saints.

He would have been satisfied to have remained indefinitely on Leonard Arrington's staff, but he quit his position there to begin Ph.D. study at Yale University. He did this only because he felt impressed that it was the Lord's will for him to do so. Although he had uprooted his family shortly after purchasing their first home in order to go to Yale and although he had borrowed thousands of dollars in order to study there, he found himself ready to abandon his Ph.D. in the middle of writing his dissertation because he worried that it involved too many controversies concerning the LDS Church and its general authorities. He asked the Lord to tell him if he should stop writing something as controversial as his study of the pre-1933 general authorities had turned out to be, and he told the Lord that he would stop and even destroy his research if that was the Lord's will. He was in earnest and desired to listen to the Lord's will, not his own nor any one else's. This faltering young historian obtained a spiritual witness that it was right to complete his dissertation, despite the so-called "controversies" and "sensitive" areas of Church history with which it dealt, and he then asked for the courage and strength to face the criticisms and consequences that might result from those who were hostile to the kinds of things he was researching and writing.

It is from this background that the present historian approaches recent criticisms concerning the writing of Mormon history by Latter-day Saints. We will proceed from smaller issues to more important issues concerning Sacred History, Secular History, Pluralistic History, Monistic History, and Accommodation History.

Elder Benson has objected to Mormon historians' use of scholarly "expressions and terminology" in describing developments or characteristics of Mormon history. Among the terms he says "offend the Brethren and Church members" are "alleged," "experimental systems," "communal life," "communitarianism," and "Christian primitivism."⁷ Elder Benson prefers that Mormon historians use traditional Mormon

terms and phrases even when Latter-day Saint historians are writing for scholarly, non-Mormon publications.

One approach in responding to this criticism is to observe that many of the terms and phrases we Mormons use have highly specialized meanings unrecognizable to anyone but another Mormon. This either requires cumbersome explanations of what is essentially Mormon jargon or the substitution of words and phrases familiar to the rest of the English-speaking world. Historians usually adopt some combination of those two alternatives, just as do LDS missionaries who encounter blank stares as they casually use familiar Mormon terms in explaining the Church and Gospel to non-Mormons. If there is going to be any communication between Mormons and non-Mormons about the characteristics of the Church, then Mormons often have to use terms familiar to non-Mormons rather than traditional Mormon usages. There is no justification for this necessity being regarded as subversive when Mormon scholars do it and admirable when Mormon missionaries do it, merely because the former may employ the scholarly terms of the general language whereas the latter employ conversational terms of the general language.

Several of Elder Benson's examples of offensive scholarly expressions are also virtually the same as phrases in earlier, official Church publications. "Christian Primitivism" is simply another form of the phrase "the Primitive Church" which appears in Joseph Smith's Sixth Article of Faith. In 1930, the First Presidency approved, copyrighted and published A Comprehensive History of the Church, which described the United Orders of Utah as having a "communistic character" and the first high school LDS seminary as being "in the nature of an experiment."⁸ It will be an awkward situation, indeed, if historians are expected to shun not only secular terminology in Mormon history, but also terms which had approval of the First Presidency in former times.

Related to the above question of terminology is Boyd K. Packer's advice to historians not to publish or refer to sensitive or controversial items merely because they have already been published before. The criticism of "communistic-communal-communitarian" as applied to the Church's United Order of Enoch despite similar usage in previous official publications is a minor issue compared to the one Elder Packer raises. General authorities in recent years have criticized Mormon historians for republishing in part or whole out-of-print Church publications such as the 1830 Book of Mormon, the Journal of Discourses (edited and published for thirty-two years under the auspices of the First Presidency), and statements taken from former Church magazines published for the children, youth, and general membership of the Church.⁹ It is an odd situation when present general authorities criticize historians for re-printing what previous general authorities regarded not only as faith-promoting but as appropriate for Mormon youth and the newest converts.

Elder Packer specifically warns against historians using "the unworthy, the unsavory, or the sensational" from the Mormon past, merely because it has been previously published somewhere else, and he berates historians for their "exaggerated loyalty to the theory that everything must be told."¹⁰ But this raises the question of personal honesty and professional integrity. If a historian writes about any subject unrelated to religion, and he purposely fails to make reference to pertinent information of which he has knowledge, he is justifiably liable to be criticized for dishonesty.

