Matthew Bowman, *The Mormon People: The Making of an American Faith*

Reviewed by David Walker

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Reviewed by David Walker

There is much talk of “the Mormon Moment” these days. (Is it here? gone? imminent? immanent?) Without wishing to belabor the theme, we do well to focus on the ways in which moments beget scholars begetting moments; that is, to pay attention to religious historians’ own constructions of Mormon Moments—now and then, for present and posterity. An occasion for reflection is Matthew Bowman’s *The Mormon People: The Making of an American Faith*, one of several popular academic books published during Mitt Romney’s recent presidential campaign. *The Mormon People* is excellent and commendable for many reasons, not least being Bowman’s smooth prose and synthetic tack. It is also cause for pause along the rough roads of Mormon historiography, precisely for the same reasons.

I. The moments that made Bowman

This is a book about religion in history and about texts in context. It does Bowman justice, therefore, to begin with *The Mormon People*’s dust jacket and to look at the text made to envelop his own text.¹ The jacket (re)presents the stage for Bowman’s voice, even as it articulates its own expectations about the stuff and suit(ability) of religion in history. It says, for example, that “Bowman peels back the curtain on more than 180 years of Mormon history and doctrine . . . and ably sets the scene for a 2012 presidential election that has the potential to mark a major turning point in the way this ‘all-American’ faith is perceived by the wider American

¹ Please forgive the parentheses about to appear, or at least understand why they are there: I am doing my part to disrupt an easy reading of this or any text about texts about texts, and thereby to respond in one mode of scholarship—recomplexification—to the intentionally popular workings of some scholars.
public”—a population wherein “the place of Mormonism in public life continues to generate heated debate on both sides of the political divide.” We readers infer that (1) formal politics both (a) reveals popular disagreements respecting true American religions and (b) occasions perceptual and religious transformations; and that (2) exposé (“peel[ing] back the curtain”) is the rightful route to calmer, better, more balanced understandings or enactments of religion.

This is simultaneously an expansive and limiting charge for Bowman as a scholar and for religious studies as a discipline: the following, explaining, and altering of formal politics vis-à-vis religion, in this case by re-connecting “a young seer and sometime treasure hunter named Joseph Smith” to “Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney.” I say re-connecting because the assumed backdrop to Bowman’s text consists of assumptions of ongoing theocracy, sorcery, fanaticism, puppetry, and heresy. I say re-connecting because, insofar as we nuance or de-familiarize such assumptions, our task is presumptively presentist; and also because it is presumptively genealogical. We are limited by well-worn tracks of denominational history (the principle that human actions can be described by ecclesiastical affiliation, ecclesiastics by doctrine, and doctrine by pronouncement and belief) and New Humanism (the idea that religious studies might, by locating common moral or experiential centers within various social institutions, foster local and global civility), even as we are freed by the possibility of finding new meanings in—and new histories for—the disciplinary and terminological assumptions that constrain us.

To be sure, Bowman is a free man, his literary contract and book jacket notwithstanding. And The Mormon People is particularly good at navigating expectations of religion’s (or Mormonism’s) doctrinal hegemonies and experiential harmonies. Such expectations are both explicit and implicit, and Bowman addresses them through that oldest of LDS techniques: effective structure and good storytelling.
II. The moments that Bowman made

