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**Title** Spotting an Anti-Mormon Book

**Author(s)** Davis Bitton

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**Abstract** Davis Bitton provides a few guidelines to help readers determine whether a given text is anti-Mormon and to explain how readers should approach such texts.

## SPOTTING AN ANTI-MORMON BOOK

Davis Bitton

It would be more than a little ridiculous to think of all who are not members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as anti-Mormons. It might induce some needed humility to discover how many throughout the world's population don't even know we exist, or if they know, think of us on a superficial, inaccurate level. Those good folks are not anti-Mormons.

On the other hand, the "street preachers," as they identify themselves, who have decided to devote their lives to disrupting the peace of Latter-day Saints as they gather for pageants, dedications of buildings, and even temple worship—these people I do not mind calling anti-Mormons. Many of us have in our minds an indelible picture of one of these preachers, standing outside the entrance to the Salt Lake Temple, shouting insults through a bullhorn at the worshippers, and refusing a polite request to desist out of "common decency" while a young bride emerged from the temple on her wedding day.

But what about books, pamphlets, and articles that discuss the church, its people today, its history, its doctrines, its scriptures? Do any of these deserve the title of anti-Mormon? The answer is an emphatic yes.

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An earlier version of this paper appeared in the online *Meridian Magazine*, at [www.meridianmagazine.com/historybits/030922spotting.html](http://www.meridianmagazine.com/historybits/030922spotting.html) (accessed 8 March 2004).

Even before looking at a specific work, we have some preliminary indications based on the publisher. I shall return to a closer evaluation of a book's content, but many busy people appreciate a broad indication to guide their choices.

Books published by faithful Latter-day Saint publishers such as Deseret Book, Horizon, and Covenant Communications, as well as articles appearing in *BYU Studies*, church magazines, and the online *Meridian Magazine* can safely be assumed not to be anti-Mormon. The explanation is quite simple: the editors who make decisions of what to publish in these venues reject manuscripts that trash the church. This list of friendly publishers and periodicals is by no means complete.

"Oh, sure, what you get from these sources is a lot of syrupy pro-Mormon drivel." Was it my imagination or did I hear that statement come from someone? My answer includes a concession and a proclamation, both based on extensive sampling. Not everything published in Latter-day Saint books and periodicals is of the same quality nor is it intended for the same age level. But anyone who refuses to read any such material is depriving himself of some excellent, important work of very high quality.

When someone tells me that she never reads material put out by FARMS (the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies), I conclude that she is less interested in Mormons than in cultivating her prejudice. Occasionally I have been disappointed, but on certain subjects FARMS has published the only articles available or the best produced to this time. To read the attack literature and refuse to examine the responses in the FARMS publications betrays a closed mind.

Am I suggesting that works produced by other publishers or appearing in other periodicals are necessarily anti-Mormon? No. They may or may not be. Several university presses and nonchurch publishers have brought out important works that deserve a respectful reading. Some of their books are the best treatment of their subject. Examples from a long list of publishers could be cited. Some presses have a very good record of publishing solid, reliable treatments of

Mormon subjects. Others have a mixed record or lean strongly toward the negative.

To be sure, the identity of the publisher is not the final determinant of whether a book is anti-Mormon, but it can be a preliminary indicator. We can assume that publications of the Utah Gospel Mission and the Utah Lighthouse Ministry, for example, are anti-Mormon, at least in intent. When individuals see it as their life's mission to tear down and destroy the Church of Jesus Christ, either in speech or in writing, their words are, in whole or in part, predictably anti-Mormon.

Moving past the publisher, here are some things to look for in books about the Latter-day Saints.

### **Inaccuracy**

Start reading at the beginning. Or turn to a chapter on a subject about which you already know something. If you come across statements that are simply inaccurate or leave a misleading impression, start counting. One or two of these on nonessential matters can perhaps be overlooked. But if they accumulate, if you find yourself saying "Oh, no" or "What?" time after time, the chances are that the book is anti-Mormon. It is amazing how some of these writers think they can get away with falsehood and inaccuracy. Preferring to believe them sincere, we are left with the explanation that they are careless and have not bothered to have their facts and arguments checked by someone who is knowledgeable.

