



4-1-2021

## Murder among the Mormons: Reflections on the Docuseries— and on Its Historical and Theological Implications

J. B. Hawes

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq>



Part of the [Mormon Studies Commons](#), and the [Religious Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Hawes, J. B. (2021) "Murder among the Mormons: Reflections on the Docuseries— and on Its Historical and Theological Implications," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 60 : Iss. 2 , Article 14.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol60/iss2/14>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *BYU Studies Quarterly* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

# *Murder among the Mormons*

## Reflections on the Docuseries— and on Its Historical and Theological Implications

J. B. Hawes

You know that you've hit upon something when a docuseries you have produced soars to number two on Netflix's weekly list of most-watched shows. That is the place where Jared Hess and Tyler Measom found themselves with their film *Murder among the Mormons* in mid-March 2021.<sup>1</sup> Their retelling of the tragic deaths of Steven Christensen and Kathleen Sheets at the hands of Mark Hofmann—and the police investigation that exposed Hofmann as a forger and murderer—made for compelling television, and millions of Netflix customers agreed.

With that kind of viewership—and with this sort of subject matter—it likely surprised no one to see reactions and reviews and commentary about the docuseries proliferate across the internet. The Mark Hofmann saga was one of incredible complexity and controversy, and the reviews and reactions to Hess and Measom's account of that saga have reflected complexity and controversy, too.<sup>2</sup>

---

1. See, for example, Renee Hansen, "5 Best Shows on Netflix This Weekend: *Murder among the Mormons* and More," March 6, 2021, <https://netflixlife.com/2021/03/06/shows-on-netflix-murder-among-the-mormons/>.

2. For a sampling of reactions, see Samuel Benson, "What Latter-day Saint History Experts Thought of 'Murder among the Mormons,'" *Deseret News*, March 9, 2021, <https://www.deseret.com/opinion/2021/3/9/22315949/murder-among-the-mormons-netflix-review-reaction-mark-hofmann-latter-day-saint-history-scholars>; Jana Riess, "Netflix Docuseries 'Murder among the Mormons' Is TV Worth Watching," Religion News Service, March 4, 2021, <https://religionnews.com/2021/03/04/netflix-docuseries-murder-among-the-mormons-is-tv-worth-watching/>; Daryl Austin, "Netflix's 'Murder among the

Admittedly, with that kind of viewership and that level of reaction, one more review essay like this can feel excessive and unnecessary—I highly doubt that the docuseries escaped the notice of any reader of *BYU Studies Quarterly*. But perhaps it is a tribute to the filmmakers that I could not help myself. It is hard *not* to keep thinking about the film after watching the docuseries and reading reactions to it. I’ve been mulling over three broad questions, while reminding myself that one film, even spread over several episodes, cannot do everything: What did the docuseries do remarkably well? What might the documentary have done that it left undone? And why should we even keep talking about this story and its historical and theological implications?

### 1. What did the docuseries do remarkably well?

#### The voices of victims.

My initial dissatisfaction with the docuseries came from the directors’ choice not to reveal from the outset that Hofmann was a forger. Nothing in the trailer or Netflix teaser hinted at that, nor did anything in the first episode.<sup>3</sup> Like many others, I worried that if viewers did not make it to the second episode, this choice could perpetuate the same kind of confusion and misperceptions that reigned in 1985 and 1986 and 1987 (more on that in the next section).

But then I rethought that—and rewatched the series.

What strikes me now is that this storytelling choice could be the series’ greatest contribution: in *Murder among the Mormons*, viewers would learn things in the same order that victims originally learned them. So, while this choice was problematic from one perspective, it was powerful from another. The power comes from feeling something of the raw experience of Mark Hofmann’s victims as we move along the timeline with them.

---

Mormons’ Uses the Same Stereotypes about Our Faith as the Villain,” NBCnews.com, March 10, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/netflix-s-murder-among-mormons-uses-same-stereotypes-about-our-ncna1260447>; Aja Romano, “Bombs, Grift, True Crime: Netflix’s Murder among the Mormons Almost Had It All,” *Vox*, March 5, 2021, <https://www.vox.com/culture/22315736/netflix-murder-among-the-mormons-review-mark-hofmann-shannon-flynn>; Meg Walter, “I’m Not So Bullish on ‘Murder among the Mormons’ Anymore,” *Deseret News*, April 5, 2021, <https://www.deseret.com/opinion/2021/4/5/22357001/not-so-bullish-on-murder-among-the-mormons-mark-hofmann-lds-church>.

3. I’m grateful to Clint Weston for pointing out to me just how far into the series that revelation came.

Thus, we watch Mark Hofmann and his wife, Dorie, discover together Hofmann's first big find—the Anthon transcript. We hear his associates describe his rising fame in the document world. We feel the growing discomfort that surrounded some documents that introduced strange new elements into the origin story of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. We sense that some people accused the Church of suppressing evidence that would harm the Church's image—and that the soon-to-be-acquired “McLellin Collection” would deal some very painful blows to the Church in just that direction.