The *Mormon People* is structured by and through the identification of moments: Mormon Moments. Among the eras and events crucial to “the making of an American Faith” (as Bowman’s subtitle has it), Bowman selects—and organizes chapters around—eight: Joseph Smith’s first visions and gatherings (to 1831), early town planning (1831–39), the life of Nauvoo (1839–46), Utahn gathering (1846–77), the announcement and denouncement of polygamy (1852–96), Progressive Era theology (1890–1945), Correlation and ecclesiastical retrenchment (1945–78), and globalization (1978–2011). Each chapter finds Bowman addressing the bugbears of religious presumption—Mormon and anti-Mormon alike—by subtle narrative counterpoint. Joseph Smith was not “wholly other,” but was rather commensurate with and intelligible to his frontier contemporaries. Commensurability, in turn, proceeded through dialogue as well as dictation. (“Mormonism was as much the construction of Joseph Smith’s followers as of Smith himself” [p. 6] is a refrain sounded especially around mergers with Sidney Rigdon’s group, economic crises at Kirtland, and post-1844 succession plans.) Mormons used the Book of Mormon as existential evidence as much as exegetical datum or proof text; and “belief” was contextualized by and through ritual performance. Saints were politically both powerful and weak; and polygamy was both fact, metaphor, and metonym. Brigham Young was patriarch and arts patron, Mormons have been theologically innovative as well as uninterested, Correlation was simultaneously stimulating and stagnating, and Mormonism manages to be a global religion without being a world religion per se.

Scholars of Mormonism are familiar with this story: Latter-day Saints are “a people of paradox.” What Bowman contributes to the field is, to his mind, a sustained analysis of mid-twentieth-century trends. Indeed it is in chapters 6 and 7 (“Eternal Progression” and “Correlation”) especially that Bowman moves beyond “synthesis”—the announced narrative

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mode of the entire book, albeit one applied with special reference to the
nineteenth century—to suggestion and trend-setting (pp. xxi, 278, 289–
90). The reader encounters there a complicated plot: James Talmage, B.
H. Roberts, and John Widtsoe advanced liberal and progressive ideals,
which were met and matched through the practical reforms of Joseph F.
Smith and Heber J. Grant, which begat David O. McKay’s and Harold B.
Lee’s program of pedagogical and ritual standardization, which was ac-
 companied by Joseph Fielding Smith’s conservative social formations and
theologies, which counterpointed those of Talmage et al. Neither Joseph
F. nor Joseph Fielding is made to stand in relative proximity to Joseph
Smith Jr. per se; and Bowman does not argue that any particular combi-
nation of, say, Joseph Fielding Smith and James Talmage sired, say,
Stephenie Meyer or Mitt Romney.

Bowman’s affinity for “the progressives” is clear, but he is wise to es-
chew both prescription and teleology by presenting recent Mormon his-
tory precisely as a plot: a drama played among multiple heroes and
 antiheroes, a complicated script from which any contemporary Saint
might take cue and to which any audience might draw connections.

III. The momentum of Bowman’s moments

What Bowman best contributes to the field of Mormon studies is, to my
mind, something more interesting—and more broadly applicable—than
his mid-twentieth-century accountings. It is a theory of cultural linguis-
tics: the notion that Mormon Moments consist in, by, and for translation.
Joseph Smith Jr. translated the Book of Mormon, others translated Smith’s
ideals into workable social policies, Brigham Young translated the exodus
experience, Wilford Woodruff translated the rationales and relations of
polygamy, and Talmage et al. “progressed” by moving new words “to the
center of the Mormon lexicon” (p. 166). Scholars of religion may take issue
with certain acts and absences of theoretical application—“experience”
remains an original, sui generis point of departure in descriptions of the
first vision and elsewhere—but the notion of translation is unimpeach-
able. Culture and cultural studies alike work through terminological shifts
and the study thereof; this is partly the Foucauldian sense of genealogy with which we are now familiar. In and into this context, Bowman says it is our job to translate, and not merely to transcribe; and it is our job to seek the roots and routes of linguistic change, whether in stump speeches, sermons, sanctuaries, schools, or homes. *The Mormon People* makes that much clear, and it consistently but subtly commands our attention.

Two observations follow from this compliment, though. The first—a challenge—concerns terms and terminological instability within Bowman’s own work. More generously put, it calls for continuation of Bowman’s inquiries and implications beyond likely bounds of trade press entertainment. The second—a critique—concerns the net directionality of Bowman’s historiographic translations.

