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Banishing the Cross: The Emergence of a Mormon Taboo

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Michael G. Reed. *Banishing the Cross:
The Emergence of a Mormon Taboo.*
Independence, Mo.: John Whitmer Books, 2012.

Reviewed by Alonzo L. Gaskill

This first book by Michael G. Reed is a revamp of his 2009 master's thesis, "The Development of the LDS Church's Attitude toward the Cross" (California State University, Sacramento). In this current work, Reed beefs up his text with some additional sources and graphics, and he adds a chapter on the cross as a symbol in the Strangite and Community of Christ (RLDS) traditions.

The book's aim is to delineate the place of the cross as a symbol in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and in the two aforementioned Restoration churches, though the book largely focuses on the Utah Church's position. The text does offer a brief history of the cross in the ancient Christian Church, though it does so largely to compare ancient Christians' attitudes toward that symbol with the attitudes found in branches of the restored gospel.

What Reed shows, rather convincingly, is that Mormonism has not always been uncomfortable utilizing the cross as one of its symbols (67–85). He establishes that Latter-day Saints (prior to the mid-twentieth century) employed that most common of Christian symbols in architecture, as jewelry, on headstones and in funeral floral arrangements, as the Church's registered branding iron for cattle, and even on the spine of certain editions of the Doctrine and Covenants (for example, the 1852 European edition). Reed points out that in 1916, the Church approached the Salt Lake City council for permission to erect a very large concrete and steel cross on Ensign Peak—a monument so large that it would be visible from anywhere in the valley. Only one year later, the Church placed a cross-shaped monument in Emigration Canyon to mark the spot where Brigham Young said, "This is the right place" (86–101). Citing a series of examples and excerpts from the historical record, Reed

establishes that the prevalent contemporary LDS attitude toward the cross as taboo largely grew out of hostilities between Utah Catholics and Latter-day Saints and did not become institutionalized in the Church until the administration of President David O. McKay (102–22). It might be noted here that Latter-day Saints are not expressly forbidden from employing the cross in personal devotions or in religious art or jewelry. Thus, Reed's use of the words "banished" and "taboo" may be a little too strong. That being said, I suspect the terms were utilized in order to make a provocative title, not because of their historical propriety.

As with any book, this one has its weaknesses. Beyond a handful of typos sprinkled throughout the text, there are a number of redundancies. For example, several times Reed offers the exact same list as to why ancient Christians avoided the cross (see 1, 150, 157). He also repeats a quote by Apostle Moses Thatcher twice in ten pages, though one of them appears in a footnote (see 93, 103). These and other similar problems are merely cosmetic, though they appear frequently enough that they bear mentioning.

Perhaps the most problematic part of *Banishing the Cross* is the book's third chapter, "Mormon Magic, Freemasonry, and the Cross" (37–60). In this section, Reed argues that Joseph and the early Saints were comfortable with using the cross as a symbol *because* they were heavily into folk magic and Freemasonry. The chapter is essentially a reiteration of other works on this same theme, including D. Michael Quinn's *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*. However, the problem is not so much that Reed largely rehearses the research of others. Rather, the difficulty is that the chapter is heavily conjectural. In approximately seventeen pages of printed text, Reed offers at least that many conjectural conclusions (for example, "almost certainly," "perhaps," "one wonders whether," "it is reasonable to assume," it is "possible" or "likely" that, it "could be posited" that, and so forth). The chapter presents evidence that crosses were used in nineteenth century Masonry and by some practitioners of folk magic during that same era. But it does not present evidence for its claim that Joseph introduced the cross as a symbol into Mormonism *because of* these influences. Reed fails to provide substantiation that Joseph introduced the symbolic cross into the restored Church. The chapter is not only speculative in its conclusions, but it also overlooks the point that Joseph never used the cross as a symbol in his public discourse or liturgical rites. In the one discourse we have in which Joseph refers to the cross as a symbol, the Prophet seems to speak

somewhat condescendingly of it.¹ Thus, whether Reed is right or wrong in his conjecture, he does not make a convincing argument for his claim that the early LDS comfort with the symbol of the cross was primarily due to Joseph's comfort with folk magic or Masonry.

That being said, the majority of the book is well reasoned and well supported. Though a fairly light read, the book is interesting and engaging—and it is, in many ways, a significant contribution to the historical record. Reed sets straight several misconceptions about the place of the cross as a symbol in the restored gospel, while inviting the reader on a pictorial journey through a transitional period in LDS Church history.

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1. See Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* (Orem, Utah: Grandin Book, 1991), 239.