With all of that in the air, we watch news footage of the events that unfold when two people, Steve Christensen and Kathleen Sheets, are murdered by package bombs on the same morning in October 1985. Reporters and police detectives scramble to piece together connections based on troubled financial partnerships between Sheets's husband and Christensen—but then historical documents are always lurking in the background because Steve Christensen had purchased the infamous “Salamander Letter.” Additional reports of bomb threats throughout the day keep Salt Lake City in the grip of a tense panic.

And then, the next day, Mark Hofmann himself is almost killed in a third bombing. A distraught Brent Metcalfe rushes to the scene and is told by police that his own life might be threatened too. Curt Bench slams his fist against his steering wheel when he hears the news about the third bomb and cries out in frustration because he had warned Mark Hofmann to be careful. As the first of the series' three episodes closes, we hear the speculation that these bombs seem like the retaliatory acts of a religious fanatic who has gone to desperate lengths to keep hidden the historical secrets of his or her faith—and all of this as the episode closes with scenes of Latter-day Saint congregations singing, “We Thank Thee, O God, for a Prophet.” The implications seem obvious: Is there something sinister—and deadly so—underneath Latter-day Saint loyalty? How far would that loyalty take someone (or *someones*) in defense of their church?

The power of this approach in the film is that it can evoke in viewers some of the emotions that key figures must have felt in that terrible fall of 1985: fear, confusion, suspicion, distress. We see why everyone was a suspect and no leads were ruled out. And this makes it all the more understandable that the naming of Mark Hofmann as the suspect in this case seemed initially outrageous. Virtually no one at the time saw that coming.

Of course, many viewers did see that coming, but perhaps fewer than we might think (more on that later). It is likely that a fair number

of viewers knew enough of the story to know its outcome—and it is likely that others did a quick Google search when they saw the trailer. But the filmmakers’ decision to tell the story the way that they did—by not hinting at all in the first episode or in the trailer or in the teasers for the docuseries that Mark Hofmann was a forger—likely gave some viewers for whom this was a first introduction to this story a window into the mindset of all of those who were interviewed in the series: they truly had no idea this was coming. And even for viewers who did know beforehand the contours of the story, this was a reminder that no one in the 1980s knew the end from the beginning.

That matters here because of the way this series lets viewers glimpse the emotional journey that so many people must have traveled at the time. There is Shannon Flynn’s haunting description of Hofmann’s father hearing his son admit guilt, or the eerie foreshadowing of home video footage of Dorie Hofmann watching her husband watch a news broadcast about his very case, or Brent Metcalfe’s emotional description of wishing he had never been born, so deep was his anguish that he had been the one to introduce Steve Christensen to Mark Hofmann. These are unforgettable moments in the film. This docuseries puts the attention squarely on the depth of human pain—something easier said than done in the retelling of history, as narratives can get further and further away from people—and in the end, it feels like this is where the attention rightly should be. For that reason, *Murder among the Mormons* makes a powerful contribution to the record. So many people were deceived, betrayed, used. The interviews, the honesty, the emotion, the time to reflect—all of that has been combined in this series to foreground the human impact of the story. The filmmakers never forget that this is a human story.

## **2. What might the documentary have done that it left undone?**

### **Elusive clarity.**

But this is also an institutional story; this is the “Mormons” half of the series’ title. How does The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints fare in the docuseries? It seems a safe bet to venture a guess that many—even most—Latter-day Saints had that very question floating in their minds as they hit the play button on Netflix. Such a question feels almost reflexive for Latter-day Saints. There is no way around it: Latter-day Saints pay attention to the public’s perception of the Church, for so

many historical and cultural reasons.<sup>4</sup> That is likely true, to some degree, of every group that has felt itself to be a minority population in a majority culture—especially a minority group that feels that it has a message to share. The *Boston Globe*'s Michael Paulson put a generous spin on this when he told a crowd in 2009 at Utah Valley University that “no other faith group is as quick to respond to newspaper coverage as The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints”; at least, Paulson said, “Mormons are nicer when dealing with reporters,” since “no one in public affairs for the church has sworn at me, which is a treat, but I also can't recall anyone who has hung up on me.”<sup>5</sup>

All of this is to say that it is hard to resist the gravitational pull to focus a review of the film on the question of how *Murder among the Mormons* depicts the Church and its members. Reactions on this score have been mixed, with some Latter-day Saints expressing gratitude that it was not worse and some expressing dismay that it was not better.<sup>6</sup> On the one hand, the Church's storyline ultimately proves only to be a tangential one in this series, since the directors keep their focus on the experiences and loss and pain of those whom Mark Hofmann betrayed—and on the investigators who solve the crime. The directors said they had “no axe to grind” about the Church in this story.<sup>7</sup> On the

---

4. For a recent—and perceptively personal—consideration of the contested place of Latter-day Saints in American public perception, see McKay Coppins, “The Most American Religion,” *The Atlantic*, December 16, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/01/the-most-american-religion/617263/>.

