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The Journey of a People: The Era of Restoration, 1820 to 1844; The Journey of a People: The Era of Reorganization, 1844 to 1946

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Mark A. Scherer. *The Journey of a People:
The Era of Restoration, 1820 to 1844.*

Independence, Mo.: Community of Christ Seminary Press, 2013.

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Reviewed by Alonzo L. Gaskill

In the first official history in twenty years, Mark A. Scherer—world church historian of the Community of Christ (formerly known as the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, or RLDS)—offers a much-needed update giving the position of Community of Christ theologians, historians, and leaders on Restoration history. Currently available are the first two volumes of Scherer’s trilogy, *The Journey of a People*. Volume 1 covers the period from 1820 to 1844, and volume 2 treats the years 1844 through 1946. The anticipated third volume will focus on the period from 1946 to the present and is due to be available in June 2016—just in time for the next world conference of the Community of Christ.

This is an important series for those who closely follow Mormon studies and other fields connected to the restorationist movements, along with those who study interfaith dynamics, Mormon history, and the modern approaches to that history. These works also have value for the general membership of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; the laity of the Utah-based faith are likely unaware of the current position of the Community of Christ on key Restoration events, doctrines, and rites. Scherer’s work is admirable in representing the views of leaders in the Community of Christ today on topics such as religious history, doctrine, the Book of Mormon, and Joseph Smith. As Scherer points out, not all in the former RLDS Church fully agree with his interpretation of “the church story” (1:xviii). Nevertheless, what Scherer describes seems representative of what I have heard at Community of Christ gatherings and symposia over the last decade.

While there may be value for those of the LDS faith in reading these volumes—if for no other reason than to gain more understanding—

I suspect many Mormons will not care for them. Indeed, a number of LDS historians who read Scherer's first two volumes expressed concern. Owing to the length of these two books together (more than 1,100 pages) and the length limitations on this review, I will point out only a few problems.

One of the first things the reader is confronted with—particularly in volume 1—is Scherer's decision to write an “interpretive” history of the Church (1:xxii; 2:xvii). In other words, these books are not intended purely as history but as an interpretation of that history. Of course, all written history requires interpretation, and there is a place for it. Even works seen by many as circumspect, such as Richard L. Bushman's *Rough Stone Rolling*, are decidedly interpretive. Scherer seems to go further, however, informing his readers that his interpretive approach seeks to “think outside the box” (1:xxii). He even indicates that “writing a history of the Community of Christ requires imagination” (1:4). If the reader keeps this in mind, many of the “interpretive” parts—such as his tendency to draw conclusions based on what he deems “probable,” “likely,” “possible,” “reasonable,” “presumable,” or “assumable” (1:57, 82, 102, 257, 334, 341, 400)—may seem less frustrating. To explain the validity of his approach, Scherer offers the following analogy:

Imagine a ten-thousand-piece puzzle on a large table. When assembled, the puzzle presents a picture that we will call “the church story.” Although most pieces fit neatly together, there are some that do not. To remedy the incongruities, historians of earlier generations did their best to force the pieces into position even though clearly they would not fit. Through sound historical methodology, today's professional historians study carefully why the pieces do not fit. When they arrive at an answer, they fashion a new puzzle of the same church story. This is called historical revision or reinterpretation. (1:4)

Scherer informs us that his version of the history of the restored gospel “provides a new puzzle design” (1:4) that will help readers to find a place for those “pieces” of the Restoration's story that just do not fit into the constructs of a modern society. According to Scherer, “much of popular understanding . . . is based on faithful tradition and folklore rather than sound historical methodology” (1:28). Some will be comfortable with Scherer's approach and will feel he has employed “sound historical methodology.” Many, however, including theologically orthodox members of the Utah-based Church, will be bothered by his methodology and his presentation—particularly in regard to the Prophet Joseph

Smith. Latter-day Saints are more likely to find value in these books if they keep in mind both Scherer's denomination and his articulated intended approach.

Readers of these volumes will come away with a strong sense of Scherer's love for Emma Smith and her son Joseph Smith III. The author's adoration of these two key figures radiates from the pages of both volumes. Indeed, at times his descriptions of Emma and Joseph III have a hagiographic quality that members of the Community of Christ will appreciate. Those who appreciate Joseph Smith Jr., however, will sense a strong dichotomy in how Scherer treats Emma and Joseph III as opposed to how he describes the founding prophet of the Restoration.

