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Quest for Refuge: The Mormon Flight from American Pluralism
Marvin S. Hill; *Exiles in a Land of Liberty: Mormons in America, 1830-1846* Kenneth H. Winn

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MARVIN S. HILL. *Quest for Refuge: The Mormon Flight from American Pluralism*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989. xxii; 288 pp. \$19.95.

KENNETH H. WINN. *Exiles in a Land of Liberty: Mormons in America, 1830–1846*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989. x; 284 pp. \$32.50.

Reviewed by Mark Grandstaff, a doctoral candidate in American history at the University of Wisconsin at Madison and a historian with the Office of Air Force History in Washington, D.C.

A current popular movie portrays a scholarly team comprised of a father (a medievalist) and his son (an archaeologist) on a last crusade in quest of the holy grail. This interdisciplinary duo, after a series of epic adventures and a number of life-threatening gyrations, comes within inches of obtaining the mythical cup. Failing in their materialistic quest, the father assures the son that they have received something far greater than the grail itself. They found what every scholar hopes to find—“illumination.”

Similarly, many fine scholars have made the illusive quest in search of early Mormon ideological and social origins. The books and articles in print are legion. The names of the various authors read like a Who's Who of both American and Mormon history: Alexander, Allen, Arrington, Brodie, Bushman, Cross, Davis, De Voto, De Pillis, Edwards, O'Dea, Quinn, Shipps, and Wood, to cite but a few. Whether in advancing a new thesis or in challenging and revising old ones, each has greatly enriched our understanding of the Mormon movement. This quest is furthered by Marvin Hill's *Quest for Refuge* and Kenneth Winn's *Exiles in a Land of Liberty*, as they attempt to shed new light on an already impressive body of literature.

There is no doubt that Hill's work is a significant contribution. Largely an update of his doctoral dissertation at the University of Chicago in the late 1960s, it is a serious attempt to place Mormonism within the context of its times. Schooled under Daniel Boorstin, Sidney Mead, and Martin Marty, and reacting often to Becker, Beard, Schlesinger, and Hofstadter, Hill incorporates within his analysis of Mormonism important elements of both the progressive and consensus traditions: class and political conflict, relativism, and status-anxiety.

Quest for Refuge is a masterful synthesis of primary research and perceptive analysis. Not only does the work expand upon Hill's previous research, it also advances a number of provocative interpretations. As he develops his major theme, anti-pluralism, a different panorama of early Mormonism develops, albeit for some a controversial one. While primarily focusing on the movement's ideological development, Hill deftly describes the emergence of the early Church's profound aversion toward American pluralism.¹ In fact, it is this dialectical clash—between the way America was supposed to be and the way it was developing—that was responsible for the internal and external persecution the Mormons received. While not the only group to fear the divisiveness of pluralism, the Mormons perhaps reacted most strongly to it. They viewed competition among religious and secular institutions as evidence of an underlying social turmoil that stemmed from social disintegration (that is, the breakdown of family, church, and community caused by westward expansion) and felt that pluralism would eventually ruin America.

If *Quest for Refuge* is a tribute to the progressive and consensus traditions, Kenneth Winn's *Exiles in a Land of Liberty*, also a doctoral dissertation, represents the "republican" school of American historiography. Pioneered by historians such as J. G. A. Pocock, Bernard Bailyn, and Gordon Wood, this interpretation

focuses on an eighteenth-century “country party” ideology of the ultimate form of society as a “republic” composed of a virtuous citizenry willing to sacrifice their wants and desires for the common good. Property ownership was the key to making dispassionate decisions about the needs of the community. Luxury was viewed as antithetical to good government and could only promote tyranny or anarchy. Virtuous citizens were thus expected to choose good leaders, and ensure, by force if need be, that the voices of liberty and freedom were not subverted by a selfish (tyrannical) minority.

Winn, unlike Hill, finds Mormon antipluralism just a part of a much larger ideological problem. The Mormon republican vision, which Winn calls “communal republicanism,” was out of step with its time. It looked backward to a preindustrial setting, while the emerging republican paradigm of the 1820s and 1830s had become more individualistic and pluralist. For Winn this competing set of republican definitions, and for Hill the Mormons’ reaction to sectarian strife and pluralism, set the stage for conflict that followed the Saints wherever they settled.

