The Story of the Latter-day Saints by James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard

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"The history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is constantly changing as new information becomes available and as each generation asks fresh questions about its past," write James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard in their preface to the 1992 edition of *The Story of the Latter-day Saints*. It was "the need to synthesize such new research for an audience of interested general readers" that prompted publication of *The Story of the Latter-day Saints* in 1976 (reviewed in *BYU Studies* 17 [Spring 1977]: 241-47). "Now, after sixteen years," the authors observe, "ongoing events in the Church's history and additional scholarship suggested the appropriateness of a revision" (xi).

The second edition of this valuable and finely illustrated one-volume history of the Church reflects the solid scholarship and faith of the authors, both of whom are recognized authorities on LDS Church history. James B. Allen taught history at BYU from 1963 until his semiretirement in 1992. He also served as assistant Church historian. Glen M. Leonard, currently director of the Museum of Church History and Art in Salt Lake City, served previously on the staff of the Utah State Historical Society and with the Historical Department of the LDS Church.

How is the new edition distinguished from the first edition? Conspicuously, the second edition is longer: eighty pages have been added. The text has been significantly changed throughout, the most obvious change involving a restructuring of the late-twentieth-century material, including the addition of a final chapter current to 1990. The volume's comprehensive bibliography has also been updated.

A revision of particular significance is the perspective the authors provide in part 5, "Toward Becoming a Universal Church, 1950-1990" (titled in the first edition "The Gospel to All Nations, 1939-1976"). The six-page introduction to this section
skillfully sets the international stage for the past forty years of Church history. Amidst political upheaval, new technology, and eroding moral and ethical values, the Church expanded exponentially.

“In 1950 Mormonism was still largely an American religion, but it stood on the threshold of a new international presence,” the authors observe (558), and then provide comparative statistics for the following four decades:

In 1950 Church membership was about 1,100,000. At the beginning of 1990 it was 7,300,000. [Stakes grew from 180 to 1,700; missions from 43 to 228.] In 1950 the Church was organized in fewer than 50 nations or territories, but in 1990 it was in 128 nations. In 1950 there were fewer than 6,000 missionaries in the field. In 1990 there were nearly 40,000. In 1950 some 7.7 percent of the population of the Church lived outside the United States and Canada, but forty years later this had changed to 40.5 percent. (560–61)

Assessing the challenges presented by such rapid growth, the authors comment:

The widespread acceptance of the gospel by people of diverse ethnic and cultural origins demanded not just tolerance but, more importantly, a reexamination by some Saints of their personal attitudes toward other races and cultures. As the Church grew more rapidly in Asia, Latin America, and Africa, for example, as well as among highly diverse cultural and ethnic groups in the United States itself, some important questions were raised. Could the traditional American-born, Wasatch-front Latter-day Saint, whose culture tended to dominate the Church, wholly and sincerely accept those of other cultures as brothers and sisters in the fullest sense? Could the Church as an institution adapt its policies and emphases in such a way that people of all cultures felt fully accepted? Conversely, to what degree did some cultural mores violate the essence of the gospel, and what necessary changes would some converts have to make in order to become Saints? Or, to put it another way, what traditional LDS policies, practices, and teaching were essential to the gospel of Jesus Christ, and which ones were merely convenient and subject to change? (559)

By framing such questions, the authors heighten readers’ understanding of Church growth and correlation in the chapters which follow, providing, for example, an important context for Spencer W. Kimball’s 1954 comments on “bigotry and class distinction” (580), the 1978 revelation on priesthood, and the challenges of culturally
diverse wards. "The vision of an international, worldwide church was continually reemphasized," they explain, "but the more important quest was for a universal church: one in which people of all nations, all races, and all cultures could act toward each other as brothers and sisters in the truest sense of Christ's teachings" (560).

Nowhere is this emphasis more evident than in the book's final chapter, "Toward a Universal Church, 1974-1990," which covers President Kimball's administration as well as President Benson's administration to 1990. (The 1976 edition's chapter 21 covered the early years of President Kimball's administration: "Lengthening Our Stride, 1973–76.") The new concluding chapter covers fourteen topics: the lengthening stride, growth and internationalization, revelation on priesthood, the international church, the intercultural challenge, course corrections, the compassionate church, politics and public policy, the Church and the changing role of women, the public image, the scriptures, President Benson and the Book of Mormon, and looking to the future. The foregoing list indicates the breadth of coverage of this important era of LDS Church history. The chapter is very positive in both spirit and tone, as indicated by the following description of President Spencer W. Kimball:

Those who predicted that President Kimball's would be a short, "caretaker" administration could not have been more wrong. Instead, he set a pace of physical, spiritual, and mental activity that much younger men found difficult to follow. On October 3, 1974, the seventy-nine-year-old church leader stood before a seminar for Regional and Mission Representatives. Filled with a vision of the universal mission of the Church, he was concerned with what the Latter-day Saints must do to help it fulfill its destiny worldwide. "If I need a title for what I desire to say this morning," he said, "I think it would be 'Lengthening Our Stride.'" That theme characterized the history of the Church itself for the rest of the decade and throughout the 1980s. (628)

The section entitled "Revelation on Priesthood" captures the basic historical features of the June 1978 revelation and gets to the heart of the matter through the use of direct quotations. Elder Bruce R. McConkie's speech given at BYU a few weeks after the revelation exemplifies the essence of this discussion. Speaking of
the contrast between the earlier and subsequent policy on priesthood, Elder McConkie said: “Forget everything I have said, or what President Brigham Young or President George Q. Cannon or whomsoever has said in days past that is contrary to the present revelation. We spoke with a limited understanding and without the light and knowledge that now has come into the world” (636). The story is further enlivened and enhanced by the inclusion of personal experiences of such men as Helvécio Martins, the first black General Authority and a native of Brazil (637), and Anthony Obinna, a Nigerian who had been seeking Church literature and requesting missionaries since the late 1960s and became the first of nineteen Nigerians baptized in his country in November 1979.

