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Vanquishing the Mormon Menace

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VANQUISHING THE MORMON MENACE

Stephen O. Smoot

A review of Mason, Patrick Q. The Mormon Menace: Violence and Anti-Mormonism in the Postbellum South. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. pp. 252 + xi, including notes and index. \$31.95.

Abstract: Patrick Mason has offered a fascinating look at the history of nineteenth century anti-Mormonism in the American South with his 2011 volume The Mormon Menace: Violence and Anti-Mormonism in the Postbellum South. Situating nineteenth century Southern anti-Mormonism in its historical context, Mason narrates a vivid account of how Mormons at times faced violent opposition that stemmed from deep cultural, religious, and political differences with mainstream American Protestants. Mason's volume is an excellent resource for those interested in Mormon history.

Any given study of anti-Mormonism typically takes one of two forms: (1) an apologetic response to anti-Mormon claims or (2) an investigation into anti-Mormonism as a strictly historical or cultural phenomenon. This is not to say that these two categories do not in some ways overlap, but broadly speaking, most treatments fall into one or the other. Some premier examples of the apologetic response would be the 1992 volume *Offenders for a Word: How Anti-Mormons Play Word Games to Attack the Latter-day Saints* by Daniel C. Peterson and Stephen D. Ricks¹ and the 2008 volume *Shaken Faith Syndrome: Strengthening One's Testimony in the Face of Criticism and Doubt* by Michael R. Ash.² The second category (the historical or cultural phenomenon of anti-Mormonism), however, has seen a number of

1 Daniel C. Peterson and Stephen D. Ricks, *Offenders for a Word: How Anti-Mormons Play Word Games to Attack the Latter-day Saints* (Provo: FARMS, 1992).

2 Michael R. Ash, *Shaken Faith Syndrome: Strengthening One's Testimony in the Face of Criticism and Doubt* (Redding, Calif.: Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research, 2008). Ash's volume was revised and expanded in 2013.

recent and important contributions by scholars associated with the burgeoning academic field of Mormon Studies. The important works of Terryl Givens and Sarah Barringer Gordon in the late 1990s and early 2000s,³ to name two examples, set a new generation of Latter-day Saint historians on a path toward focusing their study on the phenomenon of anti-Mormonism in a broader American religious, political, and cultural historical context.

It is to this second category that Patrick Q. Mason's 2011 contribution, *The Mormon Menace: Violence and Anti-Mormonism in the Postbellum South*, belongs.⁴ Published shortly before J. Spencer Fluhman's important 2012 treatise on the history of anti-Mormonism,⁵ Mason (PhD from the University of Notre Dame, the Howard W. Hunter Chair of Mormon Studies, and associate professor of religion at Claremont Graduate University) focuses his attention on the often volatile and occasionally blood-soaked experiences of Latter-day Saints living in the southern United States in the second half of the nineteenth century. With a careful historian's craft and gripping prose, Mason tells the story of the religious, cultural, political, and even moral factors that exacerbated tensions between nineteenth-century Latter-day Saints and their largely Protestant and nativist non-Mormon Southern contemporaries. It is a story that is fascinating from a historical perspective, inspiring from a Latter-day Saint perspective, and ultimately tragic from a humanitarian perspective.

Mason begins his volume with an account of the murder of Parley P. Pratt (the heralded "Apostle Paul of Mormonism"⁶) at the hands of Southerner Hector McLean in 1857. Pratt was sealed to McLean's estranged wife Eleanor in 1855 by Brigham Young "despite

3 Terryl L. Givens, *The Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Sarah Barringer Gordon, *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002). Oxford University Press republished Givens's work in 2013, attesting to an abiding interest in Mormon history in mainstream academia.

4 Patrick Q. Mason, *The Mormon Menace: Violence and Anti-Mormonism in the Postbellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). Citations from *The Mormon Menace* are followed here in parentheses.

