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## John G. Turner, *Brigham Young: Pioneer Prophet*

Reviewed by David J. Howlett

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Review of John G. Turner. *Brigham Young: Pioneer Prophet*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012. 512 pp., with photos, maps, and index. \$35.00 hardcover.

*Reviewed by David J. Howlett*

Six years ago after a Mormon History Association conference session, I remarked to the random scholar sitting next to me how topics on nineteenth-century Mormonism have been revisited ad nauseam. We needed scholarship on twentieth-century Mormons, especially that of everyday people, not more tired stories about founding leaders and “great men.” My comment was that of an overly confident graduate student. What came next was memorable. “So, what are you are writing about?” I asked the scholar. “Actually, I was thinking of writing a book about Brigham Young,” he responded. I was speaking to John Turner. My face flushed red. I backpedaled and blathered some conciliatory words. Our conversation soon ended. Fortunately, John Turner did not listen to naysayers like me, and he, along with a growing host of others, has shown the value of new questions put to old topics.

In *Brigham Young: Pioneer Prophet*, Turner offers a riveting, fair-minded, and, at times, jarring portrait of the larger-than-life nineteenth-century Mormon leader. Turner’s stated methodological end is to “avoid the parochialism and polemicism that has been endemic to Mormon history by placing Young more fully in his nineteenth-century context” (p. viii). In this light, Young proves to be a figure of great historical importance. His life, according to Turner, “brings into sharp relief” some of the era’s most contested political issues: “westward expansion, popular sovereignty, religious freedom, vigilantism, and Reconstruction” (p. 4). Within this framework, Turner argues that Young should be taken as a pioneer in more senses than one: a religious pioneer as well as a colonizer. As a religious pioneer, Young added and refined religious rituals that salved his followers’ desires for sacramental kinship connections. Young advocated and defended new, original doctrines (such as his doctrine that Adam was the God of this world). Young reformed new social practices

that Joseph Smith had only tentatively begun (the polygamous society and massive economic collectives). And Young oversaw the completion and construction of unique Mormon sacred spaces (temples, tabernacles, and wards) that decisively marked the Saints as different from other American Christians. In short, Turner's portrait of Young the religious pioneer shows that the Mormon prophet was more than the practical implementer of Joseph Smith's theocratic vision for human society; Young was a religious innovator in his own right.

Sifting through a mountain of primary and secondary sources (some unavailable to previous biographers), Turner organizes his book into thirteen elegantly written chapters, as well as a succinct prologue and epilogue. In his first few chapters, Turner follows the transformation of Young from a rather unremarkable journeyman craftsman into an effective Mormon missionary and fiercely loyal follower of Joseph Smith. Young, Turner notes, had never formed a close relationship with any religious leader until he met Smith and joined Smith's church. After that, the former Methodist and craftsman, now Mormon missionary, doggedly defended Smith from all detractors, marched in the 1834 Zion's Camp militia expedition to Missouri, and earned Smith's confidence and a place in Smith's original Council of Twelve Apostles. By sheer luck in 1839, Young became the leader of Smith's apostles because of that group's leadership ranking by age (the seniormost apostle had left Smith's church, the next senior apostle had died of his combat wounds in the 1838 Mormon War in Missouri, and another senior apostle was thirteen days younger than Brigham). If luck placed Young at the head of the apostles, he fulfilled his duties in that role quite effectively. From 1839 to 1841, Young served as a missionary in England and earned the admiration of thousands of British converts. By 1844, Young was a trusted and respected leader in a church numbering in the tens of thousands. And Young stood in Joseph Smith's inner circle that secretly practiced plural marriage—a practice that placed Young at odds with other leaders who opposed this controversial patriarchal restructuring of the family. Young, in fact, would become the most married man in Mormonism, and likely the most married man in America.

In the months after Smith's June 1844 assassination, Young rallied the Saints to stand together against non-Mormon opposition in Illinois, and he outmaneuvered other successors to Smith by claiming that the apostles jointly held the authority to lead the church. Most importantly, Young claimed the power to be the Mormon people's "chief priest," in Turner's words. That is, the Mormon leader presided over and expanded the rituals that Smith had believed would eventually bind humanity together in a great chain of being. These rituals included plural marriage, proxy baptism for the dead, and an elaborate promise-making ceremony that opened the way for an individual's eternal exaltation (godhood) in the afterlife (referred to as "the endowment"). Young's ritual power, more than anything else, secured for him a path to eventually claim to be Smith's successor rather than simply the leader of the church's foremost missionary group.

