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Mormonism: A Very Short Introduction

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Richard Lyman Bushman.
Mormonism: A Very Short Introduction.
New York: Oxford University Press, 2008

Reviewed by John G. Turner

Combining history, theology, and contemporary observations, Richard L. Bushman has crafted an engaging introduction to Mormonism, aimed primarily at outsiders to Latter-day Saint traditions and related movements. Anticipating skeptical non-Mormon readers, Bushman centers his book on several fundamental questions, including “How can twenty-first-century Americans believe in a prophet who translated golden plates and claimed constant revelations?” and “How can a religion that runs against the grain of modern secularism evoke such strong loyalties?” (xiii).

Bushman’s latest work may indeed be “very short,” but it simultaneously provides eloquent and sophisticated answers to such questions. Although he discusses post-Manifesto polygamists and the movement that became the Community of Christ, he brings to the foreground the “church headquartered in Salt Lake City” (15). Beginning with three thematic chapters that focus on the concepts of revelation, Zion, and priesthood, he then adds a chapter on “cosmology,” which fleshes out key points in Mormon theology. These chapters blend nineteenth-century starting points with more recent developments. For instance, the chapter on Zion covers Jackson County, consecration, contemporary microcredit efforts, Mormon-Gentile tension in 1830s Missouri, and the Latter-day Saint missionary impulse in fewer than twenty small pages.

For the most part, Bushman’s *A Very Short Introduction* succeeds brilliantly, particularly in the realm of theology. Most outside the LDS faith—myself included—feel themselves standing on somewhat shaky ground when discussing Latter-day Saint teachings on priesthood, exaltation, intelligence, or the Godhead. Bushman succinctly explains all of these complex topics. His explication of Smith’s rejection of an *ex nihilo* creation is particularly illuminating. Depending on their relative interest in theology, Bushman’s work will interest some readers more than others. Most Protestants and Catholics will still raise their eyebrows when encountering Joseph Smith’s King Follett discourse. Indeed, Bushman often discusses King Follett and other topics within the context of Mormonism’s

divergences from both postapostolic Christianity and nineteenth-century Protestantism. Although most focused on the nineteenth century, Bushman highlights the dynamism of Mormon theology, rooted in Joseph Smith's restoration of ongoing and immediate revelation. For example, he explains that "late twentieth-century Mormonism pulled back from" an "entrenched aversion to doctrines of grace" (76–77). To counter the argument that Mormons are not Christians, Bushman discusses a renewed appreciation for the Atonement; however, he might have more fully explained the place of Jesus Christ in Latter-day Saint theology, a subject perennially confusing to outsiders.

As the nation's most eminent historian of early Mormonism, Bushman also provides healthy doses of nineteenth-century Latter-day Saint history. While some readers might desire more coverage of twentieth-century developments, Bushman wisely caters to enduring popular interest in the Joseph Smith and Brigham Young eras. One hopes that many newcomers to Mormon history will find themselves inspired to read further, as Bushman can only scratch the surface of many compelling topics. Among the strongest are Bushman's discussion of Mormonism within various restoration movements, including the coming forth of the Book of Mormon and the combination of wide participation and hierarchical authority in Mormon priesthood.

It seems unfair to demand more of a "very short introduction," but while Bushman discusses many aspects of Joseph Smith's career, he does not introduce enough of the prophet's complex and engaging personality. Although most Latter-day Saints converted to the faith without meeting Smith, when they did meet him most found his charisma and personality attractive. Smith was affable, athletic, and full of dynamic energy, energy that sometimes became tempestuous and even reckless. Readers will find all of these traits on display in Bushman's *Rough Stone Rolling*, but to have included more of them in this short volume would have helped explain Joseph Smith's appeal. Similarly, although Bushman covers the roles of women in both historical and contemporary Mormonism, vignettes of leaders such as Eliza R. Snow would have enlivened these sections.

It is hard to say exactly how many pages an author of a brief volume on Mormonism should expend on treasure hunting, Danites, polygamy, Mountain Meadows, and blacks in the priesthood. Given Bushman's ultimate goal of making the Latter-day Saint faith comprehensible to outsiders, his treatment of these topics is adequate, but it is safe to say that some readers will not agree. "Even today," Bushman writes of the Mountain Meadows Massacre, "critics consider it the archetypical event in Mormon history. Mormons protest in vain." Bushman asserts—persuasively, in my reading of the evidence—that Brigham Young "was far too astute not to

see the damning effect of such an event on Mormon fortunes” (96). Fore-shadowing the argument of the subsequently released *Massacre at Mountain Meadows*, Bushman suggests that “the leaders of the massacre were ordinary, respectable citizens whose humanity broke down at one terrible moment” (96). Perhaps that was true of many perpetrators, but John D. Lee at least had other grievous lapses of humanity in his tragic life.

Bushman deftly makes many aspects of Mormonism comprehensible, including the Word of Wisdom (had he mentioned the average Latter-day Saint lifespan he might even have won a few converts), family home evening, and baptism for the dead. Other points, some trivial and some important, could use further illumination. What is Deseret? Why do Latter-day Saints accompany sacramental bread with water instead of wine or grape juice? Although Bushman devotes several pages to the significance of obtaining a personal testimony, one suspects Protestant readers, particularly evangelicals, will stumble over the subtly different meaning of “testimony” for Latter-day Saints.

The only other serious omission is a fuller discussion of global Mormonism. Bushman observes that “a majority of the Mormons who settled in the western United States would be Britons, Scandinavians, and other Europeans,” but he does not document the more recent growth of the Church in places like Latin America or assess the potential of Mormonism to become an enduring global religion. Since about half of all Latter-day Saints now reside outside of the United States, a brief summary of these trends would have served Bushman’s readers well.

These are all quibbles, however. Bushman succeeds in his effort to explain the continued appeal of the restored gospel in contemporary America. “Beyond the community and the wholesome life,” he observes, “Mormonism gives its members a place in the universe” (114). Even skeptical Saints hesitate to leave this “beehive.” “To depart from the Mormon circle is to abandon a plenteous and ordered existence for the perplexities and sorrows of modern life,” Bushman concludes. “All this gives Mormons reason to hold on to the faith at the center of their lives” (116).

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