5 J. Spencer Fluhman, "A Peculiar People": *Anti-Mormonism and the Making of Religion in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

6 Terryl L. Givens and Matthew J. Grow, *Parley P. Pratt: The Apostle Paul of Mormonism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

the fact that she was not legally divorced from Hector” at same the time of the sealing as Pratt’s twelfth wife (p. 3). Shortly thereafter, Eleanor traveled to New Orleans to “retrieve her children” and begin a new life in Utah (p. 3). Hector, however, was alerted to his wife’s quest and Pratt’s proximity in the area. He wasted no time hunting down the champion of Mormonism, catching up to him “twelve miles north” of Van Buren, Arkansas (p. 4). A discharged pistol and several stabs later, Elder Pratt lay dead on the ground, butchered by Eleanor’s enraged husband, whose sense of Southern honor and morality had been grievously wounded by Pratt’s taking Eleanor as a plural wife (pp. 4–7). Latter-day Saints reacted by canonizing Pratt as a martyr of the faith while Southerners insisted that McLean, not Pratt, was “the real victim” (p. 4).

The causes leading up to Pratt’s death are an obvious microcosm for the violence and persecution heaped upon Southern Latter-day Saints in the nineteenth century. Not only was Pratt a Latter-day Saint and thus perceived as subverting the quintessential Protestantism cultivated by years of Southern religious tradition, but he was a polygamist who was seen as flagrantly undermining Southern morality. This is Mason’s central thesis in *The Mormon Menace*: Latter-day Saints were targeted not merely as theological opponents (which would only warrant condemnation in polemical tracts and over the pulpit) but as a moral and cultural threat that earned vigilante justice because of their immediate danger to Southern lifestyle and ideals. Latter-day Saint plural marriage in particular stood as the foremost reason for much of the Southern anti-Mormon vigilantism in the nineteenth century. “The Latter-day Saints’ peculiar institution of plural marriage provided more than enough objectionable ‘manner’ as well as ‘matter’ to inspire the transformation of anti-Mormonism from a relatively localized phenomenon into a veritable national pastime,” Mason explains (p. 6). His evidence throughout *The Mormon Menace* fully justifies this thesis.

Publicly announced as a practice of the faith by Latter-day Saint leaders in 1852, plural marriage scandalized practically every level of the American (and Southern) public and was undoubtedly one of the main factors behind the anti-Mormonism of the nineteenth century. Mason documents the “allegations of LDS missionaries’ licentiousness” leveled by Southern anti-Mormons as well as the “religious competition introduced by active Mormon proselytization” (p. 19). These factors directly contributed to the death not only of Parley P. Pratt, Mason argues, but also of Joseph Standing (the “lustful lout,” as he was deemed in the press [p. 31]) in Georgia in 1879 (pp. 21–34) and John Gibbs at

Cane Creek, Tennessee, in 1884 (pp. 33–56). Although there was no evidence to substantiate anti-Mormon claims of Mormon libertinism, the caricature of Latter-day Saint men as sensual and libidinous sexual predators (which, incidentally, traveled across the Atlantic and became the popular perception of Mormons by inhabitants of Great Britain and elsewhere⁷) became so ingrained in the minds of many that strong distrust, suspicion, and outright antagonism toward Latter-day Saint elders (and their sympathizers) were guaranteed. Mason explores the popular nineteenth-century perception of Latter-day Saint polygamists as lustful criminals bent on subverting American morality (pp. 57–78) and captures the basic attitude of most nineteenth-century Southern anti-Mormons. Quoting an issue of the *Alabama Baptist* published in 1882, Mason summarizes, “Nothing short of complete victory, meaning the eradication of polygamy — and the entire Mormon religion if need be — would be sufficient in defending Southern homes from ‘the fiend of lust and crime set up under the garb of religion’” (p. 78).

It should be noted, as Mason does (pp. 127–148), that actual violence against Latter-day Saints (such as the murders of Parley P. Pratt and Joseph Standing and the Cane Creek Massacre) was relatively sparse, and threats of violence were made much more often than actually committed. Likewise, while certainly not meant to diminish the public mocking, political coercion, and extralegal violence experienced by hundreds of Latter-day Saints in the South during the nineteenth century, Mason explains that Southern anti-Mormonism can be effectively seen as more than mere “persecution born of religious bigotry.” “Though not without merit,” Mason writes, “this argument is ultimately insufficient in explaining the extent and nature of Southern anti-Mormonism” (p. 127). Rather, Mason sees this movement as part of “the long tradition of American vigilantism that retained a special hold in the post-bellum South” (p. 128). Latter-day Saints were not the only group targeted by Southern vigilantes, as Jews, Catholics, and, of course, Blacks experienced varying degrees of vigilante pressure and oppositional rhetoric during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As with Latter-day Saints, these minority groups were targeted not simply for their identities as such but also for social, political, economic, cultural, and racial factors. It is in this context that Mason stresses we should primarily view Southern anti-Mormonism (pp. 171–194).