The Mormon movement for these authors is a primitivist craving to stave off the changing social order of Jacksonian America by replacing it with the Mormons’ own order. Both Hill and Winn find the Book of Mormon an important source of the movement’s ideological consistency. Hill persuasively argues that the Book of Mormon is the story of a society caught in the throes of social upheaval caused by problems similar to those facing Jacksonian America. Religious disillusionment, materialism, political and societal corruption, poverty, and violence were major problems found within the Nephite culture that eventually led to their destruction. The major theme of the Book of Mormon, according to Hill, is that a society must not only believe in the true gospel to survive, but that “godly” men must rule (xiii). Thus, the contention and strife caused by competing factions inherent in the emerging American social order could be reduced only if unity would prevail. As Hill sees it, the “quest for refuge” was the search by a group of the socially disaffected for that unity.

In contrast, Winn’s interpretation portrays the Book of Mormon as a republican document demonstrating that God approves of a nation of yeoman farmers who strive to remain virtuous and free of corruption. Men like Nephi, Abinadi, and Moroni were classical republicans who put the needs of others above their own. Nephite society prospered when faithful to republican principles. It became corrupt and decadent when luxury, class formation, and Masonic-like movements permeated the cultural

fabric. Antebellum America was equally in trouble as libertarianism, pluralism, and capitalism took their toll on virtue. For Winn, Joseph Smith was a radical who from the very beginning sought to reform society with his view of "communal republicanism." The Prophet and his people sought a return to their Puritan and Revolutionary traditions in order to subvert the increasingly individualistic and corrupt society by fostering a religious community that would reestablish civic virtue and other republican tenets.

Hill's interpretation of Joseph Smith is much different. Joseph was no radical. Rather he sought consensus in society by creating a movement void of the generalities and conflicts that plagued Jacksonian America. His doctrines often were reactions or responses to the major issues causing contention. The doctrines of the plurality of Gods and multiple heavens, for instance, were attempts to resolve the divisive bickering between trinitarians and universalists.

What is more satisfactory about Hill's interpretation is his grasp of the primary sources and his rich understanding of Joseph Smith's early years. While Winn relies on traditional sociodeterministic accounts of the events leading to the First Vision, Hill offers an important revision. In his view, Joseph, a product of a puritan background, a religiously anxious and status-seeking mother, and a disconcerted, alcoholic, and unbelieving father, found himself unable to participate in an evangelical conversion experience. He was an ambivalent "victim of the revivals." Rejecting, to a certain extent, the 1838 vision account, Hill finds no revival in Palmyra in 1820 that would precipitate Joseph's teenage conversion. Rather it was after his brother Alvin's death in 1823 that his mother actively campaigned to convert her family to religion. His mother's constant importuning and his father's continued ambivalence no doubt stirred within Joseph "deep and poignant" feelings at this time, though he remained unconverted.

Most important is Hill's assertion that it was not until 1827 that Joseph Smith became a religious seeker. While accounts of his first vision (especially the 1838 version) do acknowledge Joseph's reaction to the competition and sectarian strife that caused him great anxiety, Hill adds a number of compelling forces that guided him into a quest for the primitive gospel. It was not only his maturing religious disposition, but a desire to escape the competing denominations that he faced during his life and now especially at Harmony. He also sought to harmonize his mother's and father's differences in religion, please his new wife and her family, and find a church that could offer him association. Additionally, his

impoverished condition combined with his tarnished career in treasure-hunting, his court trial over money-digging, and his expulsion from the Methodists left him outside the usual religious and social climes. Hence, in Hill's view, Joseph Smith's strong sense of alienation was produced by a combination of environmental factors that together produced anxiety and alienation and led to a search for the pristine gospel.

In this imaginative revision (unless I misread it), Joseph's early conversion experience (the First Vision), the translation of the Book of Mormon, and his final conversion to seekerism were brought about by distinct phenomena that separated the incidents in time and space. There was no specific connection of these events in Joseph's mind until after his seekerism led to his assuming a prophetic role. In other words, the various first vision accounts are Joseph's attempt to synthesize a series of religious experiences that occurred over a period of at least a decade into one single account of mythic proportions.