The chief priest who emerged from Nauvoo quickly became the Mormon chieftain, Turner explains, as Young presided over the successful mass exodus of thousands of Mormons across the plains and established a theocratic state in the Intermountain West. This singular act endeared Young to tens of thousands of his followers and won their consistent loyalty even when they had to tolerate his episodic wrath. As Turner reveals, Young was both loved and feared by the Saints. His closest associates in the church's leadership both hungered for his approval and privately resented him. They cowered under his constant berating, and they felt unfairly blamed for Young's mistakes, for which he rarely took responsibility. In private and in public, Brigham Young could be a harsh, crude man, prone to frequent profanity and violent hyperbole. Young believed that Joseph Smith forgave people too easily, and he lived a life that did not brook such weakness. And when Young forgave, he did not forget. He held perceived slights to himself against individuals for decades, as members of his inner circle, like the apostle Orson Pratt, knew all too well.

What accounts for such leadership practices? Young's Missouri and Nauvoo apprenticeship—one "forged in the crucible of anti-Mormon persecution"—left deep imprints on him, claims Turner. It cultivated in Young what Turner calls a "siege mentality" and led Young "to demonize his enemies, employ violent rhetoric, and condone murders" in the

decades after his ascension to power (p. 4). Indeed, the Brigham Young of the late 1840s to the early 1860s was a fearsome, frightening leader—revealed most graphically in his “Mormon Reformation”-era sermons in 1856 and 1857 that were aimed at reforming his Saints and ferreting out apostates from Utah Territory. Most famously, Young’s sermons and subsequent policies helped create an environment that made possible the Mountain Meadows Massacre of 120 non-Mormon men, women, and children passing through southern Utah in a wagon train. Furthermore, at the apogee of the Mormon Reformation, Young defended and condoned the murder of several apostates by local Mormon leaders (the infamous Parrish-Potter murders) and the castration of a petty thief.

These violent acts that Young condoned were part of a tradition of vigilante justice, a tragically familiar form of nineteenth-century American violence, but with a Mormon twist. In each instance, Young’s doctrine of blood atonement—loving one’s neighbor by spilling his blood before he could forsake his salvation—justified the violence. Still, as Turner notes, mid-nineteenth-century Utah actually had less vigilante violence than neighboring Western territories and states. However, in Utah, “the governor and head of the territory’s quasi-established religion [Brigham Young] lent his approval . . . to shadowy acts of retribution that alarmed even some loyal Mormons” (p. 262). In this way, Utah was unique.

As Turner points out, the violence that Young sanctioned occurred within the context of a much larger conflict between the Mormons and the federal government on the eve of the American Civil War. Here Turner deftly foregrounds his discussion of Young within the shifting landscape of the mid-nineteenth-century American political parties and their many internal factions, North and South. Whereas Joseph Smith never mastered the ability to exploit political fissures, Young, with allies like the non-Mormon reformer Thomas Kane, was able to rather remarkably fend off one set of federal officials after another and set US army commanders at odds with the territorial governor who had replaced Young in 1858.

If Turner’s section on the Mormon Reformation is shocking in its descriptions of brutality, his section on the political infighting and maneuvering in Utah and Washington, DC, after 1862 is devoid of the same apocalyptic violence. While other Americans engaged in the most massive,

protracted bloodletting in US history, Young and his Saints largely stayed out of the American Civil War. Instead, Young used the war as an opportunity to maneuver to preserve his church, their plural marriage practices, and his authority. If this was ultimately a rearguard action, it was rather remarkably executed. In this section of the narrative, Turner relates how Young adopted a new leadership approach that both defended his church and muted his blustering, violent rhetoric. For instance, when several prominent LDS leaders and merchants began a protest movement against Young in 1869, he moved against them with measured restraint. Young arranged an excommunication hearing for the leaders of the “Godbeite” movement (so named for a prominent leader of the faction, a Salt Lake City merchant and spiritual seeker, William Godbe). Unlike the Mormon Reformation era, “there was no talk of cutting throats or sending men to ‘hell across lots,’” notes Turner. Instead, Young “orchestrated a hearing remarkably free of rancor” (p. 358). Godbe and others were excommunicated, but none fell victim to physical violence.