What is true outside the topic of religion is equally true in writing about religious history. That is the reason First Presidency Counselor J. Reuben Clark Jr. criticized Church historian B.H. Roberts and the seven-volume History of the Church. President Clark told a meeting of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in April 1943:

The Documentary History of the Church unfortunately as printed does not

contain all of the documentary history as it was written. Brother Roberts made some changes in it. We do not know always what the changes were or what they are, so that, as an absolute historical source, the printed Documentary History is not one that we can invariably rely upon....Brother Roberts' work is the work of an advocate and not of a judge, and you cannot always rely on what Brother Roberts says. Frequently he started out apparently to establish a certain thesis and he took his facts to support his thesis, and if some facts got in the way it was too bad, and they were omitted.¹¹

It does disservice to the cause of the Church for Latter-day Saint historians to render themselves and the Church itself subject to justified criticism because they have ignored readily available and previously published materials in the writing of Mormon history. If such material is sensitive, controversial, unworthy, unsavory, or sensational, then it is a matter of the author's judgment of its importance whether the item should be quoted, paraphrased, or only referred to in a footnote.

In connection with Elder Packer's counsel to avoid reference to previously published sensitivities, Elder Benson warns historians against environmental explanations of the background of revelations and developments in LDS history. Elder Benson gives as examples the discussion by historians of the American temperance movement in the 1830s as part of the circumstances out of which Joseph Smith obtained the revelation on the Word of Wisdom, and he referred to historians who explained the revelation on the three degrees of glory in terms of contemporary questions by American philosophers about the afterlife.¹²

Like the questions of previously published items, a historian writing about a non-religious subject would be considered inept at best and dishonest at worst if he described someone's innovation or contribution without discussing the significance of previously existing, similar contributions and ideas of which the historical person

was undoubtedly aware. If a Latter-day Saint historian discusses the revelation to Joseph Smith about abstinence from tobacco, strong drinks, and hot drinks, and then fails to note that during the 1830s religious reformers and social reformers were involved nationally in urging abstinence from these identical things, any reader has cause to criticize the historian's accuracy, to question his motives, and to doubt any affirmation the historian might give to the revelation's truth.

It is obvious that Elder Benson opposes those who might argue that Joseph Smith simply invented something he called a revelation that actually was a product of his own mind and of the contemporary culture and environment. Not only as a believing Latter-day Saint but also as a historian, I also oppose those who make such conclusions. One can acknowledge the influence of environment and contemporary circumstance, and still affirm the actuality of divine revelations like the Word of Wisdom that seem to relate directly to the contemporary environment. In Mormon doctrine, revelations come because of specific questions that individuals or prophets ask God, and those questions arise in the minds of prophets because of conditions they observe or experience.

Without environmental influences or surrounding circumstances of significance to the prophet, there would be no revelations from God to the prophets. And the changing circumstances and environment of the world are the very reasons Latter-day Saints affirm that there must be living prophets on the earth to respond with the word of the Lord to the new circumstances. If we write Mormon history as though its revelations and developments occurred without any reference to surrounding circumstances, we undermine the claims for the Restoration of living prophets. This is one of many areas in Mormon history writing where an alleged defense is actually a disservice to the Saints.

In a more precise discussion of Elder Benson's concern about environmental explanations of Joseph Smith's revelations, Boyd K. Packer warns Mormon historians: "There is no such thing as an accurate, objective history of the Church without

consideration of the spiritual powers that attend this work...without consideration of spiritual guidance, of discernment, and of revelation. That is not scholarship."¹³ I agree with him fully, but (particularly with reference to Latter-day Saint historians) Elder Packer has created an enemy that does not exist. It is impossible for even an atheist to write about Joseph Smith or Spencer W. Kimball without acknowledging that they ~~claim~~ claim to be prophets of God, that they have made pronouncements in the name of God, and that they have proclaimed specific documents to be divine instructions given by revelation from God. True, a writer can express a tone of ridicule or affirmation, hostility or sympathy, detachment or advocacy when writing about such prophetic claims, but no reputable historian (least of all a believing Latter-day Saint) excludes consideration of the spiritual dimension in writing about men like Joseph Smith. Influenced by Freud or other theorists, historians may give alternative explanations for Joseph Smith and other prophets, but they must also acknowledge the prophetic claims of these men.