For example, Scherer speaks of Joseph Jr. as sometimes dangerous to his followers because he did not always distinguish between when he was speaking as a man and when he was speaking as a prophet (1:10, 493). Scherer believes that Joseph was not himself sure when God was inspiring him (1:9), nor does he believe that Joseph understood many of his own revelations (1:66). Instead, many of these revelations came—in Scherer's view—from his own "life's experiences" and from his "vivid imagination" (1:61). Scherer attributes Joseph's success less to God and more to the Prophet's "amazing ability to find theological relevance in folk beliefs" (1:68). Scherer also attributes the Book of Mormon and the book of Abraham to Joseph's "vivid imagination" and plagiarism rather than to revelation or ancient texts (1:93, 95, 96–97, 98–99, 138, 209, 258, 259, 262, 409, 473, 490, 491). Scherer articulates a fairly common opinion of Joseph Jr. within the Community of Christ today and among their current leadership.

Evidence of Scherer's fondness of Joseph III over Joseph Jr. is found in his downplay of Joseph Jr.'s most important revelations. As a singular example, Scherer refers to the Civil War prophecy as a "supposed" prediction that anyone of the day could have accurately made (2:111), despite its many levels of prescience and unmatched detail. He then extols Joseph III for his prophetic insight when he published his father's prediction in the *True Latter Day Saints' Herald* a month before the war broke out (2:128).

Scherer seems to fall back on old portrayals of the Prophet that have fallen out of favor even among scholars critical of the Church, mainly because these portrayals of Joseph Smith as an indolent and manipulative man make little sense when looking at his accomplishments and the unrestrained devotion he inspired in thousands during his day. Scherer

describes Joseph as receiving revelations of convenience that required the Church to provide him with certain things such as a home (1:212n7; 2:218). Scherer asserts that problems arose for him and the Church because of his unchecked ego (1:259), along with his attempts to deceive people for gain (1:272). He writes of Joseph as coming to the realization that God was not directing him in many of his pronouncements, actions, and decisions (1:337, 341). Consequently, Scherer sees Joseph as one incorporating “heretical beliefs” into the Church because God was not the source of much of his inspiration (1:389; 2:12, 218). Scherer paints a picture of him as being lazy, intemperate, and downright ignorant (1:49, 413)—attributing language of Henry Caswell to Joseph that makes him look hickish: “Them figures is Egyptian hieroglyphics, and them which follows is the interpretation of hieroglyphics. . . . Them characters is like the letters that was engraved on the golden plates” (1:413). Scherer describes Joseph as an inept, “titular leader,” a mascot of sorts, with no real power or authority, who could not deal effectively with pressures and the fallout from his own inadequacies (1:212, 263; 2:308–9; 1:420). That being said, Scherer also speaks of the founding prophet as a man with an incredible ability to control others (2:xxvi; see also 1:22–23). Readers who are familiar with the body of evidence concerning the character of Joseph will have a difficult time agreeing with the accuracy of Scherer’s descriptions. And certainly most in both the LDS and RLDS traditions will be somewhat dismayed at Scherer’s comparison of Joseph to Hitler and Mussolini—each of which, according to Scherer, thought themselves invulnerable (1:459).

In contrast, Scherer describes the wisdom and inspiration of Joseph III. He highlights how the latter “kept avoiding his father’s mistakes” and, unlike his father, sought “moderation on controversial issues.” Joseph III would “follow his father but only so far,” ensuring that he did “not make the same mistakes” his father had made (2:112, 196, 308, 544, 546). Unlike those who followed Joseph Jr., according to Scherer, those who followed Joseph III kept their allegiance to “the only true church”—avoiding misplaced allegiance to the founder of the Restoration (2:197, 218). As readers study these volumes, they may wonder how Scherer can accept the importance of Joseph Jr.’s work as the founding Prophet while at the same time seeing Joseph III as an obviously superior leader and a necessary correction to his father’s many failings.

