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# The Mormon Menace: Violence and Anti-Mormonism in the Postbellum South

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Patrick Q. Mason. *The Mormon Menace: Violence and Anti-Mormonism in the Postbellum South*.

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*Reviewed by Heather M. Seferovich*

Relatively few stories in late nineteenth-century Mormon history are more riveting than those from missionaries serving in the American South. A handful of legendary Mormon personalities served there, such as J. Golden Kimball, B. H. Roberts, and John Morgan. There are countless inflammatory threats of violence, hundreds of instances of physical assault, and even a few murders. Although tragic on many levels, such violent elements are often the foundation of successful films, plays, and books.

Patrick Mason is the most recent in a line of Mormon historians to examine the experience of missionaries in the late nineteenth-century South,<sup>1</sup> and he is among the first to have his research focusing on this area published by such a highly reputable publisher. *Mormon Menace* makes several contributions to this field of study.

Mason began researching the southerners' encounters with Mormonism in graduate school, and his 2005 dissertation at the University of Notre Dame examined southerners' persecution of Mormons, Catholics, and Jews in the late nineteenth century. A portion of that dissertation became the basis for *Mormon Menace*. From the perspective of historiography, Mason

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1. Some of the broader studies done on Mormonism in the South include Ted S. Anderson, "The Southern States Mission and the Administration of Ben E. Rich, 1898–1908" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1976); Leonard J. Arrington, "Mormon Beginnings in the American South," *Task Papers in LDS History*, no. 9 (Salt Lake City: Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1976); LaMar C. Berrett, "History of the Southern States Mission, 1831–1860" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1960); William Whitridge Hatch, *There Is No Law . . . : A History of Mormon Civil Relations in the Southern States, 1865–1905* (New York: Vantage, 1968); John Nicholson, *The Martyrdom of Joseph Standing; or, The Murder of a "Mormon" Missionary* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1886); and Heather M. Seferovich, "History of the LDS Southern States Mission, 1875–1898" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1996).

came of age professionally with the current Mormon historians who write contextual and comparative studies. His approach is instrumental in helping to mainstream Mormon history into scholarly studies.

*Mormon Menace* explores “how southerners, in the generation after Parley Pratt’s murder, encountered and then countered the perceived Mormon menace in their midst” (9). The book “is concerned primarily with the attitudes and actions of southerners as they perceived and then responded to Mormon proselytizing in their region and to the challenges that Mormonism—particularly polygamy—posed for their homes and communities, the republic, and Christian civilization” (11). Mason goes on to write, “*The Mormon Menace* thus bridges the historical literatures on anti-Mormonism, the experience of religious outsiders in America, extralegal violence, and postbellum southern religion, politics, and culture, and contributes to the evolving scholarship exploring the complicated relationship of religion and violence” (19). Consequently, it is an ambitious study for a book under three hundred pages.

The first three chapters feature thorough investigations of Mormons who were murdered in the South. The main victims are Joseph Standing (Georgia, 1879) and William Berry, John Gibbs, and Martin Condor (Tennessee, 1884). The murders have been examined by numerous authors over the last century,<sup>2</sup> but Mason offers a solid, comprehensive account of all the sources, and these stories get readers’ attention quickly while introducing points that are explored in detail in later chapters.

In chapters 4 and 5, Mason breaks new ground. First, he boldly asserts that the federal antipolygamy movement was at the heart of southern anti-Mormonism. This antipolygamy sentiment had the added benefit of bringing southerners into the good graces of northerners following the Civil War, producing a cultural reconciliation against a common enemy. Whether antipolygamy sentiment actually had such a disproportionate influence on Mormon persecution in the South will surely be debated by scholars in the years to come; however, Mason makes the case that from a