5. See Paulson's account at Michael Paulson, “Reflecting on Mormonism and the Media,” *Boston Globe*, April 4, 2009, [http://www.boston.com/news/local/articles\\_of\\_faith/mormonism/](http://www.boston.com/news/local/articles_of_faith/mormonism/). Richard and Joan Ostling put it more bluntly: “Mormons of every stripe are obsessive about their image.” Richard N. Ostling and Joan K. Ostling, *Mormon America: The Power and the Promise* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1999), xx.

6. For example, Riess, in “Netflix Docuseries Is TV Worth Watching,” says, “I was largely impressed with the religious sensitivity they brought to the story. There is no Mormon-bashing here, no axe to grind; mostly, they want to understand how these murders occurred and how so many people could have been duped by the killer for so long.” In contrast, Austin, in “Netflix's ‘Murder among the Mormons’ Uses Same Stereotypes,” says, “Dark aspersions, innuendos and accusations against the church and its leaders are allowed to pile up. . . . Worse, the first two parts of the three-part series leave viewers believing that church leaders may even be behind a plot to commit the very murders of which Hoffman [sic] was convicted.”

7. See Lauren Kranc, “The *Murder among the Mormons* Directors Are Prepared for the Church of Latter-day Saints' Response,” *Esquire*, March 3, 2021, <https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/tv/a35683846/murder-among-the-mormons-directors-interview-lds-church-response/>.

other hand, viewers have a point when they complain that the series played into—sometimes passively, sometimes actively—the perpetuation of some Latter-day Saint stereotypes (think here of Ken Sanders’s joke early in the film about setting one’s clock back ten years upon landing at the Salt Lake airport—and, almost right on cue, the docuseries uses excerpts from Church films from the 1970s that were meant to stand in for the Church of the 1980s).

A review like this could easily fall into the trap of reviewing the film that I *wish* had been made rather than the film that actually *was* made. It is worth repeating that it is apparent that Jared Hess and Tyler Measom did not intend to tell a story with the Church at the center. The choice to keep the lens on the victims and their experiences is worthwhile in and of itself—and makes for riveting moments—even if that choice doesn’t satisfy some Latter-day Saint reviewers who are worried (and rightfully so, in some cases) about persistent misperceptions.

Yet it is not only Latter-day Saint reviewers who have wished for more clarity about the Church’s part in the Hofmann drama. A *Vox* review by Aja Romano is telling: “*Murder among the Mormons* flits away from a deeper look at the Mormon church, denying us the context to really understand the relationship between the church and the forger in its midst. What does it matter that the church might have been buying documents to prevent them from wider circulation? Was the church buying documents? . . . The lack of attention to these questions makes *Murder among the Mormons* seem thin in all the places where it should be richest as a narrative.”<sup>8</sup>

Could the filmmakers have done both—that is, could they have done more to clear the historical air while keeping their focus where they wanted it to stay? I say yes, and that they could have done this even with a few simple additions that would not have changed the overall narrative direction or flow of the film that they had in mind. Inserting an explanatory note in a few key places, for example, or coming back to an interviewee to offer a “we later learned what had really happened” type perspective about the Church’s involvement, or including a couple of end titles to tie up loose threads in the story—moves like these could have gone a long way. Certainly, reviewers like Romano are not saying that the Church needed to be defended, just that the full story needed to be told.

---

8. Romano, “Bombs, Grift, True Crime,” emphasis in the original.

Here are two examples of what I mean. One deals with chronology, and one with context.

*First, I wish the filmmakers would have done more to highlight the fact that Mark Hofmann's plea deal and confession came a full fifteen months after the bombings.*

While the filmmakers did put the date of the plea-deal announcement on the screen (January 23, 1987), I think more could have been done to emphasize the time gap. A more prominent explanatory intertitle card would have worked well here. It could be too easy for viewers who aren't paying careful attention to miss that detail in the chronology or to lose track of the dates. The crucial point here is that because Mark Hofmann's confession and plea deal came more than a year after the bombings, a lot of people likely missed the full story at the time. As *Murder among the Mormons* makes very clear, media attention to the murders was intense and ever present. (The inclusion of so much time-period news footage is one of the strengths of this documentary.) But media attention to the plea deal—to the rest of the story—was much less prominent. And it was disconnected, such that it would be hard to fault people who remembered the terrible murders in Salt Lake City but never remembered (or even realized) that one of the victims was actually the perpetrator—and that the perpetrator was also a master forger.

Most reporters who rushed to Salt Lake City in October 1985 were a lot like Salt Lake City prosecuting attorney Gerry D'Elia, who admits in the film that before the bombings he was completely unfamiliar with Mormonism. He said that he had originally come to Utah for the skiing.

People like Jan Shipps and Peggy Fletcher Stack were repeatedly called upon in 1985 to give crash courses in Latter-day Saint history and theology to the crime reporters sent in from all major news agencies.<sup>9</sup> In those first few days of confusion and fear, headlines and television news broadcasts had little more to go on than to link murder and attempted murder with those who bought and sold historical documents that cast an unflattering light on the powerful and wealthy—and seemingly secretive—Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Is it any wonder that in the course of such reporting the Church took on a dangerous hue—and is it any wonder that many then, and now, might think that such a hue was deserved?