In addition to the measure of condescension manifest toward Joseph Jr. in these volumes, there are also several instances where Scherer misquotes sources to the detriment of the Prophet. For

example, Scherer describes Joseph as encouraging members in Missouri “to endeavor to take life, or tear down houses” (1:281). However, when examining what is actually stated in the source Scherer is quoting, one finds this:

And I [Joseph Smith Jr.] would recommend to Brother Wight to enter complaint to the governor as often as he receives any insults or injury; and in case that they [the citizens of Clay County] proceed to endeavor to take life, or tear down houses, and if the citizens of Clay county do not befriend us, to gather up the little army, and be set over immediately into Jackson county, and trust in God, and do the best he can in maintaining the ground. (*History of the Church* 2:145)

Scherer’s volume inverts the meaning of the quote, making it appear as though the Prophet was encouraging violence, when he was actually referring to how the Saints should appeal to the government and respond when violence was committed against them. Several times in his text he makes the claim that the Mormons were a violent people (1:1, 277, 292–95, 458), and the above misquote runs the risk of giving readers the impression that Scherer is intentionally misreading sources in order to substantiate his claims.

In a similar example, Scherer raises serious concerns about Joseph being ordained a “king” by the Council of Fifty, and he implies that a secret plot to take over the U.S. government was at the heart of this “ordination” (1:427–28). However, when one examines the event Scherer is describing, one finds Joseph explaining the ordination in this way: “I will advance from prophet to priest & then to King[,] not to the kingdoms of this earth but of the most high god.”¹ When studying the ordination in context, it becomes clear Joseph Jr. was not speaking of earthly kingdoms or governments. Rather, he was referring to the temple endowment and his ordination therein to become a “king” in the heavenly kingdom of God. Scherer’s tradition does not administer a temple endowment akin to what Joseph Jr. instituted in Nauvoo. Thus, Scherer’s misquote may be the result of not understanding those rites. Nevertheless, Scherer too often suggests motives and intentions on the part of the Prophet based on the misreading of texts or reliance on questionable

1. See Joseph Smith, as recorded by Willard Richards, in Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, comp., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph*, Religious Studies Monograph Series no. 6 (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1980), 234, 294 n. 15. Punctuation and capitalization standardized.

sources. Each is avoidable and each is problematic because of the false impressions these readings engender in the mind of the reader.

In addition to misquotations, Scherer makes claims that appear to be historically inaccurate. In his discussion of the translation of the Book of Mormon and the book of Abraham, for example, Scherer states: “Smith used a seer stone and a hat in translating portions of the Book of Mormon, yet there is no evidence that Smith used artifactual assistance in translating the Egyptian papyri” (1:412). While perhaps a small point, both Parley P. Pratt² and Wilford Woodruff³ claimed that Joseph used a seer stone or Urim and Thummim to translate the book of Abraham. Elsewhere, Scherer insists that the “Danite henchmen” were “created” by Joseph “to enforce, by violence if necessary, the ‘right thinking’ of the membership” (1:1; see also 1:292–95; 2:115). Scherer states that “a careful review of documentary evidence links the Prophet to the secret society from its origins” (1:294), but he then offers no such documentary evidence for his claims. Most historians put Sampson Avard as the founder of the Danites, and the documentary evidence appears to show that Joseph did not know what Avard was doing or how he was using the Danites to commit illegal acts.⁴

Scherer also repeats the tired accusation that there were no religious revivals in the area near Joseph’s home in the months leading up to the First Vision. Scherer relies on Marquardt and Walters’s book, *Inventing Mormonism*, as proof that the religious excitement that Joseph referred to never took place (1:59). However, historical sources thoroughly substantiate Joseph’s claims; reports of ongoing revivals near the Smith home were reported in the *Palmyra Register* on June 7, 1820; August 16, 1820; September 13, 1820; and October 4, 1820 (to name only a few dates). In addition, there were other revivals in the area in the preceding years, including 1819. Scholars have thoroughly addressed

2. See Parley P. Pratt, in *Millennial Star* 3 (July 1842): 46–47.

3. See Wilford Woodruff, *Wilford Woodruff’s Journal*, comp. Scott G. Kenney, 9 vols. (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1983), 2:154–56 (February 19, 1842).

