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Joseph Smith III: Pragmatic Prophet Roger D. Launius

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ROGER D. LAUNIUS. *Joseph Smith III: Pragmatic Prophet*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988. xii; 394 pp. \$24.95.

Reviewed by William D. Russell, chairperson, division of social science, Graceland College, Lamoni, Iowa.

With this excellent biography Roger Launius, thirty-five years old, has established himself as the foremost historian of the RLDS church. There are other RLDS historians who are better known in the community of Mormon historians (for example, official Church Historian Richard Howard, Temple School President Paul Edwards, and longtime Graceland professor of church history Alma Blair). But Launius, twenty or more years younger than each of these veteran church historians, already has the most impressive array of publications on the history of the Restoration movement of anyone in the RLDS church.

Launius's reputation was tarnished at first by his involvement as coeditor (with F. Mark McKiernan) of a flawed publication of *An Early Latter Day Saint History: The Book of John Whitmer*.¹ But since then he has published four useful books: *Zion's Camp: Expedition to Missouri, 1834*²; *The Kirtland Temple: A Historical Narrative*³; *Invisible Saints: A History of Black Americans in the Reorganized Church*⁴; and the book under review here. With the last two books especially, it is clear that he is currently the premier RLDS historian.

Joseph Smith III is a significant rewriting of Launius's 1982 dissertation (Louisiana State University). He appears to have read all of the available primary sources and the most important secondary sources for understanding the life of Joseph Smith III (1832-1914), the first president of the Reorganized Church. He is also familiar with the secular history of the period and relates it to the story where appropriate. He gives the reader good analyses of both secular and ecclesiastical politics. The endnotes are exhaustive, the work is well organized, and the writing is very readable.

The first five chapters discuss young Joseph's early years in Nauvoo, his rejection of Brigham Young's leadership, and his slow drift toward acceptance of his "call" to lead the Reorganization. The bulk of the book (chapters 6-13) deals with his leadership of the church during his nearly fifty-five years as its prophet and president, from 6 April 1860 until his death on 10 December 1914.

It is a sympathetic biography. While the critical reader might wonder if the prophet always tried to do what was right and just (xi),

Launius nevertheless has written a very professional account of Smith's life. It is clearly not "faithful history." The author does not portray Joseph III as a prophet merely doing what God told him to do. Building on Alma Blair's "Moderate Mormons" essay in *The Restoration Movement*⁵ and on Clare Vlahos, "Moderation as a Theological Principle in the Thought of Joseph Smith III,"⁶ Launius sees Joseph III as a "pragmatic prophet"—a man of action, conditioned by history and responding to events in light of his background and temperament. He tried to be faithful to his father's vision, as he understood it, but he moderated the rough edges of Mormonism, and brought it closer to orthodox Protestantism (5).

Joseph tried to have good relations with the non-Mormon community on the one hand, and vindicate the honor of his father, on the other. That was not an easy task, since his father was not exactly revered in the non-Mormon community. But non-Mormons frequently praised young Joseph's rejection of polygamy and his moderate religious stance. Not a dreamer or visionary like his father, young Joseph was a man who by temperament sought the middle-of-the-road.

His rejection of Utah Mormonism was natural in light of his mother's hostility to Brigham Young and polygamy. He rebuffed the entreaties made by Utahans to join the Brighamites. He also rebuffed the attempts of other factions to enlist him in their cause, including the Reorganization. When they sent a couple of representatives to try to win him over, he reduced one of the elders to tears when he said firmly: "Gentlemen, I will talk with you on politics or on any other subject, but on religion I will not allow one word spoken in my house" (103). Resolving that he would not join any movement unless he felt divine guidance to do so, he gradually became convinced that he should accept the Reorganization's call for him to assume the presidency. When he appeared at the Amboy, Illinois, conference of the church on 6 April 1860 to accept the call, he stated: "I have come in obedience to a power not my own, and I shall be dictated by the power that sent me" (117).

The church that young Joseph assumed leadership over had not developed a clear theological position, beyond its rejections of polygamy and the conviction that the president of the church should be a lineal descendant of Joseph Smith, Jr. The church's position on Mormon doctrines and practices such as the plurality of gods, priesthood eligibility for blacks, baptism for the dead and other temple rituals, was not settled. Gradually a middle-of-the-road position between Utah Mormonism and orthodox Protestantism emerged. The plurality of gods was rejected despite some support

for it by some early Reorganization leaders. Baptism for the dead was left in limbo in the absence of a temple. A revelation produced by Joseph in 1865 called for the ordination of blacks. (Launius points out that Joseph was an antislavery Republican in the 1850s, and remained faithful to that party throughout his life.) The Book of Mormon and later revelations through the Prophet were accepted, but the Book of Abraham did not attain canonical status in the Reorganization.

While Reorganites were united in their opposition to polygamy, they were not of one mind regarding the martyr's involvement in it. Launius notes that high church leaders—the ones most knowledgeable about Nauvoo—knew that young Joseph's father had practiced polygamy. But Joseph believed his father a good man and also that a good man would not practice polygamy. He had to deny it. As the older leaders who knew better died off, young Joseph became more vigorous in his denials of his father's involvement. Gradually the church committed itself to this historical coverup.