Hill, unlike Winn, does not overlook D. Michael Quinn's work on Joseph's magic worldview. He also provides a perspective for those who might find magic tied to Mormon beginnings unsettling. It is logically consistent, according to Hill, for those associated with a prereformation style of religion not only to look for the divine in magical forms, but also to be among the most fervent millennialists and seekers after a new Zion and a heavenly social order. Mormonism at its foundation was Joseph Smith's attempt to revitalize this magic worldview and interweave it with some of the doctrines of Christianity to form a theocratic society void of the competition and corruption found "in the place where he lived." Converts of this magical predilection saw their view of an omnipresent divinity bifurcated into two fiercely competitive factions—one sacred, the other profane. Mormonism promised unity by divine guidance.

Hill's theocratic society or Winn's "communal republic" was to be found only in the kingdom of God. Both authors agree that early Mormon writings present the notion of a kingdom separate from the United States. Oliver Cowdery, Parley Pratt, and Sidney Rigdon were only a few of the most prominent who wrote about the impending subjugation of the United States government by a Mormon theocracy. Caught up in millennial fervor, many of the early Saints looked toward an almost immediate Second Coming with themselves ruling with Christ. Hill contends that after a series of revelations dampened immediate millennial hopes, Joseph often had to stifle his more zealous followers from wanting to establish a kingdom by militant force.

Both Hill and Winn see Joseph Smith as having been convinced of a need for a separate kingdom by a series of events and turning points, including internal dissent, outside persecutions, political confrontations, and a failure to get redress from the local, state, and federal governments. According to Hill, his conversion to a separate kingdom came only after years of political involvement and attempts to save society as an insider. When President Van Buren refused aid in 1839, Joseph saw separation as the only possible route for the Mormons. Winn, while finding Van Buren's rejection important, sees continued hostility in Illinois and non-Mormon apathy toward Mormon grievances as evidence that the "great experiment" had collapsed. Joseph's campaign for the presidency was the American republic's last hope for salvation. Failing that, separation and building their own republic were the only solutions for the Mormons. Both authors, however, find temple rituals as well as the Nauvoo Legion and the Council of Fifty integral to an eventual Mormon political hegemony.

These two books also touch on other stimulating issues. Their analyses of the dissent at Kirtland and in Missouri are enlightening. Hill describes in great detail how dissent was formed, shaped, and handled by Church leaders. The more exclusive the organization became, the more the dissent grew. Additionally, Hill portrays disaffiliates like Orson Pratt, Orson Hyde, and Thomas B. Marsh as "human beings" whose views were shaped by what they experienced and thought. It was not simply the devil or some stolen milk that put these men at odds with Mormon ecclesiastical power. Neither was it simply a republican dissent. While Winn is aware of many of the dissenters' arguments as they relate to republican tenets of tyranny and natural rights, he fails to distinguish among the many dimensions of religious disaffiliation. Moreover, he tends to ignore those dissenters, such as Pratt, Hyde, and Marsh, who fail to fit his interpretive model.

In their accounts of the clashes between Mormons and their neighbors, Hill and Winn cite regional differences, pluralism, political abuses, and mutual hostility as key factors in the persecutions. More importantly, they distinguish the various perceptions the opposing sides had of each other. Missourians saw the Saints as belligerent, politically dangerous, and wanting their land. In Nauvoo, the rise of the kingdom was predicated upon the foundation of Apostles and prophets—a ruling elite. Joseph was viewed as a powerful religious leader who fused the role of speculator, political candidate, and commanding general of a standing army, and competed directly with the economic and political elite of the

county and state. According to Hill, Mormon actions proceeded from a worldview that could not separate the sacred from the secular.² From the Mormons' perspective, they were persecuted only for religious reasons. Winn, in contrast, views these clashes as being between distinctive republican definitions. Thus both gentiles and Mormons saw their opposites as tyrannical and subversive to republican ideals.

Both authors, however, do need to reevaluate some of their thinking about the Kirtland experience. They contend that persecution was minimal in Kirtland because of the small population base, the little land acreage owned by the Mormons, and the inhabitants' similar New England backgrounds. Winn incorrectly asserts that Ohioans never made the transition from exposé to political violence because the Saints posed no threat to Kirtland's social structure. By 1837, Kirtland Mormons had twice the population of non-Mormons, owned most of the prime acres in the center of the community, and had effectively assumed the major political offices in the town. The community did not simply acquiesce because of their common backgrounds, but worked from a framework adapted from their New England heritage to handle community problems. Their town leaders met, determined that the Mormons were hostile to their interests, and then proceeded to implement several tactics in order to force the Mormons to leave. They "warned" them to leave, hired Philastus Hurlbut to expose their beliefs, took economic sanctions, and by 1836 began to use force. The persecution may not have been as dramatic as in Missouri or Nauvoo, but it was nevertheless strongly present.