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2. Some of the better-known publications include Ken Driggs, “Murder in Georgia: The Joseph Standing Murder Case,” *Mormon Heritage Magazine* 1 (September/October 1994): 28–36; Ken Driggs, “There Is No Law in Georgia for Mormons: The Joseph Standing Murder Case of 1879,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 73 (Winter 1989): 745–72; Hatch, *There Is No Law*; Nicholson, *Martyrdom of Joseph Standing*; and Devon H. Nish, “A Brief History of the Southern States Mission for One-Hundred Years, 1830–1930,” L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah. There are also numerous articles about the murders that have been published in periodicals such as the *Deseret News*, *Salt Lake Tribune*, *Millennial Star*, *Southern Star*, and *Elders’ Journal*.

postbellum southern perspective, “[the Mormon missionary invasion] was an epic contest between competing civilizations, one monogamous and the other polygamous, one Christian and the other idolatrous, one dedicated to defending the purity and virtue of southern womanhood and the other intent on debasing it” (77). In these chapters, Mason also grapples with the ways polygamy engaged issues of religious freedom and federalism. Of particular note is the author’s masterful discussion that succinctly summarizes social, theological, and legal points of southern mob violence against Mormons (93–95).

In chapter 6, Mason tells how southerners reacted to Mormon theocracy and explores the boundaries of nineteenth-century religious tolerance: “With increased access to and representation in Washington, Mormons would exercise greater influence over federal policy, which would in turn not only allow them to protect their own interests but also potentially push their agenda on the rest of the nation.” This did not set well with mainstream southern Christians: “Particularly in the 1880s, southerners thus joined with voices from around the country in exposing Mormonism as a political—as well as moral—threat to the nation and American civilization” (108). To some extent, similar debates in the South are continuing into the twenty-first century with Mormon presidential candidates.

Chapter 7 adds substantial new information to the quantitative knowledge of southern violence against Mormons. Here, Mason identifies over three hundred violent incidents against Mormons and then interprets the data, discovering a correlation between anti-Mormonism and the national antipolygamy campaign (131); this correlation supports his assertions in chapters 4 and 5. While organizing violent acts into a hierarchy, Mason takes the opportunity to illustrate these various tragedies with fascinating stories. The chapter ends with a thought-provoking discussion of southern vigilantism and Mormonism’s place in that framework. In Mason’s words, “American society was founded on the guarantee, protection, and exercise of individual rights. As an inevitable result of pluralism, however, the rights of various segments of the population were bound to clash at some point. Mormonism confronted nineteenth-century Americans, including southerners, with profound challenges to their identity and conception of good society” (148).

Chapter 8 examines the impact of southern anti-Mormonism on Mormons’ identity in the West: “The violent persecution of Mormons in the postbellum South, punctuated by Joseph Standing’s murder and the massacre at Cane Creek [Tennessee], played a crucial role in constructing and reinforcing a persecution narrative that sustained, and was sustained by, the dualistic millennialism inherent in nineteenth-century Latter-day Saint

faith” (162–63). Mormons’ experiences of persecution profoundly shaped their self-identity.

Chapter 9 compares the persecution received by Mormons to that received by Catholics and Jews in the postbellum South. Of these three religious minorities, Catholics had the dubious distinction of receiving the most lynchings. Unexpectedly, most of these victims, “comprised largely of Irish and Italian” heritage, were lynched by other Catholics (181). Of course, none of the persecution of any of these groups compares to that received by African Americans in the South.