Joseph had studied law in two law offices during the mid-1850s. While he returned to farming rather than practice law (the author does not explain why), his legal training appears to have produced in him a legalistic approach to church leadership and doctrine. Correct doctrine was what is contained in the scriptures, which he treated as law books.

Launius notes that the RLDS church was a movement of dissenters (140). Its early members were Mormons who chose not to follow the main body of Saints west. (This reviewer questions the references to the main body who went to Utah as simply one of the "factions" of Mormonism after the martyrdom [77, 101, 191, 364, 368].) As Smith gradually centralized power in the movement (by gaining control of the church press, of the general conferences, and of the appointment of top officers by way of his revelations), it is not surprising that some opposition came from some of the earliest leaders of the Reorganization. The greatest internal crisis came in the late 1870s and 1880s when two apostles—Jason Briggs and Zenos Gurley, Jr.—opposed certain church doctrines as well as the centralization of power in Smith's hands. The latter made it difficult for them to be heard on their doctrinal views. Incidentally, Briggs could be considered the founder of the Reorganization. His claim of a revelatory experience in 1851 brought the "New Organization"—as it was first called—into being. He became the first President of the Quorum of Apostles in 1853 (90), seven years before Smith accepted the office of president. He was, in effect, the founder and first head of the Reorganization even though he was never its president/prophet.

In an excellent chapter on this internal crisis, Launius again builds on earlier work by Alma Blair and Clare Vlahos⁷ and produces an excellent account of the doctrinal and political struggle that culminated in the removal of the two men from the Twelve in 1885 and their withdrawal from the church entirely one year later.

The church grew at a reasonable rate. Membership approximately doubled each decade, up to 23,951 by 1890, the last figure the author gives.

While the book focuses mostly on Joseph's relationship to the church, Launius does not neglect Smith's family. Within a very few years of Joseph's acceptance of the presidency of the church, all of his immediate family had joined the church except stepfather Lewis Bidamon, whose creed was: "I believe in one God who has neither partners nor clerks" (61).

Joseph Smith III had three wives and seventeen children, including three sons who became the next three presidents of the RLDS Church (Frederick, Israel, and William Wallace). Reorganized members hasten to note that Joseph had one wife at a time, and that the first two wives preceded him in death. Scandal was not averted entirely, however. When first wife Emmeline died in 1869, housekeeper Bertha Madison stayed on to help with family chores. Gossip circulated. It only gradually died out when Joseph married Bertha Madison five-and-one-half months after Emmeline's death. Joseph was 62 when Bertha died in 1896. When he met Ada Clark, 29, in Toronto, tongues wagged when they married three months later. Joseph managed to sire three sons by Ada when he was 66, 68, and 75 years old, respectively.

In the final chapter Launius discusses how Joseph addressed the question of who would succeed him. He was high on the flamboyant R. C. Evans of Toronto, whom he called into the First Presidency. But he wanted his eldest son, Frederick, to succeed him. At first Fred M. did not show a lot of interest. Finally Joseph brought his son into the First Presidency, and it was not long before a revelation indicated that Fred M. was to succeed his father. Evans gradually defected from the church and published *Why I Left the Latter Day Saint Church* in 1918.

In the epilogue, Launius relates Joseph III to Max Weber's three types of leadership: the legal, traditional, and the charismatic or prophetic. The charismatic founders of a movement are usually succeeded by noncharismatic leaders who lead more in the legal or traditional mode. This seems to be necessary if the movement is to survive. Joseph Smith III fits this analysis. Launius doesn't discuss Brigham Young, but the same conclusion would likely hold with him as well. The question I have is whether it is then legitimate to

call a noncharismatic leader like Joseph Smith III a prophet. I found little in the life of this moderate pragmatist which suggests that he was a prophet in either the Old Testament sense or in the Weberian theory. Smith was a pragmatic church administrator who happened to be called a prophet by his followers. His administrative position was strengthened by the fact that when he felt strongly enough about an issue he could promulgate his policy preference or his choice of personnel for high callings in the church in the form of a revelation. With such authority he was certain to carry the day.

NOTES

¹Independence, Mo.: Herald House, 1980; see Grant McMurray's review in the *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 1 (1981): 60–61.

²Independence, Mo.: Herald House, 1984.

³Independence, Mo.: Herald House, 1986.

⁴Independence, Mo.: Herald House, 1988.

⁵Lawrence, Kans.: Coronado Press, 1973.

⁶*John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 1 (1981): 3–11.

⁷See Alma Blair, "The Tradition of Dissent—Jason W. Briggs," *Restoration Studies* 1, ed. Maurice L. Draper (Independence, Mo.: Herald House, 1980), 146–61, and Clare Vlahos, "The Challenge to Centralized Power: Zenos H. Gurley, Jr., and the Prophetic Office," *Courage: A Journal of History, Thought, and Action* 1 (March 1971): 141–58.