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Orson Hyde Howard H. Barron

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Book Reviews

Edited by Peter Crawley

BARRON, HOWARD H. *Orson Hyde*. Bountiful, Utah: Horizon Publishers, 1977. xiv + 336 pp. \$7.95.

Reviewed by Marvin S. Hill, associate professor of history at Brigham Young University.

Howard Barron, a professor of religious instruction at Brigham Young University, has written a study of Orson Hyde which the publisher calls on the dust jacket "a biographical classic." While in some ways the book may be a "classic," it is not a biography, nor essentially an historical work as I understand these terms.

Barron's work is a chronology of the major events in Orson Hyde's life, with emphasis upon his activities as missionary, apostle, colonizer, and Church administrator up to the time the Saints left Council Bluffs. No doubt many Latter-day Saints will find this account informative since Hyde participated in many of the major events in Church history during these years and was a very active missionary.

Yet opportunities are lost. Despite its sequential format, its sketchy historical research, and its historical subject matter, I do not believe this work qualifies as history or biography in the best sense. The book is not an attempt to understand the man Orson Hyde, his mind and spirit, his times, the meaning of his life in the broad context of Mormon and American history. It is rather an attempt to depict Orson Hyde as the ideal Mormon type, in terms of 1970 values. Great emphasis is placed on Orson's faith and commitment, his obedience and conformity. Seen thus, Hyde is shorn of those qualities which made him a unique and significant human being. Hyde is valued here as an automaton who acts only in ways leaders are expected to act. He is symbol and image, but not flesh and blood. Thus countless paragraphs tell us that he departed for this mission or that one, that he filled this Church assignment or that, but never are we taken inside the man to probe his heart and soul as a free, moral individual.

The handling of Hyde's apostasy in 1838 illustrates the point. During the Mormon war in Missouri when 300 elders were organized into Danite bands and sent out to raid Gallatin and burn the town (in retaliation for so many wrongs done the Mormons in Missouri), Orson Hyde took no part. Sick with anguish and des-

pair, and tortured with growing doubt about the truth of Mormonism, Hyde wrote to a Sister Abbot on October 25: "I have left the Church called Latter Day Saints for conscience sake, fully believing that God is not with them, And is not the mover of their schemes and projects." Hyde told Brigham Young afterward that it was the Danites that repelled him. He and Apostle Thomas Marsh wrote an affidavit denouncing Danite activity which was collected as evidence against Joseph Smith at the pre-trial in Richmond in November 1838. Hyde was excommunicated from the Church and remained out of it for eight months. Lonely and remorseful, he later contacted Heber C. Kimball and sought his intercession with the Prophet to regain his membership and former standing. Only upon Kimball's and Hyrum Smith's special pleading did Joseph Smith yield and allow Hyde's restoration. Hyde confessed that he had acted foolishly, and that he had sinned, but we have no record of his saying that his testimony in his sworn affidavit was a misrepresentation. We do know that he told Brigham Young that he had come to see matters in a different light, however.

This very crucial period in Hyde's life, which tells us so much about the man and his times, is handled in a conventional way in *Orson Hyde*. Professor Barron accepts John Taylor's statement that the testimony of Marsh and Hyde was untrue, without any attempt to evaluate the evidence.

It is the Orson Hyde who faced such agonizing choices in 1838 (and afterwards) whom we do not get to know in Barron's treatment. Do we not thus lose sight of something of great importance? This kind of iconography strips men of their individuality and moral agency. If it is history, it is history closer to Puritan than to Mormon values. Orson Hyde was not only a man of great loyalty to the Church, but also a man of conscience who did not believe Danites belonged in the Church of Christ. Hyde's finest hour may have come here when he broke with group pressures to protest Danite wrongs. Afterward, in his history, Joseph Smith admitted Danite excesses and expressed some regret. It was perhaps this recognition that made it possible for Hyde to come back to the Church. To fail to perceive the moral dilemma facing Hyde in 1838 is to miss the man, the movement, the meaning.