Professor Louis Midgley's central criticism of Mormon historians is that their writings about Joseph Smith do not positively affirm to the world their personal testimonies that he was God's prophet, and Ezra Taft Benson seems to indicate this same expectation when he says, "We would hope that if you feel you must write for the scholarly journals, you always defend the faith."¹⁴ But why is it necessary for Latter-day Saint historians to do more than the writers of Sacred History did when they simply stated that Moses and the other prophets said, "Hear ye the word of the Lord?" Boyd K. Packer himself once counseled an LDS Seminary teacher to use the words "The Latter-day Saints believe" and "they claim" in his Ph.D. dissertation, rather than portraying the spiritual experiences as facts.¹⁵ Most Latter-day Saint historians simply report that Joseph Smith said he saw God and Jesus Christ, and that he announced numerous communications as direct revelations from God. Occasionally, a Mormon historian writing to a general audience (primarily non-Mormon) may also

suggest alternative explanations for the prophetic claims, without stating the historian's own beliefs about what is inevitably a question of personal faith.

Skeptics are often unmoved by the most ardent personal testimonies, and earnest inquirers have occasionally been converted to the Church after learning about it from anti-Mormon publications. It is inconceivable to me that a Latter-day Saint with a personal testimony would begin to lose that testimony simply because he or she read a publication by a Mormon historian who reported the revelations of Joseph Smith without including the historian's personal testimony of the truth of those revelations. That kind of scholarly detachment does not threaten testimony and is not subversive to the Church.

Central to the above criticisms by Elders Benson and Packer and by Professor Louis Midgley is their assertion that Mormon historians have adopted the assumptions of secular scholarship and have abandoned the verities of the Spirit in their presentation of Mormon history. Ezra Taft Benson speaks "of this trend, which seems to be an effort to reinterpret the history of the Church so that it is more rationally appealing to the world," Boyd K. Packer warns against the tendency for Mormon academics, and historians in particular, "to begin to judge the Church, its doctrines, organization, and leadership, present and past, by the principles of their own profession," and Professor Louis Midgley writes that "it is now possible to find historians functioning within the Church defending the proposition that the Restored Gospel must be studied and evaluated entirely with what they choose to call the 'naturalistic assumptions' of certain wholly secularized professional historians."¹⁶ In other words, they accuse Mormon historians of writing to accommodate non-Mormon assumptions. This involves the distinction between monistic history and pluralistic history.

As used here, monistic history refers to the willingness of a historian to consider only one explanation for historical developments, and pluralistic history refers to the willingness of a historian to consider more than one explanation.

The former is closed and the latter is open. Elders Benson and Packer and Professor Midgley demand that interpreters of Mormon history be "open" to the spiritual dimension of revelation and prophetic identity in Mormon history, rather than simply dismissing out of hand the possibility of divine revelation and prophetic calling. But in reality, they are not asking for a pluralist interpretation of Mormonism. They are asking that any interpreter simply change the monistic category of Joseph Smith as fraud, or religious genius, or personality disorder, for the equally monistic interpretation that Joseph Smith was a divine prophet. If asked to give a categorical definition of Joseph Smith, I (and virtually every other Letter-day Saint historian) would say that he was a divinely-called prophet of God, but in all honesty we must also acknowledge that other reasonable, honest, and conscientious interpretations are also possible.

Moreover, the requirement for a monistic interpretation of Mormon history does not stop with categories of definition, but also extends into process. For example, Boyd K. Packer demands that Mormon historians demonstrate and affirm that "the hand of the Lord [has been] in every hour and every moment of the Church from its beginning till now."¹⁷ This would require a single, monistic explanation for every event in Mormon history, but there are compelling reasons why Mormons ought to be willing to consider alternative explanations within Mormon history.

Personally, I am not willing to simply say that "the hand of the Lord" is a sufficient explanation for all the events and developments in the Mormon past, and there is profound Scriptural precedent for being willing to consider pluralistic explanations for even the most crucial events in Mormon history. One of the most important developments in the Sacred History of the Book of Mormon was the destruction of the Nephite people, yet the prophet-writers of that history suggested several different causes: adultery,¹⁸ fornication,¹⁹ the Gadianton Band of Robbers,²⁰ secret combinations in general,²¹ unrighteous lawyers and judges,²² or pride.²³ Although some of these explanations are interrelated, others of these historical

interpretations in Book of Mormon Sacred History are distinct.

