

REVIEW OF *WHAT HATH GOD WROUGHT: THE TRANSFORMATION OF AMERICA, 1815-1848*¹ BY DANIEL WALKER HOWE

John C. Thomas—Department of Religious Education

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Dean May thought it vital for young Latter-day Saint historians to “broaden, broaden, broaden”—to pay a price of “labor and empathy” to begin to see their faith “as others might,” thereby making it explicable to all. Richard Bushman noted that few Mormon writers have carefully examined Joseph Smith’s “place in American history,” in part because the issue seemed to pale against an even broader question—what the restoration meant for the future of the world.² For those who want to broaden their perspective on the American birthplace of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *What Hath God Wrought* is a very good place to start. Daniel Walker Howe’s learned but accessible survey of antebellum America, part of the Oxford History of the United States, won the Pulitzer Prize for history in 2008. Not only his time frame, 1815-1848, but Howe’s persistent attention to American religious history (including various millennial visions for America), make this book especially helpful for viewing Mormon origins in context. Readers who wonder how well Bushman succeeded in his aim to write a “cultural biography of Mormonism’s founder” in *Rough Stone Rolling* would do well to consult Howe’s rich narrative of seemingly every aspect of American culture.

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Howe claims to have told a “story,” rather than arguing a “thesis” (849). If so, it is clear that the protagonists in his story are the “improvers”—the reformers and inventors who envisioned economic, social, and spiritual refinement for the nation. To a remarkable degree, these “improvers” agreed that America had a special mission to champion liberty in the world, and though their faiths varied, they often linked American progress to the second coming of Christ. What is also remarkable is the extent to which many of this time saw revelation and reason as natural partners in the cause of liberty, self improvement, and social reform. America became widely literate and increasingly integrated by new transportation and communication technologies. Science and religious faith cohabited happily. Only slowly, and largely after 1848, did these comfortable affinities begin to fray. Of course slavery was always there to haunt the optimists, and abolitionists insistently questioned their countrymen’s contentment. In Howe’s story, in fact, it is apologists for white supremacy who play the role of antagonists—and he points out that many people exhibited mixed outlooks.

The book is dedicated to John Quincy Adams, whom Howe sees as a principled and prescient statesman, president, and legislator—symbol of the improvers. Andrew Jackson, whom Howe finds lacking both in personal style and political ideology, personifies the voice for white male privilege. Adams was a well educated Unitarian who had no trouble invoking millennial language about America’s mission and shared the postmillennial optimism of many Evangelical reformers. Howe highlights the affinities of the Whigs and the postmillennialists (580); he also believes that men like Adams and Clay held out a more rational course of national development than many Democrats (and pessimistic premillennialists). “Whigs preferred for the United States to concentrate its energies internally, on economic development, education, and social reform.” By contrast, Democrats feared class and race conflict and offered westward expansion as “a safety valve [that would] preserve America as a land of opportunity for white men” (686). Though folks in both camps looked westward, Howe shows how the desire to protect or extend slavery led some Americans to invoke the prospect of continental conquest, even as it made them suspicious of federal initiatives that might have aided economic development within the existing nation.

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Howe describes the Whigs’ conception of liberty as “positive,” where freedom “was a means to the formation of individual character and a good society.” The Democrats’ conception of liberty was “negative” because it implied “freeing the common (white) man from the oppressive burdens of an aristocracy” (583). Thus the Democrats favored “economic uniformity” (assuming market forces would continue to uphold family farming—including slave farming) and “cultural diversity” (protected by states rights), while the Whigs favored “economic diversity” (market-led modernization aided by public works and monetary policy—likely to eclipse slave-labor at some point) and “cultural uniformity” (largely by education, along with private reform—often religiously sponsored) (583-84). Howe eschews the term “Jacksonian democracy,” since Jackson and many of his partisans’ attachment to extending white male power across the continent came at the expense of slaves, free blacks, Indians, Mexicans, and women. Ironically, the Democrats’ “safety valve” backfired by raising the stakes on slavery so much as to lead to Civil War, which doomed their model society.