---

9. See Jan Shipps, *Sojourner in the Promised Land: Forty Years among the Mormons* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 105.

That impression does come across in the docuseries. There are insinuations that reflected the spirit of the times—that the Church was hindering the investigation, that President Gordon B. Hinckley was being less than forthcoming about his meetings with Hofmann, that the Church did not want to face the facts that the documents presented. But today, those insinuations in the film feel underexplored or ill-timed. The filmmakers do not hammer on this, though. It all feels true to the doubt and suspicion that swirled around Salt Lake City in the mid-1980s.

But what the docuseries missed seems reminiscent of what happened in real life. The details and nuance are hard to get at; the insinuations are left hanging in the air; the Church's part in all of this is never quite resolved. The archived news footage of the plea-deal announcement that the docuseries does include is of Tom Brokaw on NBC, and in the clip, Brokaw announces Hofmann's confession—and then states that Hofmann confessed to forging *two* documents related to the founding of the Church. This understatement is part of the problem. Viewers of the docuseries might miss the fact that Hofmann actually dealt *dozens* of forged documents to the Church (and to many others). Losing track of that sense of scope can make a big difference because many (maybe most) viewers of this docuseries are learning for the first time about Mark Hofmann.

If my limited experience is indicative of larger realities, my guess is that even many Latter-day Saints (especially young Latter-day Saints), pre-Netflix documentary, did not know Mark Hofmann's name or story. Probably fewer than 20 percent of my students in Church history classes at Brigham Young University over the past several years have indicated that they have heard of Hofmann. All of that has now changed with this docuseries. It has introduced a new generation to this tragic story.

But the significance of that is more than just awareness of this case. In a number of ways, I think Mark Hofmann's forgeries and murders ran together with several other 1980s happenings—the *God Makers* film, for example, or the wave of violence in several fundamentalist polygamist families—to cast a shadow on the public image of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its members that stretched all the way through Mitt Romney's campaign—even if two decades later people were far enough removed from the specific episodes to not even necessarily know what was causing the shadow. The incidental concurrence of *The God Makers* and the Hofmann saga mattered, in a mutually reinforcing way. *God Makers* debuted in December 1982 and, over the next several years, played to thousands of viewers a month. The thrust

of *God Makers* was that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was a cult that deceived the outside world *and* its own members by hiding dark secrets behind a family-friendly façade. Mark Hofmann and his crimes seemed to be “exhibit A” in confirming the worst assertions of *The God Makers*. The impression that something sinister was going on, or that the Church responded to reputational threats with deadly seriousness, reverberated long and loudly in the public’s mind, even if people did not know the specifics of these Hofmann-related events.<sup>10</sup>

Plus, these reputational blows against the Church clearly figured into Mark Hofmann’s planning. One short story that I wish the docuseries would have included to highlight that very point is a revealing incident with the *Los Angeles Times*. The *Times* ran an extensive two-part feature about the Mark Hofmann saga in spring 1987 (post-plea deal) that persisted with a claim from an unnamed informant that the Church was hiding an Oliver Cowdery history that would have provided a corroborating (and damaging) witness of the Salamander Letter’s assertions. The *LA Times* stated that their informant had seen this Oliver Cowdery history, even though the Church had countered that a thorough search of its archives had turned up no such Cowdery history. Finally, four months later—in August 1987—in a one-paragraph retraction that appeared on page 29 of the newspaper, the *LA Times* admitted that the unnamed informant was none other than Mark Hofmann. The *LA Times* expressed regret that the newspaper’s staff, like so “many others who had dealings with Hofmann,” had been “seriously misled.” “In retrospect,” the retraction read, “it’s clear we erred in publishing it without verifying Hofmann’s story with another source.”<sup>11</sup> But it was

---

10. This is the point (about the impact of the *God Makers* film and the Mark Hofmann episode) that I aim at in chapters five and six of *The Mormon Image in the American Mind: Fifty Years of Public Perception* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

11. “Tried to Kill Self, Mormon Artifacts Dealer Says,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 1, 1987, 29. For more on these *Los Angeles Times* stories, see Richard E. Turley Jr., *Victims: The LDS Church and the Mark Hofmann Case* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 309; Haws, *Mormon Image in the American Mind*, 145–46. See also Elder Dallin H. Oaks’s strong criticism of several prominent news organizations along these lines in “Recent Events Involving Church History and Forged Documents,” *Ensign* 17, no. 10 (October 1987): 63: “In a circumstance where The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints could not say much without interfering with the pending criminal investigation and prosecution, the Church and its leaders have been easy marks for assertions and innuendo ranging from charges of complicity in murder to repeated recitals that the Church routinely acquires and suppresses Church history documents in order to deceive its members and the public.”

this kind of slow and soft corrective statement that allowed mischaracterizations of the Church's part in all of this to persist in people's minds. Having an interviewee retell this story in the docuseries would have been an easy addition that could have accomplished multiple things: it could have given insight into the depth of detail in Mark Hofmann's plotting, and it could have offered insight as to why suspicion of the Church often became overblown. The docuseries could have made some headway in this direction by showing just how intentional—and entangled—Mark Hofmann's assaults on the Church were and how long it was before Hofmann's admissions were made public.