More attention should also be given to how newspapers created an image of the Saints from which others could draw conclusions about Mormon intentions. What Ohioans said and did about the Mormons undoubtedly had an effect on how Missourians perceived the Saints. It may even have dictated some of the tactics they used. The same could be said of the people in Illinois. Certainly Thomas Sharp's rhetoric was shaped by the Missourians' perceptions of the Saints as presented in their newspapers. Thus, by the time the Mormons arrived in Nauvoo, a perceptual paradigm had already been set up from which their intentions could be judged and a plan for persecution could be drawn.

Perhaps a more serious criticism of Hill's book involves his basic assumption about American pluralism. Hill cites James Madison's *Federalist*, number 10, as proof of the Founding Fathers' intention to insure that "no single interest group or 'faction' would be able to dominate," thus protecting America's

freedom. This interpretation has come under attack as anachronistic and distinctly modern.³ Hill is no doubt aware of the argument but fails to address it. With much of his interpretation based on this idea, this omission is conspicuous.

Winn has a similar interpretational problem. While the discussion over "republican" ideology has blossomed in the last decade, its definition is still imprecise. The age-old question of exactly to what extent general ideology actually motivates people is still unclear. Moreover, "classical republicanism" has become a vague term often substituted by historians for rigorous analysis. Finally, I am not sure if Winn gives us anything that Hill has not discussed already under the rubric of pluralism. The significance of Winn's work, however, lies in his contributing to a growing body of literature that finds differing visions of classical republicanism as a major cause of conflict in early and antebellum America.⁴ The Mormons' antebellum experience may prove an excellent microcosm from which to gain further insight into the events leading to the firing on Fort Sumter in 1861.

Both of these books are important for reasons already enumerated. The fact that Winn relies heavily on Hill's work is indicative of the importance of *Quest for Refuge*. Marvin Hill has written a monograph that could well supplant Brodie's *No Man Knows My History* as the book heralded by secular scholars as the definitive work on Mormon origins. Winn's work, in contrast, has brought Mormonism into the mainstream of current historical debate. Both works are long overdue, and like our two friends who sought the grail and failed, Hill and Winn have given us, if not the chalice, at least "illumination."

NOTES

¹For the essence of Hill's argument about Mormonism's response to pluralism, see his "Counter-Revolution: The Mormon Reaction to the Coming of American Democracy," *Sunstone* 13 (June 1989): 24-33.

²While Hill owes a great deal to Robert Flanders's interpretation of Nauvoo, he differs markedly in his assertion that Joseph Smith was a "true believer" in his cause. Flanders often views the Mormon prophet as a megalomaniac vying only for power and status (see Robert Bruce Flanders, *Nauvoo: Kingdom on the Mississippi* [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965], esp. chaps. 4-6; see also Robert Bruce Flanders, "Dream and Nightmare: Nauvoo Revisited," in *The Restoration Movement: Essays in Mormon History*, ed. F. Mark McKiernan et al. (Independence, Mo.: Herald House Publishing, 1979), 141-66.

³During a period of intense debate about coalition politics in the 1930s and 1940s, modern pluralist theory in American political culture evolved and was popularized by Charles Beard, Harold Laski, and Walter Lippmann. A major critique of applying modern pluralist theory to Madison's *Federalist*, no. 10, is Paul L. Bourke, "The Pluralist Reading of James Madison's Tenth Federalist," *Perspectives in American History* 9 (1975): 271-95; see also Sean Wilentz, "On Class and Politics in Jacksonian America," *Reviews in American History* 10 (December 1982): 45-63.

⁴See, for instance, Paul Goodman, *Toward a Christian Republic: Antimasonry and the Great Transition in New England, 1826-1836* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); and James Oakes, *The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders* (New York: Vintage Books, 1982), esp. chap. 1.