Lest one get the impression that Howe’s book is primarily a political history, I must note how widely and deeply and deftly he probes the many facets of American culture—material, literary, ethnic, spiritual, and so on. The opening chapter is an excellent overview of the America in which Joseph Smith grew up. Throughout the book, Howe takes all kinds of ideas seriously, noting how technology allowed those ideas to circulate across the nation. Notably, he highlights the ubiquity of religious discourse and the substantive ways in which religious associations

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fostered positive liberty. He has an excellent chapter on the religious “awakenings” of the era, and argues that postmillennial thinking, fueled in part by material prosperity, became in this period the prevailing religious outlook on America’s future, offering a synthesis of “the faith in progress characteristic of the Enlightenment with biblical Christianity,” which also “legitimated American civil religion, that durable fusion of patriotism, nondenominational Protestantism, and belief in America’s responsibility to conduct an experiment in free government” (289). Howe admits nonetheless that this comfortable convergence of ideas faded in the later 19th and 20th centuries, a point that Richard Bushman has made in considering Joseph Smith’s challenge to American culture.³

In this light, it is interesting to explore Howe’s treatment of Mormonism, which mostly occurs in chapters titled “Pursuing the Millennium” and “Westward the Star of Empire” (clues about how he situates Joseph Smith and the church in the wider American story). How well does Howe comprehend the Mormons and their place in the saga? May regretted that few non-Mormon scholars had “been able to enter the world of Mormonism sufficiently to write persuasively about it,” and he urged them to “deepen, deepen, deepen.”⁴ Given the scope of the book, Howe’s treatment of early Mormonism is not fully satisfying, but compared to similar efforts (such as Charles Sellers’ *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846*, whose interpretations about economic change and religion Howe challenges), it seems a more serious and respectful and genuinely interested effort to understand.

Years ago Howe joined other scholars at a conference on “Personal and Political Liberty in the Book of Mormon.” Surprised at how well the book bore “close analysis,” he wrote that his “teaching and writing” would benefit from his new “appreciation...for this complex and inspiring work.”⁵ So what does Howe say of the Book of Mormon in his magnum opus?

True or not, the Book of Mormon is a powerful epic written on a grand scale with a host of characters, a narrative of human struggled and conflict, of divine intervention, heroic good and atrocious evil, of prophecy, morality, and law... Although it contains elements that suggest the environment of New York in the 1820s...the dominant themes are biblical, prophetic, and patriarchal, not democratic or optimistic. It tells a tragic story, of a people who, though possessed of the true faith, fail in the end. Yet it does not convey a message of despair; God’s will cannot ultimately be frustrated. The Book of Mormon should rank among the great achievements of American literature, but it has never been accorded the status it deserves, since Mormons deny Joseph Smith’s authorship, and non-Mormons, dismissing the work as a fraud, have been more likely to ridicule than read it.

It is a thoughtful and engaging sketch. Granted, Howe goes no further, but perhaps others may take up his challenge to take the book more seriously.⁶

Howe says some other interesting things about how the Mormons fit on the religious landscape. On the one hand, Joseph Smith's revelations set up a "millenarian critique of the larger society and a collectivist, authoritarian dissent from American individualistic pluralism" (731). On the other hand, "The Mormons did not passively await Christ's millennial kingdom but worked to prepare for it. Their brand of premillennialism was as activist as any postmillennialism, and even more certain of a special millennial role for America."⁷ Howe goes so far as to say that the Mormon outlook constituted an "extreme version of American exceptionalism" (316). What more needs to be known about the revelations and practices of the church to see how well these labels help us understand the Mormons' relationship to their neighbors?