*Second, I wish the docuseries would have stated that Mark Hofmann's post-plea deal interviews with investigators ended abruptly and that some investigators concluded that Hofmann continued to deceive and manipulate investigators even in those interviews.*<sup>12</sup>

In other words, I don't think we should readily trust Hofmann's account of things. We should not let him control the narrative, even as a voice from the past. In the third episode of the docuseries, we hear Mark Hofmann tell interviewers that he knew he could succeed because "people tend to ignore anything that does not fit within their beliefs. They reject the facts because it means giving up their beliefs, for which they have sacrificed so much." In an earlier excerpt, he expresses mild surprise that so many people were fooled by his forgeries. There is no question that the dramatic tension of the docuseries is enhanced by weaving Mark Hofmann's own voice into the narrative. But I worry that the docuseries did not push back on his version of events. In this case, I think both of Hofmann's statements are worth disputing because I think Hofmann's view is a distorted one—and one that does not do justice to the victims.

Near the end of that third and final episode of the series, Shannon Flynn says something that, in light of these same Hofmann statements from earlier in the episode, could leave the audience with a skewed view. "I should have suspected," Flynn muses. "We all should have suspected. We didn't. *People don't want to know.*" Flynn's statement could be read in at least two ways, and those two possible readings offer a key distinction, I think, for understanding the whole story.

---

12. An August 1987 *Salt Lake Tribune* article put it this way: "No one is certain Hofmann is telling the truth in these transcripts." Quoted in Turley, *Victims*, 334. See Linda Sillitoe and Allen Roberts, *Salamander: The Story of the Mormon Forgery Murders*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 509–11.

On the one hand, Flynn could be saying, “We all should have suspected that Mark Hofmann, the *individual*, was suspicious or untrustworthy,” and “People didn’t want to know what kind of *person* he really was.” Flynn’s self-indictment here is a poignant moment in the film, but I don’t think others will be (or should be) quick to pile on. Thinking of other key moments depicted in the series, one can imagine the retrospective recriminations that Flynn might have felt when he remembered what he had seen of Hofmann’s drinking binge in New York City, or that Brent Metcalfe might have felt when he remembered an interaction at Hofmann’s home in which Hofmann had admitted his atheism. After the fact, in hindsight, it is true—there *were* at least a few telltale signs of a double life on the part of Mark Hofmann. In that sense, it is understandable why Flynn would say, “We all should have suspected.” An honest observer might say, “Yes, you had grounds to be suspicious that Hofmann did not always act with integrity. Perhaps you did not want to admit that to yourself, and that’s what you mean when you say you didn’t *want* to know.”

But still, even with that said, it is hard to fault these individuals for “not wanting to know,” as Flynn put it. The series shows just how utterly *unsuspicious* Mark Hofmann the person was to everyone who knew him. The repeated insistence of Hofmann’s innocence on the part of his neighbors, his father, his wife—and their total incredulity when Hofmann was charged—make it hard to accuse anyone of willful ignorance or simply turning a blind eye. The preponderance of evidence was in favor of trust, not mistrust. It is not hard to empathize with people who did not want to let their minds think the worst of someone they felt they knew intimately. Who would have done better or differently? This, again, is what makes this docuseries shine. We travel through the devastating realizations with the victims who learn that the unthinkable was the truth.

There is a second way that Flynn’s closing statement can be read, though. It could be taken to imply that “we should have been suspicious of the *documents*. People didn’t want to know the truth about the *documents*.” That interpretation of Flynn’s meaning, though, seems untenable, considering all of the evidence depicted in the series (and all of the evidence that the series left out). But it is an interpretation that the excerpt from Mark Hofmann’s prison interview wants to promote, too—and that’s the danger of giving Hofmann too much narrative control. There are other moments in the series that seem to reinforce this interpretation that buyers did not *want* to suspect the authenticity of the documents, or that the forgeries should not have fooled people

so easily—and that’s what makes this point worth emphasizing. For example, collector Brent Ashworth says that his wife described Ashworth as greedy, and the implication is that his greed made him gullible. (Interspersed comments by Gerry D’Elia and Ken Sanders reinforce this idea.) Ashworth’s is an understandable regret about things that could only have been clear in hindsight. But “greedy” seems the wrong descriptor here, wrong for the implication that Ashworth and Hofmann were somehow driven by a shared motivation. It is clear that Ashworth was not in this for the money. Ashworth admits that he was “greedy” in the sense that he wanted “the best documents”; his subsequent explanation is that “I always wanted to build a collection to be the best that it could be.” The best historical documents are, of course, verifiably authentic documents. Hence, Ashworth’s passion for possessing “the best documents” was the very reason that he was energetic in verifying the documents. But again and again, the verification process gave him no reason not to trust Mark Hofmann.