If we were to adopt secular terms to describe these explanations by prophet-historians, we could substitute moral disintegration, social disorganization, political discontinuity, and socio-economic disparity. Which of the various historical explanations within the Book of Mormon is the "true" or "real" reason for the decline of the Nephite civilization? I don't know, and apparently the historian-prophets who wrote the record didn't know, either. But they felt an obligation to examine the evidence, reflect upon it, and offer the best explanation or interpretations they could.

In like manner, Mormon historians may share the convictions of the Nephite prophets and Boyd K. Packer that the "hand of the Lord" operates throughout history and that "His purposes fail not," but they also have an obligation to examine the evidence, reflect upon it, and offer the best interpretations they can for what has occurred in Mormon history. The human record is characterized by complexity, both in the Book of Mormon peoples and in Latter-day Saints. There is nothing subversive about interpreting these developments from different points of view, even perspectives of understanding in secular disciplines.

A more serious problem of Mormon history is involved in the implications of Boyd K. Packer's demand that historians demonstrate that "the hand of the Lord [has been] in every hour and every moment of the church from its beginning till now." Every Mormon historian agrees with Ezra Taft Benson that "we must never forget that ours is a prophetic history,"²⁴ but there are serious problems in the assertion or implication that this prophetic history of Mormonism requires "the hand of the Lord" in every decision, statement, and action of the prophets. This is a far larger question than the historical exploration of environmental backgrounds to decisions and revelations or the application of secular understanding to explain specific events in religious history. Central to the apparent demands of Elders Benson and Packer is the view that the official acts and pronouncements of the prophets

are always the express will of God. This is the Mormon equivalent of the Roman Catholic doctrine of papal infallibility.

The Catholic dogma of infallibility is not that the pope is incapable of human weaknesses, but that his statements and decisions are infallible in all matters of faith and morals. It was not until 1870 that Roman Catholicism officially adopted the infallibility doctrine, and the Mormon Church would have to dispense with some of its fundamental doctrines in order to adopt a position of prophetic infallibility. The LDS doctrine of free agency is central to the entire Mormon view of existence in time and eternity, and that doctrine is incompatible with the view that a Latter-day Saint is free to make mistakes in what he says and does until he becomes a prophet. If a prophet is incapable to personal opinion, human limitation, and error in his decisions and statements, then that prophet has no free agency as a prophet and no personal responsibility. If an LDS prophet is incapable of making mistakes in his prophetic calling, then he is the only Latter-day Saint who is excused from "rendering an accounting of his stewardship unto God," as required in the firm Mormon doctrine of each individual's absolute responsibility for his own actions and for the callings given to the individual by God on earth.

The Apostle Paul wrote authoritatively to the Saints, but noted that "I speak this by permission, and not of commandment." Although the Book of Mormon was written, preserved, and translated by prophets of God, the title page declares, "And now, if there are faults they are the mistakes of men." A Book of Mormon prophet expressed his "opinion" about doctrines only partially revealed to him. Joseph Smith specifically denied that everything a prophet said was the word of the Lord, and affirmed, "A prophet was a prophet only when he was acting as such." When J. Reuben Clark announced a decision of the First Presidency to a general conference in 1940, President Clark observed, "We are not infallible in our judgment, and we err, but our constant prayer is that the Lord will guide us in our decisions, and we are trying so to live that our

minds will be open to His inspiration." To the Church Seminary and Institute teachers in 1954, President Clark also declared that "even the President of the Church has not always spoken under the direction of the Holy Ghost."²⁵

Mormon historians would be false to their understanding of LDS doctrine, the Sacred History of the Scriptures, the realities of human conduct, and the documentary evidence of Mormonism if they sought to defend the proposition that LDS prophets were infallible in their decisions and statements. Moreover, it would be hardly less false to allow readers of Mormon history to draw the conclusion that LDS prophets were infallible in their statements and decisions, because the Mormon historian presented Church history as though every decision and statement came as the result of direct revelation to the prophet. Therefore, the Mormon historian has both a religious and professional obligation not to conceal the ambivalence, debate, give-and-take, uncertainty, and simple pragmatism that often attend decisions of the prophet and First Presidency, and not to conceal the limitations, errors, and negative consequences of some significant statements of the prophet and First Presidency. In like manner, however, the Mormon historian would be equally false if he failed to report the inspiration, visions, revelations, and solemn testimonies that have also attended prophetic decisions and statements throughout Mormon history.