Bowman’s narrative implies a certain Hegelianism whereby historical persons, perspectives, and terms represent inexact syntheses of theses and antitheses. More than that, Bowman’s Hegelianism is explicitly Weberian, insofar as Mormon syntheses have, he says, generally accompanied bureaucratic developments and the routinizations of charisma. Neither of these echoes are necessarily problematic, and even Bowman’s accounts of Brigham Young’s post-1844 push “not [for] charisma but institution”—tired though this analytical terrain may be—make for dynamic reading (p. 91, compare 93, 138). Dynamic, indeed, and that is irrespective of one’s personal or disciplinary attachments to Max Weber.

However, for those of us who are attached to or interested in Weber, we would do well to give freer run to a fuller slate of Weberian questions, or at least to track closely the terms in which he was most interested. Bureaucracy, for one, is a thing variously valued in *The Mormon People*. Sometimes, as during the Young years and shortly thereafter, bureaucracy provided flexibility and an outlet for growth: men and women had access to “the bureaucratic power of the councils”; and councils themselves “ground into motion”—in varying but generally westward directions—when church leaders were incarcerated or indisposed (pp. 136, 63). But other times bureaucracy was a site of fragility or a barrier to church progress, as when United Orders faltered in the face of freewheeling, railroading economics, or when Correlation’s “scientific organization”
squashed inspiration and innovative thought (pp. 119, 197). Bureaucracy
seems here a contradictory thing vis-à-vis Mormon religious develop-
ment: it underwrote both advancement and declension, effecting both
revolution and retrenchment.

I have no problem with paradox reappearing as description for bu-
reaucratic operation. Quite the contrary. But I do think that paradox and
bureaucracy alike deserve fuller and more explicit treatment, not least be-
cause Weber himself belied any singular theory of bureaucratic develop-
ment (toward scientific organization, away from religion) with
implications of religion’s cultural diffusion, profligate reproduction, and
corporate imbrication. In short, elsewhere if not here, we need theories
and translations of bureaucratic and religious paradoxes, not simply evo-
cations thereof. To that end we might well ask, How were mid-twentieth-
century ecclesiastical bureaucracies (and the corporations they
resembled) different from nineteenth-century ecclesiastical bureaucra-
cies (and the corporations they resembled)? Was “scientific organization”
more effectively achieved in the later period, as Bowman implies? If so,
did such achievements entail commensurate reactions—scientific or oth-
erwise, streamlined or not—in other sectors? Which sectors, then, have
been more important for formations of (discourses of) Mormon religion?
What is “the secular” advanced in and against Mormon bureaucracies,
and in what ways has Mormonism itself become framed—now, imma-
rently—in society?

I have a hard time imagining Random House publishing any book
built around such questions, but it would make for important reading. It
is a testament to Bowman’s work, in any case, that it lends itself easily to
imaginations of argumentative furtherance and pairing.

My final point pertains to the modes of historical translation and
historiographic synthesis intrinsic to, but often implicit in, The Mormon
People. Despite its occasional veneer of argumentless summary, synthesis
is itself an argumentative act. It is an argument to say that the nineteenth
century (for instance) has been “covered,” and it is an argument to select
certain historiographic trends or historical moments to “summarize.”
It behooves us therefore to ask, Does this particular selection—this
translation, this synthesis—give us the type of institutional groundwork
necessary for the furtherance of Mormon studies and religious studies more broadly? The answer is predictable: yes and no.

A brief story captures well my reservations—and apparently others’ too. While waiting for my own copy to arrive, I had the good fortune of skimming a copy of *The Mormon People* at a public library in Washington, DC. In it a previous patron had made three marginal notes, the longest of them objecting to Bowman’s characterization of Utahn railroad construction. Bowman asserts that “in 1869 [Brigham Young] grudgingly greeted the transcontinental railroad,” but my predecessor, circling grudgingly, wrote instead: “He welcomed it. Church always welcomed new tech” (p. 119). This marginalia was a gratifying find for me, a student of railroad and tourism development in the West. And the graffiti was in large part correct: Brigham Young *did* welcome the railroad—albeit after anticipatory arrangements—not only because railroads would ease Saintly travel to and from Utah, but also because they would bring new business, new trade, and new territory for religious encounter.