Howe also says the Mormons "sought to escape from the United States," yet "ended up playing a role in extending the United States" (731), and he describes both the westward exodus under Brigham Young and the service of the Mormon Battalion (727-32, 758-61, 813-14). But the irony runs deeper, and closer to his central story, than he notices. It was the Democrats of Jackson County, anxious to preserve local autonomy of the white common man, who forcibly evicted the Saints from their nascent place of refuge in 1833, within the boundaries of the United States. Five years later, Democratic Governor Boggs finished the expulsion using the force of the state militia. Democratic Presidents Jackson and Van Buren told the Mormons the federal government could not redress their Missouri losses, leading the Mormons to vote for Harrison's Whig ticket in 1840. But then the Mormons mystified and alienated both parties by shifting to Democratic candidates in subsequent Illinois elections. In frustration, Joseph insisted the Saints would vote for "friends" who protected their civil rights, regardless of party, and then instituted a campaign for the presidency himself that repudiated both parties for failing to apply the Bill of Rights in the states, offering other policies that crossed party lines. When local autonomy in Nauvoo violated freedom of the press in Nauvoo, the Democratic governor quashed it, leading to the Prophet's assassination. The Union that emerged from the Civil War was the kind of federalism Joseph Smith had begged for, yet the Republican party soon turned central powers against local autonomy and "cultural diversity" in Mormon Utah, redefining the First Amendment religion clauses in the process. Considering these twists, what was it about America that Mormons really wanted to escape?

Howe's answer, that Brigham Young and his followers wanted a place "to implement their theocratic vision of society and prepare for the millennium undisturbed" (727), is incomplete at best. It reflects the historians he cites, as well as his relative inattention to the content of Mormon belief. He attends to the social and cultural make up of early Mormons more than the principles the missionaries taught, and he pays

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more attention to the Word of Wisdom than any other revelation in the Doctrine and Covenants. This is a thin read of Mormon doctrinal ideas. With so much talk about conversion and sanctification, what did Mormon doctrines and covenants offer? What did Joseph Smith’s revelations say about God, humanity, and the power of atonement, and how did those ideas play out in a nation divided between “improvers” and conservatives? How did the temple link Mormon doctrines about the millennium and salvation? Such issues stay beyond Howe’s reach. When he concludes by stating that nowadays the Mormon “way of life...impresses observers as the most ‘American’ of all” (731), one wonders not only whence it might spring but whether it is really true.

Still, Howe’s central purpose is not to unlock the inner workings of early Mormonism, but to help us understand and learn from a remarkable era of development and missteps in the young republic. This he does with empathy and stylish labor. ☺

NOTES

- 1 Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), XVIII, 904 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, bibliographical essay, index.
- 2 Dean L. May, “Writing from within a Religious Tradition: A Mormon Perspective,” *Journal of Mormon History* 28 (Spring 2002), 115-16; Richard L. Bushman, “A Joseph Smith for the Twenty-First Century,” *BYU Studies*, vol. 40, no. 2 (2001), 162-64.
- 3 Richard L. Bushman, “A Joseph Smith for the Twenty-First Century,” 166-68.
- 4 Dean L. May, “Writing from within a Religious Tradition: A Mormon Perspective,” 116-17.
- 5 Noel B. Reynolds, “The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon in the Twentieth Century,” *BYU Studies* vol. 38, no. 2 (1999), 38-39.
- 6 What about “God’s will” in US history? Howe ponders the tragedy in America’s trajectory after 1844. Had Clay won that year’s election, Howe believes, there would have been no Mexican War, gradual emancipation by economic diversification and compensation, dampened sectionalism, no Republican party, and no Civil War. “The decisions that electorates and politicians make have real consequences,” he rues (690). Mormons, by the way, said much the same thing as they mourned the assassination of their prophet-candidate that year. Despite the bloody consequences, Lincoln eventually implemented the major policies of Adams and Clay (835). Did that make him the instrument of God’s inexorable will, working amidst war and religious declension? If so, had he moved the nation closer to eventual redemption or condemnation?
- 7 For an interesting perspective on this tension of pre- and post-millennial perspectives and programs in Mormonism and Evangelical Protestantism, see Richard J. Mouw, “What Does God Think about America? Some Challenges for Evangelicals and Mormons,” *BYU Studies* vol. 43, no. 4 (2004), 5-21.