### **Telling Us What We Believe**

The ground rule here should be to let each person say for himself what he believes. You may speak for yourself. I will speak for myself. All too often our enemies like to state our beliefs for us. If they quote from past sermons or writings, they do so without regard for context. They find a quotation of the 1870s, the 1850s, or the 1830s and try to hang it around the neck of people who have never heard of it. To suggest that something is part of the fabric of current Mormonism when it is never mentioned and never advocated is a deliberate

smear. Yet these charming critics are eager to tell us what we think. How often have we heard that we don't believe in salvation by grace? Or that we don't believe in the Jesus of the Bible? Excuse me, but such people are not interested in a conversation or in accuracy. They are anti-Mormon.

### **Principle of Selection**

Since it is impossible to include everything, any author selects what he wishes to include. If a book about Latter-day Saints shows a strong preference for negative information, I don't mind considering it anti-Mormon. This does not mean that only positive narratives are allowed. The best histories are true to the complexity of life. While not excluding problems and misbehavior, they do not try to impugn a whole people by examples that are rare and unrepresentative. Is the reported incident typical or is it unusual and exceptional? One who wanders down the street of Mormon history picking up an empty beer can here, a piece of decaying garbage there, whose whole interest is in such things, who shows no interest in goodness or dedication or courage or achievement—this is your typical anti-Mormon writer. Muslims, Jews, Catholics, Protestant evangelicals, Hindus—many groups have reason to be concerned about how they are portrayed. Latter-day Saints are no different and can fairly raise the same questions.

### **Interpretation**

After deciding what to include, writers explain what it means. Or by the way they tell the story, they imply an interpretation. I am not so tender-eared that the church must always be presented pure as the driven snow. Situations can be complicated. Individuals with tempers and poor judgment sometimes say things or do things we are not proud of. The point of view of outsiders, even if skewed, becomes part of the historical reality and should be recognized and, if possible, understood. But if a book misses no opportunity to cast Mormons as villains, if it always shows the church, its leaders, its people, and its beliefs in the worst possible light, it deserves the anti-Mormon label.

### What We Know of the Author

Since good books can be written by bad people and bad books by good people, I prefer to evaluate a book on its own terms. But if the author participates in anti-Mormon activities, denounces the church, or engages in behavior defiantly contrary to church standards, his portrayal of the Saints and their history will probably not be scrupulously accurate, much less fair or sympathetic. If he presents himself as a Latter-day Saint when in fact he has not set foot inside a sacrament meeting for twenty-five years, we have a right to be suspicious. If he indulges in snide, disrespectful, cruel comments about the Saints and those they sustain as prophets, we should not be surprised if his book is anti-Mormon. I am always happy to be proved wrong in such expectations, but when an author makes no effort to hide his contempt of the Saints and what they stand for, his predisposition is hard to ignore.

I have learned much from conscientious scholars who are not Latter-day Saints. Many of their works are friendly, neutral, or probing—willing to recognize complexity, willing to grant sincerity even when they might disagree with the religious faith of their subjects. Such publications are not anti-Mormon. I thank many of these good people who have a sincere interest in Latter-day Saints as a subject of historical or sociological investigation and who have made important contributions. Others of like mind are always welcome. The outside perspective can be illuminating.

But illumination is not the word for the deceit and distortions of the anti-Mormon. A book that is clearly anti-Mormon should have a sticker on the dust jacket: *Caveat lector*—let the reader beware. I say this not because I wish for only simple, saccharine works about the church but because it is always regrettable when people are misinformed. Anti-Mormon works demonize their subjects. They leave a flawed, tainted picture. They mislead.

Some people find it difficult to believe there is such a thing as an anti-Mormon book. Others think that only anti-Mormon literature can be relied upon. After all, if this material tells them what they want to hear and tears down the church they wish to tear down, why would they not read it and recommend it? I wonder if they turn to the abhorrent

anti-Semitism in such works as the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* for their information about Jews.

My remarks here are tentative and preliminary. Each of the suggested earmarks is worthy of discussion. Other indicators could no doubt be added. In the meantime, if you haven't done so or if it has faded from your memory, give yourself the pleasure of reading Hugh Nibley's "How to Write an Anti-Mormon Book."<sup>1</sup>

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1. Hugh W. Nibley, "How to Write an Anti-Mormon Book (A Handbook for Beginners)," in *Tinkling Cymbals and Sounding Brass: The Art of Telling Tales about Joseph Smith and Brigham Young* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 474–580.