That is the point. What the docuseries shows is just how much work went into verifying the authenticity of the documents. This is not a story of people rushing to conclusions. This is a story of careful examination and tentativeness—and the consensus of experts. The series and the story may, in the end, be a cautionary tale about the limitations of experts, but that seems a wholly different matter. The buyers who interacted with Mark Hofmann demonstrably wanted to know the truth—think FBI examiners and cyclotron tests. Mark Hofmann’s forgeries were just that convincing.

One moment in the docuseries underscores this point, but it’s a moment that can be easy to miss. George Throckmorton, the forensic expert who, along with Bill Flynn, finally discovered the ink-cracking breakthrough that exposed Mark Hofmann as a forger, relates that he and Flynn had spent *one hundred ten hours* examining the Salamander Letter before detecting the cracks in the ink under powerful magnification. One hundred ten hours. The forged document defied forensic detection even after one hundred ten hours of expert scrutiny. Hence any dismissal of the victims in this story as easy marks or credulous dupes simply does not hold. The chilling counterfactual implication from the film is this: if it were not for the murders and the extraordinary time and investigative resources devoted to the documents precisely because this became a murder case, would the forgeries ever have been detected? And not for want of examination, either—it is simply apparent, again and again, that the forgeries were just that convincing.

This is why I wish the docuseries would have raised doubts about just how far investigators ultimately felt they could trust Mark Hofmann in his prison interviews. Despite his assertion to the contrary when he was interviewed on tape, Mark Hofmann succeeded because people did *not* ignore or bury facts. The parties involved—the victims—deserve better than to be explained away as overly eager or credulous. Instead, viewers should ask if Hofmann, in his prison interviews, subtly mocked the experts and his buyers as a form of self-gratification and ego. We should be careful not to let him control the narrative about how easy it should have been to catch him.

Certainly, Church leaders (and numerous other buyers) made missteps—almost always related to trusting Mark Hofmann’s word—but not out of carelessness or out of a desire to play fast and loose with facts. Ironically, Hofmann perversely benefited from the Church’s own integrity to its mission. This is part of the context that I wish the docuseries would have laid out—and it is the context that the victims had at the time that many of the Netflix viewers likely do not have. The docuseries could have done more, I think, to highlight the idea that the Church and its members have always felt divinely charged to collect and preserve documents related to the Church’s history—and had been doing so for a century and a half before Hofmann arrived on the scene. That institutional mandate gave an opening to Hofmann. And while laying this kind of background might have slowed the pace of the docuseries’ narrative, more could have been said about Leonard Arrington’s decade in the Church’s history department (1972–1982), and the tensions, by the early 1980s, between those in Church leadership who favored a move toward more historical openness and nuance about the Church’s past and those in Church leadership who saw such a move as giving fodder to enemies who sought to discredit everything about that past.<sup>13</sup> Even *Newsweek*, in 1982, caught wind of this internal tension and published a brief article with the headline, “Apostles vs. Historians.”<sup>14</sup> This was not a climate that Mark Hofmann created, but it was a climate that

---

13. Benjamin Park sets up this backdrop in an article he wrote for *Religion Dispatches* to coincide with the release of *Murder among the Mormons*. Benjamin E. Park, “Murder among the Mormons; Latest True Crime Doc from Netflix, Highlights Issues of Faith, Skepticism, and Authenticity,” *Religion Dispatches*, March 1, 2021, [https://religiondispatches.org/murder-among-the-mormons-latest-true-crime-doc-from-netflix-highlights-issues-of-faith-skepticism-and-authenticity/?fbclid=IwAR215AJOFv\\_6Lv6i7i2mqNeIhj8JX\\_y98WVONUwRIr9qP8fjqo86NEUD21Y](https://religiondispatches.org/murder-among-the-mormons-latest-true-crime-doc-from-netflix-highlights-issues-of-faith-skepticism-and-authenticity/?fbclid=IwAR215AJOFv_6Lv6i7i2mqNeIhj8JX_y98WVONUwRIr9qP8fjqo86NEUD21Y).

14. Kenneth L. Woodward, “Apostles vs. Historians,” *Newsweek*, February 15, 1982, 77.

worked to his advantage. He knew that these tensions would raise the stakes—and hence the interest—in his “finds.”