Besides placing these Mormon stories in their proper historical context—socially, culturally, religiously, and legally—this information is also enhanced by the author’s delightful writing style, which keeps pace with the intriguing stories. Furthermore, Mason is to be applauded for his extensive research, especially in southern newspapers. Although the anti-Mormon sentiment ran high and newspaper editors were among those who actively and consistently persecuted the missionaries, his research of these papers should not be minimized—I imagine it was somewhat akin to finding needles in haystacks. Readers will appreciate Mason’s undertaking when they consider the vast amount of primary sources that exist on the Southern States Mission. A simple search of “Southern States Mission” in the catalog at the Church History Library lists over fourteen hundred sources, while the L. Tom Perry Special Collections at Brigham Young University’s Harold B. Lee Library catalogs more than one hundred. Granted, some of these documents are from years other than the late nineteenth century, but it should be remembered that the Southern States Mission was the largest domestic mission during this era, and it is adequately represented in the proportion of documents from this time. The sheer volume of records is both a blessing and a curse to researchers; on the one hand there is a lot of information, but on the other it is challenging to consult a substantial percentage of them. Needless to say, because of all these resources, I predict *Mormon Menace* will not be the last book-length study on this topic.

After reading this book, readers may come away wondering why Church leaders continued to send missionaries to a region with so much hostility and violence. Based on my reading of dozens of diaries and countless editions of a half dozen or so Mormon newspapers, I know that elders in the Southern States Mission encountered the full spectrum of hospitality and hostility, the pendulum swinging wide on both ends. And apparently, Church leaders must have ultimately felt the success rates in the South offset the violence the missionaries encountered. My own research revealed

that in the latter quarter of the nineteenth century, 3,839 baptisms were performed by more than 1,760 missionaries who served in the region.<sup>3</sup>

In my view, Mason missed an opportunity to explore the impact the Book of Mormon had on southerners and how this new scripture may have contributed to the persecution missionaries received. Mormons' use of additional scripture was not acceptable to the majority of southerners, many of whom strongly believed that the biblical passage about not adding to or taking away from "this book" applied to the entire Bible and not just the Revelation of St. John the Divine (Rev. 22:18–19). They perceived the Mormons' use of scripture other than the Bible to be heretical and contrary to the foundation of Christianity. In one case, a well-meaning southerner advised a missionary to omit his testimony of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon from his sermon. The missionary, Elder Nathan Tanner, recorded in his journal: "He intimated that I did not know how much danger I was in and said there were men who were willing to 'gore' me through for my testimony." However, Elder Tanner recorded that his testimony of these things was the reason he was preaching—otherwise he would go home. He then explained that he feared God's judgments more than those of a mob.<sup>4</sup> As Samuel Hill put it, "Claims of orthodoxy have functioned to maintain group identity and solidarity."<sup>5</sup> Thus, the Latter-day Saint faith and use of additional scripture challenged the dominant religious culture in the region, and this surely influenced the persecution the Mormons received.

Stories of persecution and anti-Mormonism grab readers' attention, and this creates a risk of voyeurism. Perhaps there is something in human nature—and the Mormon psyche that has been fed a steady diet of persecution stories—that draws us toward violent stories. Though it is unfortunate that the stories of hospitality were not emphasized in Mason's book, he does make a passing remark about this reality: "LDS elders frequently recorded shows of hospitality from southerners, often in the same communities where they encountered violent opposition. Any full account of the Mormon experience in the South would detail this broad range of relations and not focus so exclusively on conflict as I do here" (12). While these stories of hospitality do not negate the persecution Mormons encountered, they

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3. Seferovich, "History of the Southern States Mission," 52.

4. Nathan Tanner, Diaries, August 19, 1884, Church History Library.

5. Samuel S. Hill, ed., *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, Volume 1: Religion*, ed. Charles Reagan Wilson, James G. Thomas Jr., and Ann J. Abadie (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 154.

do offer a more complete understanding of why Latter-day Saint leaders continued to send so many elders to the region, even after the murders, and give some balance and perspective to the missionaries' experiences during their southern sojourns.

The lasting significance of *Mormon Menace*, I believe, will be in the timeless issues that Mason has identified as being at the heart of southern persecution against Mormons: the limits of religious freedom, the definition of culturally acceptable marriage and how this relates to questions of federal versus states' rights, and the interplay of popular sovereignty with the rule of law. For one reason or another, these same issues continue to be debated, albeit in slightly different forms, in the twenty-first century.

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