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Book Reviews

HILLAM, RAY C., ed. *By the Hands of Wise Men: Essays on the U.S. Constitution*. Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1979. 128 pp. \$4.95.

Reviewed by Donald Q. Cannon, professor of Church history and doctrine, Brigham Young University.

By the Hands of Wise Men contains an introduction and seven essays by authors trained in the disciplines of history, economics, law, philosophy, and political science. Because "this book is an outgrowth of a symposium sponsored by the College of Social Sciences in commemoration of the centennial of Brigham Young University," it has both the strengths and weaknesses of that relationship. It includes the work of some eminent scholars, but it also has some material that does not fit comfortably with the other essays. *By the Hands of Wise Men* contains an introduction and seven essays by authors trained in the disciplines of history, economics, law, philosophy, and political science.

The first essay, "The Doctrine of an Inspired Constitution," by Noel Reynolds,¹ deserves to be the lead essay because its title and basic assumptions are central to the book's theme. Reynolds believes that the U.S. Constitution is an inspired document. Furthermore, he argues that the process of divine inspiration related to the Constitution is similar to the process involved in the welfare program of the Church; that is, inspiration comes through the historical process of growth and experimentation.

While Reynolds's essay contains many brilliant insights, it is marred by some questionable assumptions. On page three, for example, he claims that most early Americans saw the hand of God shaping American destiny, when, in fact, many early Americans were clearly skeptical of such a notion. Professor Reynolds also says that notable historians of the nineteenth century echoed this providential

¹Noel B. Reynolds, "The Doctrine of an Inspired Constitution," *Brigham Young University Studies* 16 (Spring 1976): 315-40.

view of America, citing specifically George Bancroft. Although Bancroft did believe that, it should be noted that he was an exception. On the positive side, some of Professor Reynolds's conclusions are excellent. He warns his readers, for example, "Some Latter-day Saints seem to take the prophetic teaching that the Constitution was inspired as a reason for insisting that the original document was a final achievement, which should never be modified or revised."

In "Virtue and the Constitution" Richard L. Bushman claims that virtue is absolutely essential to the proper functioning of the U.S. Constitution. His definition of virtue—the avoidance of self-indulgence, and the sacrifice of personal interest for the good of the whole—is borrowed from the noted American historian, Gordon S. Wood. The Constitution, argues Dr. Bushman, was an effort to compensate for the lack of virtue in Americans. Even though the Constitution guards against selfishness, Americans must be vigilant in promoting virtue, which is its opposite. Bushman says we can accomplish this best by teaching faith and virtue.

In his essay on J. Reuben Clark,² Martin B. Hickman deals with three aspects of President Clark's commentaries on the Constitution: (1) his belief that it was an inspired document, (2) the centrality of the separation of powers, and, (3) the freedoms of the first amendment. He summarizes President Clark's thinking on the inspired nature of the document in this manner: "He viewed history through the lens of faith." The balance of the essay is a clear and persuasive statement of J. Reuben Clark's views on the U.S. Constitution. Reading this essay persuades me to agree with Dean Hickman that J. Reuben Clark's unique contribution was his ability to write with precision about the Constitution.

L. Dwight Israelsen's essay on "Mormons, the Constitution, and the Host Economy" describes the ideal system of economics and government as the Law of Consecration. He points out that the capitalist system fostered by the U.S. Constitution is the best "host economy" because it allows the Church the option of activating or deactivating the Law of Consecration as necessary. Israelsen cautions Mormons: "Having been taught the superiority of capitalism as a host system, they [Mormons] begin to attribute capitalistic institutions, as well as the attitudes and operational characteristics of capitalism, to the ideal system." This is a solid essay, but there seems to be too much on economics and too little on the Constitution.

²See *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 7 (Spring 1972): 37-46 and *BYU Studies* 13 (Spring 1973): 426-40.

Consequently, this article does not integrate as easily as it should with others in the book.

“The Constitution as Change” is the subject of the essay by William Clayton Kimball. Exploring the relationship of the written constitution to American constitutional culture, he concludes that the real U.S. Constitution is not the document but “what the people say it is, and what they will sustain it to be.” In this insightful essay Professor Kimball tells us that genuine change must take place in the minds and hearts of the people, and not just in the wording of the Constitution.

Rex E. Lee, in his essay “The Inspired Quality and the Flexibility of the Constitution,” says that the U.S. Constitution is inspired in its overall structure, but not necessarily in each individual provision. He goes on to tell us that the breadth of the Constitution is its most important inspired quality. This breadth has enabled the U.S. Constitution to endure for almost two centuries. Professor Lee wisely cautions Latter-day Saints: “We find it easy to lapse into the expansive notion that the Constitution, like the gospel, embraces all truth.”

In the concluding essay, “Some Thoughts about Our Constitution and Government,” Elder Neal A. Maxwell writes that “our American Constitution places heavy duties on the individual citizen.” Some of those duties include seeking wise, good and honest political leaders, rendering community service, and being personally righteous. Emphasis in this essay is on political responsibility rather than on the Constitution. Although it is written in Elder Maxwell’s characteristically brilliant manner, the political interest of this essay does not blend in as comfortably with the others as it might.

Although it has some unevenness, *By the Hands of Wise Men* certainly is worth buying and reading. It is an important contribution toward an understanding of the U.S. Constitution. The non-LDS reader might be uncomfortable with some of the material, but this book succeeds in addressing some important issues for Mormon readers concerning the Constitution.