7 See generally Craig L. Foster, *Penny Tracts and Polemics: A Critical Analysis of Anti-Mormon Pamphleteering in Great Britain, 1837–1860* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2002).

To be sure, nineteenth-century Latter-day Saints were right to bemoan an unrelenting national religious bigotry toward Mormonism that went all the way to the highest levels of the federal government, and, as Mason shows (pp. 149–170), the very real anti-Mormon antagonism suffered in the courts, in the press and by gangs of vigilantes was highly influential in shaping nineteenth-century Mormon identity. Likewise, the extralegal violence meted out to Latter-day Saints in the South was by no means justified. Nevertheless, Mason emphasizes that nineteenth-century anti-Mormonism was born out of more than simply blind prejudice against Mormons. Only by understanding all of the complex factors behind Southern anti-Mormonism (including a fair share of non-violent political and religious opposition [pp. 102–126]) can we begin to make sense of the tragic episodes explored in *The Mormon Menace*. Just as Latter-day Saints (rightly) insist that such events as the tragic Mountain Meadows Massacre were more than a mere display of brazen Latter-day Saint fanaticism driven by an intrinsically violent, dangerous, and blindly irrational theology (the arguments of a popular American nature/adventure writer notwithstanding⁸), so too it would be wise to understand Southern anti-Mormonism in a fuller historical context.⁹

8 Jon Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith* (New York: Doubleday, 2003). For reviews of this problematic work, see Craig L. Foster, “Doing Violence to Journalistic Integrity,” *FARMS Review* 16/1 (2004): 149–74; “Church Response to Jon Krakauer’s *Under the Banner of Heaven*,” online at <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/ldsnewsroom/eng/commentary/church-response-to-jon-krakauer-s-under-the-banner-of-heaven> (accessed July 30, 2015). Max Perry Mueller has offered some interesting commentary on the impact of Krakauer’s work for Mormon Studies in general but also points to many “problematic sources and faulty interpretations of theology” in the book. See “Mormonism and the Problem of Jon Krakauer,” online at <http://religionandpolitics.org/2015/07/14/mormonism-and-the-problem-of-jon-krakauer/> (accessed July 30, 2015).

9 Interestingly, the LDS Church’s “Gospel Topics” essay on nineteenth-century violence committed upon and by Latter-day Saints invokes many of the same historical factors mentioned by Mason to explain such incidents as the Mountain Meadows Massacre, including the deep-rooted nineteenth-century tradition of American vigilantism and extralegal violence. “Much of the violence perpetrated by and against Latter-day Saints fell within the then-existing American tradition of extralegal vigilantism, in which citizens organized to take justice into their own hands when they believed the government was either oppressive or lacking. Vigilantes generally targeted minority groups or those perceived to be criminal or socially marginal. Such acts were at times fueled by religious rhetoric.” See “Peace and Violence among 19th-Century Latter-day Saints,” <https://www.lds.org/topics/>

To that end, I judge Mason's work a success. With *The Mormon Menace*, Mason has provided a fascinating historical narrative that explores the complexities of the sometimes violent inter-religious and inter-cultural competition that largely drove the Mormon/non-Mormon conflicts of the nineteenth century. By viewing anti-Mormonism in a more nuanced historical context, a robust picture emerges that helps us understand the motives of the perpetrators and appreciate and remember the experience of the victims.

Stephen O. Smoot graduated cum laude from Brigham Young University with Bachelor of Arts degrees in Ancient Near Eastern Studies and German Studies. His areas of academic interest include the Hebrew Bible, ancient Egyptian history and religion, Mormon studies, and German Romanticism. He blogs on Latter-day Saint and other topics at www.plonialmonimormon.com.