A few critics have been more specific in their criticism of Mormon historians who portray the human frailties of LDS leaders. Ezra Taft Benson observes that Mormon historians tend "to inordinately humanize the prophets of God so that their human frailties become more evident than their spiritual qualities," and Boyd K. Packer has recently made the following comments about a Mormon historian's talk:

What that historian did with the reputation of the President of the Church was not worth doing. He seemed determined to convince everyone that the prophet was a man. We knew that already. All of the prophets and all of the apostles have been men. It would have been much more worthwhile for him to have

convinced us that the man was a prophet; a fact quite as true as the fact that he was a man.

He has taken something away from the memory of a prophet. He has destroyed faith. ²⁶

This is, in part, related to the infallibility question. Elder Packer criticizes historians for eliminating the spiritual dimension from their studies of prophets, and he accuses such historians of distortion for failing to deal with such a fundamental characteristic. Yet Elders Benson and Packer also demand that historians omit any reference to human frailty (aside from physical problems, I suppose) in studies of LDS leaders, and emphasize only the spiritual dimension. Elder Packer quite rightly observes that omitting the spiritual, revelatory dimension from the life of a Church leader would also deny the existence of the spiritual and revelatory, but it is equally true that omitting reference to human weaknesses, faults, and limitations from the life of a prophet is also a virtual denial of the existence of human weaknesses and fallibility in the prophet. Must Church history writing portray LDS leaders as infallible, both as leaders and as men? This is not the Sacred History we know.

Sacred History (which is contained in the Bible, Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price) is an absolute refutation of the kind of history Elders Benson and Packer seem to be advocating. Sacred History presents the prophets and apostles as the most human of men who have been called by God to prophetic responsibility. Sacred History portrays the spiritual dimensions and achievements of God's leaders as facts, but Sacred History also matter-of-factly demonstrates the weaknesses of God's leaders. Examples are the scriptural accounts of Abraham's abandonment of his wife Hagar and son Ishmael, Noah's drunkenness, Lot's incest, Moses' arrogance, Jonah's vacillation, Peter's impetuosity and cowardice, Peter and Paul's mutual criticism, Lehi's doubt, Alma the Elder's former whoredoms, Alma the

Younger's former apostasy, and the progression of Corianton from adulterous missionary, through repentance, to one of the three presiding high priests of the Church among the Nephites. Moreover, the Doctrine and Covenants contains frequent condemnations of Joseph Smith by the Lord. Sacred History affirms the reality of divine revelation and inspiration, but also matter-of-factly demonstrates that God's leaders often disagree and do not always follow His revelations consistently. An example is Peter's continued shunning of Gentiles despite his revelation at Joppa, for which Paul publicly condemned him.

According to the standards of history apparently required by Ezra Taft Benson and Boyd K. Packer, such a writer of Scriptural Sacred History is suspect at best and faith-destroying at worst. To use Elder Packer's words, "instead of going up to where [God's leaders] were, he devised a way of collecting mistakes and weaknesses and limitations to compare with his own. In that sense he has attempted to bring a historical figure down to his level and in that way feel close to him and perhaps to justify his own weaknesses."²⁷ Sacred History presents God's leaders as understandable human beings with whom the reader can identify because of their weaknesses at the same time he reveres the prophetic mantle. Sacred History enriches the lives of readers by encouraging them to identify and empathize with fallible, human prophets, rather than discouraging them by presenting the prophets as otherworldly personages for whom the reader can feel only awe and adoration. A young contemporary of Joseph Smith expressed the importance of identifying with fallible prophets in this way: "I see Joseph Smith the Prophet do things which I did not approve of; and yet...I thanked God that he would put upon a man who had these imperfections the power and authority which he placed upon him...for I knew I myself had weaknesses and I thought there was a chance for me." This young man, Lorenzo Snow, eventually became an apostle and president of the LDS Church.²⁸ The recent biography of Spencer W. Kimball is virtually Sacred History in its presentation of a loveably human prophet of God, whereas the Mormon

history of benignly angelic Church leaders apparently advocated by Elders Benson and Packer would border on idolatry.