As Young aged, he “grew more cantankerous than fearsome,” argues Turner (p. 405). The reader might wonder whether Young simply grew weary of picking fights, but Turner sees Young as pursuing a deliberate strategy in the last decade of his life to adapt to new circumstances. The “Lion of the Lord,” as Young had been nicknamed, could no longer bowl over his wayward allies or political and ecclesiastical opponents. This new strategy certainly surprised Young’s opponents in Utah and Washington who, over and over again, underestimated the Mormon prophet’s abilities. Young was no one’s martyr. He was a survivor.

From the outset of his biography, Turner attempts to warn his readers against measuring Young against modern sensibilities and standards. “Young believed that God had cursed black people with inferiority and servitude, viewed American Indians as savages inclined toward idleness, and—especially until his later years—made misogynistic comments about women,” states Turner (p. 5). However, Young, cautions Turner, was much like the majority of other nineteenth-century white American men in all of these attitudes. Turner, who is a practicing Presbyterian, also attempts to defend Young against moralistic judgments of him and his church for

their bribery of federal authorities, noting that Mormons “were hardly the only Americans with a less than saintly record when it came to political ethics” (p. 369). Historian Edward Blum, though, calls Turner to task on this point, noting that his contextual example was a comparison of the LDS Church with the Union Pacific Railroad. “One claimed to be a church” while the other did not, says Blum.<sup>1</sup>

Blum’s brief criticism (one of a handful of critiques in an otherwise glowing review of Turner) is suggestive of a belief that nineteenth-century American critics of Young and most contemporary LDS members share in common: churches should limit the instruments of coercion they employ for any desired end. In contrast, Brigham Young, as leader of an incipient nation-state pitted against US federal power, reached for all of the weapons that he could devise to defend his kingdom. These included lies, bribes, occasional physical violence, and bureaucratic procedures. In short, Young employed the very weapons that the United States used against him. Of course, Brigham Young claimed to lead a church—but the point is that, especially under his leadership, it was no ordinary church. As Turner notes, Young’s LDS Church “had the real estate to back up [its] kingdom-building rhetoric” (p. 413). No one else did. Young’s church was a theocratic society that only reluctantly became a defanged American denomination—and that only after Young’s death. In the end, Young “preserved a church and created a people, but that success damaged and even destroyed some lives” (p. 413). And this leads to another factor that underlies Blum’s brief critique of Turner’s Young: the desire that Americans, then and now, hold for revered institutions and leaders to possess pure characters, motives, and actions.

For most Americans, religious leaders are not to be average individuals; they are to be exemplary and extraordinary. LDS members venerate their past leaders in ways that are foreign to everyone except for many Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, Catholics, and some Protestants—which is to say that veneration of ancestors is nothing extraordinary. As religious

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1. Edward J. Blum, review of *Brigham Young: Pioneer Prophet*, by John G. Turner, *Christian Century* 129/21 (October 2012).

studies scholar Robert Orsi reminds us, religions allow people “to form deep ties with saints, ancestors, demons, gods, ghosts, and other special beings, in whose company humans work on the world and on themselves.”<sup>2</sup> These relationships, though, are fraught with all the same vicissitudes of human relationships—love, anger, abuse, mutuality. Consequently, disappointment with an ancestor or a divine being is nothing unusual. Beyond these disappointing religious relationships, religious people often encounter disappointment when they study their group through the same lenses that historians study all other cultures and peoples. Historian Grant Wacker warns that “for many [religious folk] the most upsetting part [of studying history] is to learn how shabby their own story—the story of their own tribe, their own sect—really is, for all too often it proves to be a tale of small-minded men and women inflicting large-minded cruelties upon anyone who got in their way.”<sup>3</sup> If online reviews of Turner are any measure, many LDS readers of *Pioneer Prophet* have had this very experience. Some reviewers of Turner have even suggested that LDS individuals should not recommend *Pioneer Prophet* to average LDS members.<sup>4</sup>

While I am not LDS and have far lower stakes in this conversation, I find this last suggestion overly protective. LDS members already google information on church history to their hearts’ content and are famous for buying books about themselves. I think it would be far better for them to read a balanced portrait of Young rather than encounter a less sophisticated (even if well-documented) rendering elsewhere. Turner provides

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2. Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 2.