With this context, accusations of the Church’s efforts to suppress the troubling documents that Hofmann brought to light seem both understandable *and* overstated. While the Church did keep a few Hofmann acquisitions quiet, it publicly commented on others: the Salamander Letter is a case in point in the film. But even in the Salamander Letter case, the story has so many twists and turns that it can be too easy for viewers to lose their way and fall into easy assumptions about Church motives. Here’s one example of that: an online March 2021 *Esquire* interview with the docuseries’ directors originally included this passage (emphasis added): “But the most damaging perhaps was the Salamander letter—a document Hofmann forged which called the founding tenants [*sic*] of Mormonism into question. *The church bought the document in an attempt to shield its contents from members of the faith*, and even though the letter proved to be fake, the *coverup* did enough damage to the community itself.” The article was later corrected with this passage (emphasis added again):

But the most damaging perhaps was the Salamander letter—a document Hofmann forged which called the founding tenets of Mormonism into question. Steve Christensen purchased the controversial document *and gave it to the Church* in 1984, and *though the Church later released its contents to the public*, President of the Church Gordon B. Hinckley stated that “This does not preclude the possibility that it may have been forged at a time when the Church had many enemies,” in the early days of Mormonism. Although the letter eventually proved to be fake, the letter itself and Church’s handling of the situation had a profound impact on members at the time.<sup>15</sup>

While I’m grateful for the correction, the author’s original confusion is but one more reminder of an area where the docuseries could have done more.

The docuseries might have also highlighted that the Church publicly announced acquisition (from Hofmann) of the “Joseph Smith III

---

15. Compare the archived original version of Lauren Kranc, “The *Murder among the Mormons* Directors Are Prepared for the Church of Latter-day Saints’ Response,” March 3, 2021, at <https://web.archive.org/web/20210303191729/https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/tv/a35683846/murder-among-the-mormons-directors-interview-lds-church-response/>, with the corrected version at <https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/tv/a35683846/murder-among-the-mormons-directors-interview-lds-church-response/>.

Blessing” that offered documentary support more in the direction of the prophetic succession model of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints than that of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—and LDS Church leaders offered the blessing to RLDS leaders in a document exchange. In other words, Church suppression of the documents acquired from Hofmann was by no means the standard *modus operandi*. The story is much more complex than that, and blanket accusations are patently unfair. Instead, the desire on the part of many Church leaders and members to be as well informed as possible on the Church’s history—and to make that history as well documented as possible—opened doors for Hofmann on good faith. And wherever his Latter-day Saint customers fell on that “historical tension” spectrum—whether they were excited by his finds for the insight they offered about the past or anxious about their potential for mischief in the present—Hofmann knew they would be interested. He knew their religious commitments made them so—and sincerely so.

Thus, we come full circle back to Hofmann’s prison interview comment and to the reason why that comment deserves to be disputed: Hofmann succeeded precisely because people of faith would *not* ignore things that even went against their beliefs.

### **3. Why should we even keep talking about this story and its historical and theological implications?**

#### **Agency and redemption.**

This turn to religious belief brings me to a final section. Is there value in retelling this story? I say yes. Apart from the historical value and memorable moments of this docuseries—and despite the misses detailed above—I think this story offers profound moments for theological reflection. Reflections about trust and betrayal, reflections about transparency and courage, reflections about the epistemological limits of historical inquiry—the film calls forth all of these.

I say all of this hesitantly, though, because of how blithe this can sound. My heart aches for the victims whose lives were forever changed by Mark Hofmann. It is worth repeating that the docuseries should, above all, draw out deep empathy and sorrow from viewers for those whose lives were devastated. And it can be easy for someone far removed to speak about theological reflections when the pain is not personal. But I cannot help but think of a repeated scriptural phrase that is dear to readers of the Bible and the Doctrine and Covenants alike. Here’s

the Romans 8:28 iteration of this: “We know that all things shall work together for good to them that love God” (compare D&C 90:24; 98:3; 100:15). The comprehensiveness of this assertion is what gives the passage its power. “All things.” In a Latter-day Saint cosmology, this cannot mean that God causes all things or that God ordains all things. This cannot be fatalistic or deterministic. Rather, all things that *happen*—through our agency, through the agency of others, through the agency of no one—can still work together for our good. God is just that good; he can turn all things to work for our good.

Two such possibilities have been on my mind, and the film gestures toward both of these.

The first centers on a question about prophets and revelation and agency. The film raises this question, even if not in quite these words: Why weren’t Church prophets privy to divine detection of the forgeries—and immediately so? I’m grateful that the Hofmann episode lets us wrestle with this question for all of the good thinking this question can generate about the role of prophets, the process of divine communication, the wisdom and foresight of God, and especially the place of human agency in the economy of God.

Of course, that question presupposes an assumption about the way prophets—and God—*should* function. So, it is worth calling that assumption into question by asking ourselves a host of other questions. Shouldn’t we be grateful that the Church is led by prophets who are interested in and intrigued by historical documents related to the Church? That their kneejerk reaction in this instance was not to reject everything that runs counter to their expectations of the historical narrative? That they were willing to consider and respect the opinion of experts? That they took a “wait and see” approach? That they did not see documents that altered the picture of the early Church and its leaders as necessarily undermining the spiritual source of their faith and witness? That they expressed that history can go only so far as a source of knowledge about ultimate things? These kinds of queries fall into one line of questioning, but there are other lines, too: Even if God were to have exposed Mark Hofmann and his plot to his prophets from the outset, how might the story have been different if prophets originally took a strong stand against the authenticity of the documents—only on the basis of their claims to revelation—in the face of expert evaluation on the part of Church members and others? Would Church leaders have alienated more people by what could have been seen as a stubborn refusal to face the facts? Would that have been an even more impossible

situation? And would there ever have been a resolution? Tugging on these counterfactual threads shows how quickly other things could unravel. The situation is not so simple as we might think it is, knowing what we now know.<sup>16</sup>

Richard Turley does this kind of theological work in episode three of the film—and his articulate response to the question as to why prophets did not detect Hofmann’s deceit is remarkably layered for a brief sound-bite answer. His response asks viewers to step back and to consider what would be the consequence if God *were* to intervene and detect and stop all wickedness and conspiracy and deceit. The Latter-day Saint answer is that agency would be permanently compromised—and the whole plan of God would thus be frustrated.