4. See David J. Whittaker, “The ‘Danites’ in Mormon History,” in *By Study and Also by Faith*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1990), 1:166–74; Leland H. Gentry, “The Danite Band of 1838,” *BYU Studies* 14, no. 4 (1974): 421–50; James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard, *The Story of the Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 130–33; Joseph Smith Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 3:231.

the question of revivals in upstate New York,⁵ and Scherer would have benefited his readers by pointing to the ample support for the Prophet's claims. It is difficult to understand why Scherer neglected these sources. Even if he desired to call into question the activities and motivations of the leadership in the first-generation Church, his argument would have been stronger if he had started from a position that is more historically grounded.

Scherer's choice of sources is often puzzling. He states in his introduction to volume 2 that this history of the Church is a "synthesis" of "the extensive research and writings of the church history community" (2:xvii). However, he often seems unaware of research done by the Latter-day Saint side of the Restoration movement—research that contradicts or clarifies his claims. Readers may be surprised to find that a Restoration-based history that was published in 2013 does not reference *The Joseph Smith Papers*, which are representative of the most recent research in the field. Friends in the Community of Christ inform me that volume 1 was written by Scherer a number of years before the *Papers'* availability. Volume 1 was not published until volume 2 was completed, so that the first two volumes could be sold as a set. Nevertheless, Scherer has missed many important primary and secondary sources germane to his project—sources that would have made these texts of more value to the interested reader.

In connection to the problems with sources listed above, Scherer has a tendency to make unsupportable statements that seem designed to undermine Joseph Jr.'s prophetic gifts. Scherer claims that the beheadings of Shiz and Laban in the Book of Mormon were because Joseph Jr. (during his "writing" of the text) was experiencing a "psychological reflection" on his own leg surgery when he was a youth (1:39). Scherer also says that Joseph Jr. named Nephi's antagonist brother "Lemuel"

5. See, for example, Milton V. Backman Jr., *American Religions and the Rise of Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1965), 251–69; Milton V. Backman, "Awakenings in the Burned-over District: New Light on the Historical Setting of the First Vision," *BYU Studies* 9, no. 3 (1969): 301–20; Richard Lyman Bushman with Jed Woodworth, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 36–37; Milton V. Backman, *Joseph Smith's First Vision: The First Vision in Its Historical Context* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1971), 53–111; Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 53. See also the www.fairmormon.org website, which has numerous articles addressing this topic and the historical evidence supporting Joseph Jr.'s claims.

because he had a neighbor in Palmyra named Lemuel Durfee, who did not think highly of young Joseph (1:115 n. 104). Scherer also claims that the Book of Mormon narrative about the conversion of the four sons of Mosiah was simply Joseph Jr. incorporating into his sacred text the story of the conversion of four of his brothers to Presbyterianism (1:115 n. 104). Scherer sees a link between the death by natural causes of Joseph's father-in-law (Isaac Hale) and the account in 1 Nephi of the death by natural causes of Ishmael (1:115 n. 104). There are many more of these loosely connected, shadowy intimations in Scherer's work.

The Journey of a People is a modern view that takes readers back to a previous age. Recently, the tensions between the RLDS and LDS movements have waned. Indeed, the two traditions seemed to have moved on. If anything, the divide in recent years has focused more on which movement was too conservative or too liberal. However, Scherer's new history takes readers back to a previous debate. His book is strongly apologetic in tone, often needling the Utah-based faith and its doctrines, practices, and leadership. The bias in these books is understandable—they are the history of the Church as seen through the eyes of a practitioner. Scherer presents *his* version of a faithful history, and he has every right to do so from the perspective of his denomination. How can we fault someone for standing up for his faith, as Scherer does? However, it should not be considered unseemly if scholars or those affiliated with the Utah-based church find fault with misquotations, unsupported statements, and inaccurate history.

As stated above, this is a very important work, bringing religious adherents and scholars of the restorationist movement up to date on the position of the second largest denomination springing from the ministry of the Prophet Joseph Smith. Scherer's third volume will cover the last fifty years in RLDS and Community of Christ history, a time of upheaval that caused many to question the Church. I look forward to this upcoming volume and the revelations it will provide.

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