The opening of nations previously closed to Latter-day Saint missionaries is the basis of an informative discussion which treats David M. Kennedy’s calling as a special Church ambassador; the goodwill established by Elders Nelson and Oaks in China; and the opening of Poland, Greece, the former Yugoslavia, Hungary, the former Soviet Union, and India to missionary work.

Appropriately, this final chapter closes with President Benson’s vision of “flooding the earth with the Book of Mormon.” The prophet’s call to Saints to study the scriptures and particularly the Book of Mormon formed the basis of his first conference address as President of the Church, and in the next three years he delivered thirty-nine addresses on the Book of Mormon. During the same period, fifteen new foreign language translations of the Book of Mormon were completed. “His message was effective,” observe the authors, “for throughout the Church people increasingly bore witness of what reading the Book of Mormon had done for them” (669).

There is much more to applaud in this last chapter, not the least of which is the fact that it does not ignore some of the sensitive issues the Church has faced in recent years, including the ERA and women’s issues, the excommunication of George P. Lee, and the Hofmann forgeries. There are also some real weaknesses—weaknesses which are perhaps inherent in any survey history because of the lack of space. On some topics simply too little is
included. While the international church is discussed at great length, the section on the BYU Jerusalem Center leaves the reader grasping for additional material. There are only sixty-two words to tell the story of this important place (648). The section on “Course Corrections” reads more like a series of telegrams than history. It raises more questions than it can answer in mentioning the retirement of Eldred G. Smith as Patriarch and the introduction of the consolidated meeting schedule (655). When controversial topics such as the change in the patriarchal office are discussed, more explanation is needed in order for the reader to be sure of the authors’ intent.

Other significant changes have been made in the text of *The Story of the Latter-day Saints*. Generally, these changes de-emphasize historical environment and increase emphasis on revelation. A good example of this trend is the section on the Word of Wisdom. In the first edition, the authors emphasized the social milieu of Jacksonian America as background for the Word of Wisdom. In the second edition, while the American environment is still discussed, revelation is the major force in the development of this teaching. Note the following new material in the 1992 edition:

This revelation, known as the Word of Wisdom, was another good example of divine guidance coming to the Church in response to inquiries about particular matters. Not only was there controversy among the region’s populace, but, it appears, an immediate situation closer to home played a key role in calling forth the inspired code of health. Joseph and his family lived in rooms in Newel K. Whitney’s store and, as Brigham Young reported many years later, the Prophet was influenced by happenings among the elders attending the School of Prophets in an upstairs room above the store.

When they assembled together in this room after breakfast, the first they did was to light their pipes, and while smoking, talk about the great things of the kingdom, and spit all over the room, and as soon as the pipe was out of their mouths a large chew of tobacco would then be taken. Often when the Prophet entered the room to give instruction he would find himself in a cloud of smoke. This, and the complaints of his wife at having to clean so filthy a floor, made the Prophet think upon the matter, and he inquired of the Lord relating to the conduct of the Elders in using tobacco, and the revelation known as the Word of Wisdom was the result of his inquiry. (105)
Revelation is also emphasized in the discussion of Joseph Smith’s ideas on the three degrees of glory. The 1976 edition contained information on a book by Thomas Dick entitled *Philosophy of a Future State*. The authors then showed parallels between the ideas of Thomas Dick and Joseph Smith concerning the future condition of mortals. In the 1992 edition, reference to Thomas Dick has been deleted and a sentence added concerning Joseph Smith’s preparation, searching, and inquiring of the Lord (79).

Careful readers will find other differences, too. The discussion of the Mountain Meadows Massacre, for example, softens the statement “Though the Church itself cannot be held responsible, the massacre at Mountain Meadows is nevertheless the most tragic slur on its history, for some members of the Church participated” (1976, 303), to read “Though the Church itself cannot be held responsible, the massacre at Mountain Meadows became a tragic stain on the history of these tense and difficult times” (1992, 311). A new photograph features descendants of victims and participants in the massacre in the spirit of reconciliation, “joining hands in a symbol of unity and forgiveness” at the September 1990 dedication of an on-site memorial to the victims (313). There are numerous editorial changes in less sensitive matters. In some instances, the 1976 text has been condensed to allow the inclusion in the 1992 text of stories and details about individuals, a commendable effort by the authors to maintain a personal touch in this comprehensive survey history.

On subjects of current interest, Allen and Leonard have an extensive list of sources. In “The International Church,” for example, an entire page of sources is presented with reference to both books and articles. There is a wide range of coverage, with references on LDS topics from official LDS publications, publications with only minimal LDS connections, and non-LDS publications.

For both the serious scholar and the casual reader of LDS history, *The Story of the Latter-day Saints* is a book worth owning. With the strengths already described, as well as excellent maps and illustrations, this new edition is an attractive and useful volume for Latter-day Saint readers.