



10-1-1966

Nauvoo—Kingdom on the Mississippi Robert Bruce Flanders

LaMar C. Berrett

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq>

Recommended Citation

Berrett, LaMar C. (1966) "*Nauvoo—Kingdom on the Mississippi* Robert Bruce Flanders," *BYU Studies Quarterly*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 3 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol7/iss3/13>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *BYU Studies Quarterly* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

ROBERT BRUCE FLANDERS. *Nauvoo—Kingdom on the Mississippi*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965. 364 pp. \$6.50.

This book is based on a doctoral dissertation written for the University of Wisconsin. At present, the author is an associate professor of history at the Reorganized Latter Day Saints Church's Graceland College in Lamoni, Iowa.

Professor Robert Flanders has attempted to search deeply and give insight into the temporal life of Joseph Smith and the Mormons in Nauvoo. Joseph Smith is considered not primarily as a religious leader, but as an economist, promoter, architect, politician and man of affairs. Without fully considering the religious forces, the author has attempted to analyze the social, political, military and economic facets concerning the Mormon kingdom. He has done what most secular historians would accuse church historians of doing—that is, of writing church history in a vacuum.

An example of this weakness is found in an interpretation of the Word of Wisdom (D&C 89). To divorce the theological implications of this revelation and make it a matter of economic necessity is to ignore a complexity of forces in favor of a simple cause. Religious forces as well as economic, social and political forces must be considered in order to reconstruct the "why's" of events in church history.

After the publication of many inaccurate works by splinter-groups of the Church, it is refreshing to read in Flanders' book a somewhat objective account of historical events such as the origin of polygamy. He sees polygamy originating in Nauvoo with Joseph Smith rather than in Utah with Brigham Young. Moreover, he writes about the nine apostles who were led to Utah with the majority of Mormons, and of those who were opposed to the exodus as being a small minority.

Five of the chapters were most appealing to the reviewer. Chapter one has excellent factual material concerning the various reasons the Saints were so well accepted by the people of Illinois in 1839. Extensive research had to be done before writing chapter four. It deals with the economic, social and political setting of the British converts and their purpose in emigrating from England. Chapter seven on the Nauvoo Temple helps the reader to understand the keen feelings of the Saints in their desires for a temple. Perhaps the eighth is the most enlightening

chapter. It is concerned with the Saints' political controversies and their affiliation with both Whigs and Democrats. The commendable research and writing accomplished by this author is reflected in these first chapters particularly.

There are very few noticeable mechanical errors in the book, such as the misspelling of Berrett (p. 23). There are, however, certain errors of fact. The author said that "details of its[Nauvoo Masonic Temple] size and cost are lacking" (p. 248). The Masonic Temple is still standing and thus the size would not be difficult to measure. In the text (p. 311) Flanders said that "few, including Smith himself, seemed to have seriously considered the possibilities of his death." However, early revelations to Joseph Smith indicate that he did seriously consider this possibility. Certainly, as he went to Carthage on June 24, 1844, he knew, according to his own record, that he would probably be killed. The author confused Orson Hyde with Orson Pratt (p. 269). He quoted Ebenezer Robinson's account of Orson Pratt's disappearance and indicated this was Orson Hyde. The author makes it sound as if the "five thousand persons" who received their endowments in Nauvoo were a minority of the Mormons in the Nauvoo region (p. 336); but four-fifths of the adult population is not a minority.

The reviewer questions the author's liberal use of and reliance on anti-Mormon sources. Too much reliance is given to apostate testimonies. John C. Bennett was a bitter enemy of the Prophet Joseph and the Mormons, and yet Mr. Flanders says that the "historian" could not discount Bennett's charges (p. 267). Ebenezer Robinson, who wrote a history of the Church fifty years after the events occurred and who at the time was an apostate from the Church, might have had some doubtful "historical" statements; yet Flanders has quoted extensively from his writings. On the other hand, Flanders failed to even list B. H. Roberts' *Rise and Fall of Nauvoo* in his bibliography. He seems to have chosen the "morsels" to suit his own taste. Is it history when the writer tries to reconstruct the feelings of the Saints in Nauvoo by quoting such unreliable representatives as John C. Bennett? Does Bennett express the feelings of the majority of Saints?

Two other aspects of Flanders' book make it objectionable to members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. One is the criticism of Brigham Young and the Mormon Church

in Utah. The second is the accusation that Joseph Smith was an imposter—a false prophet. Examples of the first are as follows: (1) Brigham Young and his “assumption” of control over the Church (p. 123). (2) The Nauvoo Temple being “unfinished” (He says it was unfinished like the “city” and “kingdom,” which might be a good indication of how it *was* finished.) (3) The tithing practice of the Reorganization being the proper method (p. 207). (4) The age-old accusation that Masonry provided the basis for the Nauvoo Temple endowment ceremony. (5) Although the author courageously admits the practice of polygamy in the Nauvoo period, he is careful to point out that this came not by revelation, but as a “simple logical step.” (6) He criticizes Brigham Young for not following Lyman Wight to Texas as he claims Joseph had planned. In this, Flanders seems to misunderstand the workings of latter-day prophets—the receiving of revelation “today” to guide the people. (7) He contends that Joseph Smith III was designated by his father to succeed him as the president of the Church.

Finally, the most serious objection of the book from a “Utah Mormon” point of view is the denial of the Prophet Joseph Smith as a living prophet of God. The view of the author is not unlike that of most “modern historians”: That Joseph Smith was a product of the times; a creature of the society; a temporal planner, promoter, architect, entrepreneur, executive, filibusterer and politician. This view would quite naturally preclude any notion that Joseph Smith could have received revelations from a Supreme Being, and therefore was an imposter. Flanders accuses Joseph Smith of being an exaggerator (p. 132), a liar (p. 275), a compromiser (p. 120), and a false prophet (pp. 102-103). He says that his motives were questionable (p. 163); that he was not opposed to the Danite movement in Missouri; and that the revelations he received were of his own making. To the reviewer, all these accusations are false, and the last accusation is the most serious. He denies the revelation on plural marriage (p. 267). Although he gave Joseph credit for having had a vision of the Nauvoo Temple, he still says that the conception of the building was his own. The author claims that the integral part of the gathering of the Saints to Zion was for the purpose of speculation rather than to fulfill prophecy and revelation (p. 46); and that the Lord did not give the Saints foreknowledge of the Saints’ move to the West

(p. 289). (See Andrus, Hyrum L. "Joseph Smith and the West," *B.Y.U. Studies*, Vol. II, No. 2, pp. 129-147.)

The criticisms of the Prophet Joseph Smith are not based on an examination of all sources available. The author seems to try to place "doubt" in the mind of the reader concerning Joseph Smith and revelation. An example of this may be found in a footnote on page five. The author would place doubt in the mind of the reader when he says Matthew L. Davis was not a member of Congress as Joseph Smith had said he was—intimating that Joseph did not tell the truth. This doubt towards Joseph's character could have been dispelled had Flanders noted that Matthew L. Davis was a political correspondent in Washington at that time. It was not a serious mistake for Joseph to assume that Davis was a politician rather than a correspondent. Although Joseph made an error in identity, the man did exist who apparently wrote the article Joseph was quoting.

Yes, Joseph Smith was human. He made mistakes, and was the first to admit it. But why emphasize his errors unless the errors are significant?

In spite of these weaknesses, much valuable historical information has been collected and well written by Professor Flanders. This is a book that amateur and professional historians should read if they are interested in an economic, social and political treatise on the life of Joseph Smith and the Mormons in their kingdom on the Mississippi.

LaMar C. Berrett
Brigham Young University