If I choose to uplift my predecessor’s act of book defacement, it is because Bowman has failed to honor the argumentative interventions of certain of his own forebears. Leonard Arrington, Dale Morgan, and others of their era were among the first in our field to contest notions of mid- to late-nineteenth-century Mormon industrial allergies, and it is to my mind the greatest shortcoming of Bowman’s work that it ignores many of the arguments of, say, Arrington’s *Great Basin Kingdom* (1958). To state the charge harshly: Bowman rejects, without sufficient explanation or acknowledgment, the “Mormon Moments” important to scholars situated squarely within the Moment of his own greatest concern: the mid-twentieth century. He spends little time attending to 1856 (the so-called Reformation) or 1869 (Arrington’s “Year of Decision”), for instance; and his bibliographic essay gives neither rationale nor roadmap for the general move away from “economic history”—by

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no means exhausted terrain—nor either from Arrington’s implicit arguments about religious institutionalization.⁴

I have no doubt that Bowman has reasons, but we too have the right to know them. Indeed more than that: we scholars of American religious history have not only the right but the obligation—the job, even—of historiographic clarity, that is, of genealogy in a subdisciplinary sense.

So what if we were to “pull an Arrington”? Arrington’s marginal notes, like those of my predecessor, might point to the importance of technology and industrial hubs for Mormon practical and discursive developments. They might point out that Heber J. Grant (b. 1856)—arguably one of the central tragic heroes of Bowman’s narrative—learned the very rudiments of trans-local Mormon incorporation during the railroad age. Or they might object that the Word of Wisdom—one among Bowman’s favorite exempla of Mormon counterculture, Progressive Era progressivism, and post-Grant wholesomeness alike—was likewise freighted with multiple bureaucratic interests, it having been reinstated shortly before 1869. (Meanwhile, the marginal notes of Reid L. Neilson and J. Spencer Fluhman, modern scholars of the nineteenth century, might point to the Mormon choruses and non-Mormon backdrops behind certain of Bowman’s scripts, highlighting thereby the importance of Tabernacle Choir tours, B. H. Roberts’s Chicagoan lobbies, informal politics, print media, and popular culture in the making of Mormon “religion.”)⁵ Such interventions

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⁴ I find Bowman’s chief engagement with Arrington—in the first section of the bibliographic essay that stands in place of sustained in-text or endnoted engagement with secondary scholarship—to be somewhat evasive on this point. Bowman writes that “the most important . . . [attempt] to tell the same story as this volume” is Arrington and Davis Bitton’s *The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints* (New York: Knopf, 1979), and that, while “it still stands useful today,” that book “could not benefit from much of the work it inspired, and its treatment of the twentieth century is necessarily cursory” (p. 278). Bowman also refers to Arrington’s *Great Basin Kingdom* as “the basic work” on Great Basin settlement (p. 284), but there is no discussion of Bowman’s own narrative choices relative thereto.

may not derail Bowman’s narrative directions, but it is our business to ask whether and how they might. And in any case, we would do well to compare parallel and divergent tracks en route to better understandings of the demands and expectations for our own (political, religious, historiographic, lexicographic) Mormon Moment.


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*Reviewed by Stephen H. Webb*

Traditionally speaking, metaphysics, at least in a form that has been useful for Christian theology, has been synonymous with the Platonic conception of a hierarchically ordered cosmos. In this view, the world is arranged in interlocking levels of reality that correspond to qualitatively different kinds of experience. Knowledge is the outcome of a journey into intangible universals that turn out to shine with more lucidity than the phenomena given to our perception. The more one penetrates the real, the less physical it becomes—and the same can be said about us. Our souls are as light as the divine, which suggests a shared substance or original unity. Reason’s labor provides a measure of how far we have fallen, just as reason’s attainment is an indication of how far we may yet rise. The virtues, which discipline our recalcitrant bodies, clear the path