



4-1-1983

Prophet of Blood: The Untold Story of Ervil LeBaron and the Lambs of God by Ben Bradlee, Jr., and Dale Van Atta

M. Guy Bishop

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

Recommended Citation

Bishop, M. Guy (1983) "*Prophet of Blood: The Untold Story of Ervil LeBaron and the Lambs of God* by Ben Bradlee, Jr., and Dale Van Atta," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 23 : Iss. 2 , Article 16.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol23/iss2/16>

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.

Book Reviews

BRADLEE, BEN, JR., and DALE VAN ATTA. *Prophet of Blood: The Untold Story of Ervil LeBaron and the Lambs of God.* New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1981. 350 pp. \$15.95.

Reviewed by M. Guy Bishop, a research historian residing in Farmington, Utah.

On 16 August 1981, Ervil Morrel LeBaron was found dead in his cell at the Utah State Prison, the victim of a massive heart seizure. At one time he was recognized by a small group of zealous disciples as "The One Mighty and Strong"—a divinely anointed prophet who was called to usher in the second coming of the Lord. For others, however, including his religious opponents and a host of law enforcement officials, Ervil LeBaron was Satan incarnate—the accused perpetrator of death and destruction throughout the western United States and in Mexico. But wherein does the truth lie? In *Prophet of Blood*, two skilled journalists try to answer that query. It is an intriguing and disturbing tale of polygamy, lust for power, conspiracy, and murder.

The Lambs of God, the name assumed by Ervil LeBaron's followers, constituted a socio-ideological subculture of Mormonism which advocated the continuance of the practice of plural marriage. Although polygamy was officially suspended by the leadership of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints late in the nineteenth century, "the principle," as practitioners choose to refer to it, continued unabated by a scattering of devotees. Acting on the assumption that the prophetic mantle of Joseph Smith, which sanctioned polygamy for the faithful, had been secretly passed on in the 1880s to a small group of men specifically chosen to preserve it, the practice continued to thrive in isolated pockets of rural Mexico and the American Southwest. And it was from this heritage that Ervil LeBaron would eventually emerge.

By the mid-twentieth century clusters of polygamists inhabited the United States and at present are estimated to number near thirty thousand. However, *Prophet of Blood* focuses on the activities, and

rivalries, of just two groups: the Church of the Firstborn, with fundamentalist roots in the infamous Short Creek, Arizona, colony founded by John Y. Barlow in the 1930s, and the Lambs of God, a band of dissenters which seceded from the former organization in 1971. Led by Ervil LeBaron, himself the son of a polygamous union, the dissidents quickly assumed an aggressive, no-holds-barred approach to winning converts. LeBaron's ultimate goal included not only the conquest of the Firstborners but an eventual usurpation of the leadership of the LDS church as well. If religious polemics failed to change hearts and minds, then the Lambs of God were willing to employ violent means.

Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of the entire book is the description of the careful development of an us-versus-them mentality which Ervil LeBaron nurtured among his "sheep." As described by the authors, it was the almost paranoid fear of persecution which drove the group to commit murder with a sense of impunity. Just as religious fervor, when properly directed, can be a tremendous force for good, misguided zealots can be made to feel justified in killing for the Lord. LeBaron evidently convinced the Lambs that such was their cause. Traitors, so-called false prophets (which came to encompass everyone but "The One Mighty and Strong"), and assorted other opponents were possible targets for assassination. One member of the cult boasted that the group was responsible for up to seventeen unsolved homicides.

Although not an actual participant, Ervil LeBaron was convicted in May 1980 of first degree murder in the slaying three years earlier of Rulon Allred, then the head of the Church of the Firstborn. The death of Allred, a long-time challenger for the mantle of Joseph and one whom the Lambs of God had frequently called to repentance, was viewed as the will of God. Such a position was well within the dictates of cult orthodoxy: opposition was to be silenced and false prophets to be eliminated. Therefore, the murder was applauded by LeBaron's followers.

Prophet of Blood is a powerful, well-written book. Ben Bradlee and Dale Van Atta appear to have done their homework thoroughly and mastered a very complex subject. At the same time, it is a disquieting study. The reader cannot help but wonder how Ervil LeBaron persuaded his adherents to murder in the name of true religion. Obviously this was not the first time in history that violence had been so justified, nor, unfortunately, is it likely to be the the last. One has to look no further than the evening news to find similar incidents. But for the spiritual and ideological descendants of nineteenth-century

Mormonism, these subjects from the past, such as plural marriage and blood atonement, strike closer to home. Whether the LDS church now sanctions, or ever did sanction, principles such as these, it is fascinating to consider a contemporary subculture which accepts them.

Any criticisms of this book would, in general, be dictated by the tastes of the reader. Scholars might find the total lack of footnotes or bibliography to be unforgivable. I, for one, would have appreciated at least some clues as to other works on fundamentalism as well as insight regarding the authors' occasional attempts to analyze the LeBaron movement from a psychological standpoint. For example, they surmise that Ervil LeBaron was full of the "persecution complex" (which, from an amateur point of view, seems justified), but they never really outline this trait in even a rudimentary fashion. Also, Bradlee and Van Atta often mention Joseph Smith and the political kingdom of God but fail to place the concept within its proper historical context by demonstrating even a passing awareness of fine recent treatises on the subject. Finally, there are sections of *Prophet of Blood* which smack of journalistic sensationalism. For example, several pages of the third chapter seem to identify a member of the LeBaron family as prone to nudism and free love—perhaps a true observation, but largely irrelevant to the matter at hand.

Minor shortcomings aside, I highly recommend the book. It provides important insight regarding this very real subculture of Mormonism which has often been overlooked. And while Ervil LeBaron and the Lambs of God were, without a doubt, the more negative aspect of polygamous society, between the lines is also a chronicle of hardworking people who sincerely practice what they hold to be true. Whether or not their claims are valid, the entire fundamentalist movement certainly goes much deeper than the more remembered exploits of a handful of misdirected individuals portrayed herein.