3. Grant Wacker, “Understanding the Past, Using the Past: Reflections on Two Approaches to History,” in *Religious Advocacy and American History*, ed. Bruce Kuklick and D. G. Hart (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 168.

4. For instance, see Craig L. Foster, “New Light on Old Shadows: John Turner’s Attempt to Understand Brigham Young,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 3 (2013): 221; Julie M. Smith, review of *Brigham Young: Pioneer Prophet*, by John G. Turner, *Times and Seasons* (blog), 10 September 2012, <http://timesandseasons.org/>; Carl [Cranney], “Book Review: *Brigham Young: Pioneer Prophet* by John Turner,” *I Feel Like Schrödinger’s Cat* (blog), 18 December 2012, <http://ifeellikeschrodingerscat.blogspot.com/>.



an unvarnished portrait of the Mormon prophet. But it is also a richly textured, three-dimensional image of Young. Apologetically minded renderings of Young, whether from the countercult or the self-anointed faithful, lack the same realism. The so-called average people that I know understand this and feel insulted if scholars treat them as children, unable to tackle complicated ideas.

Several reviews of Turner by LDS members have critiqued him for not providing ample reasons for why nineteenth-century Saints followed Young.<sup>5</sup> I found this critique unconvincing. As Turner points out, over and over again, nineteenth-century Saints followed Young for a multitude of reasons. Young presided over a mission in Great Britain that converted thousands of people. Young successfully engineered the exodus from Nauvoo across the plains. Even with the spectacular disaster of the Martin and Willey handcart companies, Young showed his ability to organize and inspire people to send relief to avert a much larger disaster. As a preacher, Young gave plain-talking sermons that appealed to his listeners, and his occasional crude analogies even entertained them. Young exercised charismatic gifts, like speaking in tongues, and gave powerful prayers. And crucially, Young, as nineteenth-century Mormons believed, held the keys to conduct religious rituals that bound them to one another (plural marriage and adoption rites) and their ancestors (baptism for the dead and endowments for the dead). When reviewers have stated that Turner neglected the reasons for why nineteenth-century LDS followed Young, I suspect that they actually meant that Turner neglected laying out reasons for why they, modern Mormons, would want to follow Young. And these are two very different questions.

Still, after reading Turner's work, I have no doubt that thoughtful, faithful LDS readers will find many ways to relate to the figure who Turner claims "dedicated himself to Joseph Smith, boldly challenged religious, political, and economic conventions, and shaped . . . the Mormon people in his self-image" (p. 413). Historians and Mormon laity alike are

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5. Foster, "New Light on Old Shadows"; Smith, review of *Brigham Young*; and Carl, review of *Brigham Young*.

fortunate that such a gifted historian as Turner dedicated so much time to place Young back into the center of nineteenth-century Mormon history. If millions will know Brother Joseph once more, after Turner, they will know, even if with a melancholy sigh, Brother Brigham too.

**David J. Howlett** is a visiting assistant professor of religion at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, New York. Previously, he served as a Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow in Modern Christianity at Bowdoin College. He specializes in American religious history, and his first book, *Kirtland Temple: The Biography of a Shared Mormon Sacred Space*, will appear this spring.

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Review of Claudia L. Bushman and Caroline Kline, eds. *Mormon Women Have Their Say: Essays from the Claremont Oral History Collection*. Draper, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2013. 314 pp., with index. \$31.95 paperback.

*Reviewed by Jana Riess*

In the superb introduction to *Mormon Women Have Their Say: Essays from the Claremont Oral History Collection*, Claudia Bushman points out that although written accounts of Mormon women's lives have been encouraged for nearly two hundred years, "those from eminent women have, for the most part, been privileged" (p. xiv). The lives of female leaders, prominent pioneers, and the wives of General Authorities have assumed pride of place, while the life stories of ordinary LDS women are often not recorded. In an impressive effort to document such contemporary women's experiences, the Claremont Oral History Project has harvested more than 2,500 single-spaced pages of such women's interviews—and is gathering and transcribing still more. This volume of essays, coedited by Bushman and doctoral student Caroline Kline, is the first in what one hopes will be many books that mine the rich data of the Claremont project.