Ezra Taft Benson, Boyd K. Packer, and Professor Widgley accuse Mormon historians of writing Church history to accommodate non-Mormon scholarship, but Elder Packer, in particular, advocates another type of Accommodation History. He assaults the philosophy and conduct of Mormon historians because their objective Church history "may unwittingly be giving 'equal time' to the adversary," and because such history "may be read by those not mature enough for 'advanced history' and a testimony in seedling stage may be crushed."²⁹ In regard to this latter point, he takes historians to task for being "so willing to ignore" the necessity for teaching fundamentals before presenting advanced information, and Elder Packer observes that "teaching some things that are true prematurely or at the wrong time, can invite sorrow and heartbreak instead of the joy intended to accompany learning."³⁰

But Boyd K. Packer is not advocating the gradual exposure of the Saints to historical truth. He excludes that possibility by warning historians against publishing objective history even in professional journals that "go far beyond the audience that they have intended, and destroy faith," and he assails Mormon historians who "want to tell everything whether it is worthy or faith promoting or not."³¹ Elder Packer is not advocating Paul's dictum of milk before meat,³² but he demands that Mormon historians provide only a Church history diet of milk to Latter-day Saints of whatever experience. No historian has the kind of insensitivity for prerequisites that Elder Packer accuses us of, and I am personally very sensitive to the need to reassure and cushion the Saints due to the fact that half my own family are Catholics, several are recent converts, and others are inactive members of long standing. But a diet of milk alone will stunt the growth of, if not kill, any child.

Aside from urging the kind of Church history that would not surprise or offend even the newest convert, Boyd K. Packer urges that historians write Church history from a siege mentality to deny any information that enemies of the Church could

possibly use to criticize the Church. By this standard, most of the Old Testament, the Gospel of John, many of Paul's epistles, and the Book of Revelation would never be approved for inclusion in the Bible. Moreover, at the very time the Romans were persecuting and martyring the early Christians (to an extent never equalled in Mormonism), the New Testament writers were including candid discussions of Peter's foibles, disagreements between the apostles, and apostolic condemnations of whole communities of Christians. In mid-nineteenth century, when the Mormons were generally hated and persecuted and were routinely attacked in the public press, President Brigham Young and other LDS leaders published sermons which spoke quite openly about Joseph Smith's weaknesses at the same time they testified of his prophetic calling. Why does the well-established and generally respected Mormon Church today need a protective, defensive, paranoid approach to its history that the actually embattled earlier Saints did not employ?

Ezra Taft Benson and Boyd K. Packer want Church history to be as elementary as possible and as defensive as possible. This is Accommodation History for consumption by the weakest of the conceivably weak Saints, for the vilest of the conceivably vile anti-Mormons, and for the most impressionable of the world's sycophants. In contrast, the Sacred History of the Scriptures is presented for the instruction and enlightenment of the Saints, with the affirmation that the weaker Saints can become strong by knowing the full truth and by seeking the power of the Spirit, that the enemies of God's truth will distort things to their own destruction anyway, and that the praise of the world is seductive. On the latter point, First Presidency Counselor J. Reuben Clark told priesthood leaders in the 1950s that there "is a startling parallel" between second century Christianity and second century Mormonism, and that in the early Church the Saints "were extremely anxious for two things: First, to be well thought of by the pagans. Their ears itched for praise. Do any of you brethren know anything about such a tendency as

that?"³³ Sacred History is not timid, defensive, or public-relations oriented, and Mormon historians are better to use it as their guide rather than the Accommodation History that has often characterized twentieth century Mormonism and that some general authorities apparently want to perpetuate indefinitely.

The Accommodation History advocated by Elders Benson and Packer and actually practiced by some LDS writers is intended to protect the Saints, but actually disillusioned them and makes them vulnerable. Ezra Taft Benson reports with obvious irritation the fact that LDS Seminary and Institute teachers ask him, "When and where can we begin to tell them our real story?" and Elder Benson observes, "Inferred in that question is the accusation that the Church has not been telling the truth."³⁴ The tragic reality is that there have been occasions when Church leaders, teachers, and writers have not told the truth they knew about difficulties of the Mormon past, but have offered to the Saints instead a mixture of platitudes, half-truths, omissions, and plausible denials. Elder Packer and others would justify this because "we are at war with the adversary" and must also protect any Latter-day Saint whose "testimony [is] in seedling stage."³⁵ But such a public-relations defense of the Church is actually a Maginot Line of sandy fortifications which "the enemy" can easily breach and which has been built up by digging lethal pits into which the Saints will stumble. A so-called "faith-promoting" Church history which conceals controversies and difficulties of the Mormon past actually undermines the faith of Latter-day Saints who eventually learn about the problems from other sources.

One of the most painful demonstrations of that fact has been the continued spread of unauthorized polygamy among the Latter-day Saints during the last seventy-five years, despite the concerted efforts to Church leaders to stop it. Essential to this Church campaign is the official historical argument that there were no plural marriages authorized by the Church or First Presidency after the 1890 Manifesto, and that whatever plural marriages occurred between 1890 and the so-called "Second Manifesto"

of April 1904 were the sole responsibility of two renegade apostles, John W. Taylor and Matthias F. Cowley.³⁶ A lifelong opponent of post-1890 polygamy, J. Reuben Clark spearheaded the administrative suppression of the polygamist Fundamentalists from the time he entered the First Presidency in 1933, but he ruefully noted in 1945, "that one of the reasons why the so-called 'Fundamentalists' had made such inroads among our young people was because we had failed to teach them the truth."³⁷ The truth was that more than 250 plural marriages occurred from 1890 to 1904 in Mexico, Canada, and the United States by authorization of the First Presidency, and by action or assent of all but one or two members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. The official denial of that fact in LDS Church statements and histories actually has given credibility to the Fundamentalists in their promotion of new plural marriages after 1904 in defiance of First Presidency authority.³⁸ Despite his recognition of the problem, President Clark himself was trapped within an administrative policy of historical defensiveness which he did not create and which he decided not to resist. The continued battle of Church authorities against present day polygamy might have been more successful had they encouraged a full disclosure of authorized post-Manifesto polygamy that would enable a contrast to be made with the unauthorized polygamy that has continued to the present. This would certainly respond to J. Reuben Clark's assessment of the situation thirty-six years ago, and would also reflect Church President John Taylor's philosophy:

Some people will say "Oh, don't talk about it." I think a full, free talk is frequently of great use; we want nothing secret nor underhanded, and for one I want no association with things that cannot be talked about and will not bear investigation.³⁹

As a Mormon historian, I desire to use the skills of scholarship in research and documentation, to emulate the examples of Sacred History in approach and philosophy and to help the Saints understand the vitality of Mormonism from a position of

knowledgeable strength. In warning Mormon historians against objective history and against telling too much truth about the Mormon past, Boyd K. Packer says, "Do not spread disease germs!"⁴⁰ To adopt the symbolism of Elder Packer, I suggest that it is apostates and anti-Mormons who seek to infect the Saints with disease germs of doubt, disloyalty, disaffection, and rebellion. These typhoid Marys of spiritual contagion obtain the materials of their assaults primarily from the readily available documents and publications created by former LDS leaders and members themselves. Historians have not created the problem areas of the Mormon past; they are trying to respond to them. Believing Mormon historians like myself seek to write candid Church history in a context of perspective in order to inoculate the Saints against the historical disease germs that apostates and anti-Mormons may thrust upon them. The criticism we have received in our efforts would be similar to leaders of eighteenth century towns trying to combat smallpox contagion by locking up Dr. Edward Jenner who tried to inoculate the people, and killing the cows he wanted to use for his vaccine.

The central argument of the enemies of the LDS Church is historical, and if we seek to build the Kingdom of God by ignoring or denying the problem areas of our past, we are leaving the Saints unprotected. As one who has received death threats from anti-Mormons because they perceive me as an enemy historian, it is discouraging to be regarded as subversive by men I sustain as prophets, seers, and revelators. Dedicated and believing Mormon historians are seeking to build the Kingdom of God and to strengthen the Saints by "speaking the truth in love," as Paul counseled.⁴¹ For this Mormon historian, the words of a familiar Church hymn express his hope:

O Thou Rock of our Salvation, Jesus, Savior of the world,
 In our poor and lowly station We thy banner have unfurled.
 Gather round the standard bearer; Gather round in strength of youth.
 Every day the prospect's fairer While we're battling for the truth.

Associate Professor of History, Brigham Young University.

1. Ezra Taft Benson, "God's Hand in Our Nation's History," in 1976 Devotional Speeches of the Year (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1977), 310, 313.
2. Boyd K. Packer, "The Mantle is Far, Far Greater Than the Intellect," presented on 22 August 1981 to Seminary, Institute, and Brigham Young University religion instructors, and published in Brigham Young University Studies 21 (Summer 1981): 259-78. This talk has been published as a pamphlet by the Church Educational System and is scheduled for full publication in the Church's Ensign magazine in February 1982.
3. Ibid., 265, 266.
4. Louis C. Midgley, "A Critique of Mormon Historians: The Question of Faith and History," mimeographed draft, dated 30 September 1981, 54-55.
5. Dennis Michael Quinn Journal, 2 August 1962.
6. Ibid., 21 November 1962.
7. Ezra Taft Benson, The Gospel Teacher and His Message (Salt Lake City: The Church Educational System, 1976), 11-12. "Communitarianism" also appears in the transcript copy of the talk, p. 8, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah. Specifically, Elder Benson objected to classifying Joseph Smith "among so-called 'primitivists,'" but the studies to which he referred used the terms "Christian Primitivists" and "Christian Primitivism."
8. B.H. Roberts, A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: "Published by the Church," 1930), 5:487, 6:519.
9. A written example is Joseph Fielding Smith to the author, 9 August 1962, in which he enclosed a letter decrying Wilford Wood's reprinting of the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon. The author is aware of verbal statements by general authorities with regard to the other examples cited in the text.

Historian Notes

10. Packer, "The Mantle," 272, 263.
11. J. Reuben Clark statement, 8 April 1943, in "Budget Beginnings," 11-12, Box 188, J. Reuben Clark Papers, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.
12. Benson, The Gospel Teacher, 11.
13. Packer, "The Mantle," 262.
14. Benson, The Gospel Teacher, 11; Midgley, "A Critique of Mormon Historians," 27-32.
15. Packer, "The Mantle," 260. *Emphasis in original.*
16. Benson, The Gospel Teacher, 10; Packer, "The Mantle," 259; Midgley, "A Critique of Mormon Historians," 42.
17. Packer, "The Mantle," 262.
18. Jacob 3:3-7, 10.
19. Helaman 8:26.
20. Helaman 2:13.
21. Ether 8:21.
22. Alma 10:27.
23. Moroni 8:27.
24. Benson, The Gospel Teacher, 10.
25. I Corinthians 7:6; Book of Mormon title page; Alma 40:20; History of the Church 5:265; April 1940 Conference Report, 14; Church News, 31 July 1954, p. 8.
26. Benson, "God's Hand in Our Nation's History," 310; Benson, The Gospel Teacher 10; Packer, "The Mantle," 265. *Emphasis in original.*
27. Packer, "The Mantle," 266.
28. George Q. Cannon Journal, 7 January 1898, quoted in Stanley B. Kimball, Heber C. Kimball: Mormon Patriarch and Pioneer (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), p. xv.

Historian Notes

29. Packer, "The Mantle," 267, 271.
30. Ibid., 265.
31. Ibid., 265, 263.
32. I Corinthians 3:3; Hebrews 5:12.
33. April 1952 Conference Report, 81; Remarks to Bishops' Meeting, 29 September 19 typescript in Box 151, Clark Papers, Brigham Young University.
34. Benson, The Gospel Teacher, 10; Benson, "God's Hand in Our Nation's History,"
35. Packer, "The Mantle," 268, 271.
36. Examples re B.H. Roberts, A Comprehensive History of the Church 6: 399-400; Joseph Fielding Smith, Essentials in Church History, 24th ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1971), 512-13; J. Max Anderson, The Polygamy Story: Fiction and Fact (Salt Lake City: Publishers Press, 1979), viii. Several scholarly LDS historians, who should have known better, have also adopted the half-truth, official history approach toward post-Manifesto plural marriage. See James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard, The Story of the Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1976), 443-44, and Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton, The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 245-246.
37. J. Reuben Clark statement, 21 March 1945, research in possession of the author
38. Personal research of the author, as well as the fragmentary introduction to the question in Victor W. Jorgensen and B. Carmon Hardy, "The Taylor-Cowley Affair and the Watershed of Mormon History," Utah Historical Quarterly 48 (Winter 1980): 4-36.
39. Journal of Discourses 20:264.
40. Packer, "The Mantle," 271.
41. Ephesians 4:15.