Human freedom to act means that pain can be inflicted—we will inflict pain on others, and others will inflict pain on us. It seems a steep price to pay—until we consider the alternative.

I cannot forget that it is easy to speak of this in generalities; it can seem callous to speak of this in specifics. But my mind is drawn to Alma 14. I think of the unspeakable pain of women and children suffering death by fire; I think of Alma and Amulek watching. I hear Amulek ask how this can go on without their calling upon the power of God to stop this. And I hear Alma’s aching response: “The Spirit constraineth me that I must not stretch forth mine hand; for behold the Lord receiveth them up unto himself, in glory; and he doth suffer that they may do this thing, or that the people may do this thing unto them, according to the hardness of their hearts, that the judgments which he shall exercise upon them in his wrath may be just; and the blood of the innocent shall stand as a witness against them, yea, and cry mightily against them at the last day” (Alma 14:11).

This turn to Alma 14 is not meant to imply in the Hofmann case that I think the Lord was constraining his prophets from revealing what they, in reality, knew about the documents all along. Instead, it is meant to reinforce the reality that true agency means that real human choice also means the possibility of real human evil. This is a “problem of evil” question, and the Latter-day Saint answer to that problem hinges on agency. In a universe where agency is key to progress, where choice is key to

---

16. In early 1981, Church Apostle Bruce R. McConkie did compose an internal memo in which he expressed his doubts about the authenticity of the Joseph Smith III Blessing, based on contextual and doctrinal inconsistencies. For a full description of that memo, see Turley, *Victims*, 53–55.

becoming, where actions reveal (as well as shape) our true colors and our true desires, we begin to see that it could not be otherwise. There are times when God has preemptively revealed a pending plot—think Doctrine and Covenants 10 and the lost 116 pages—but there are other times when he has not—think Joseph, the son of Jacob, being sold into slavery by his brothers. Either way, the message seems to be the same: the work of God cannot ultimately be frustrated.

The docuseries offers a chance to look back at just how far The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has come in its institutional approach to the Church's history. There is no question that Mark Hofmann's exploits forced Church leaders and managers to evaluate much of what they were doing in their historical work (even though it would be wrong to say that Mark Hofmann was the only factor driving such evaluations). Richard Turley's appearance in the film seems significant not just for what he says but for what he symbolizes. In the midst of all of this mid-1980s turmoil, Turley was hired to manage the Church's historical department. Over the next two decades, he and like-minded colleagues quietly advocated for a new philosophy and outlook and fearlessness in preserving and telling the Church's history. In that regard, the world of today feels remarkably different than the world of 1985.

I would not do justice to the docuseries, though, if I did not come back from the institutional level to the individual level. The Latter-day Saint answer to the problem of evil cannot just be agency. It is meaningless without the redemption that Jesus Christ promises. This is the second theological reflection that has been on my mind because of *Murder among the Mormons*: the question of redemption, and the hope that the pain that is on full display in the film is not irredeemable.

Who could not be moved by Brent Metcalfe's comments when he expanded on his heart-rending wish that he had never been born? He told the interviewer on camera that this was "soul crushing," that it felt like the plot of *It's a Wonderful Life*, only in this real-life version there was "no redemption at the end of the story." I have thought over and over about his statement. I think about the burden of blame that Mark Hofmann so unfairly put on Brent Metcalfe, his close friend, or on his wife, Dorie Olds. Both Metcalfe and Olds became emotional in the film when they expressed the wish that they could go back in time and undo everything. It is heartbreaking that they felt this responsibility when in reality they, too, were innocent victims. In the face of this depth of despair, I do not ask this lightly: Can there be any redemption at the end of this story? Can any of this work together for good?

With hope, and humility, we want to say yes, don't we? In the closing moments of the film, the directors return to Al Rust. He recounts being forced to sell his entire coin collection to repay to the bank the amount that Hofmann had swindled from him—an advance loan of \$185,000. Rust talks about not being able to sleep because of the press of anxiety and worry and loss. But then he describes a moment of deep clarity and insight: the thought came to him that Mark Hofmann had taken so much already that Rust must not let him steal the future, too. “All of a sudden it just came to me: he's destroyed you financially, but don't let him destroy you otherwise—spiritually, emotionally, physically. Don't let him do it!” Rust called Mark Hofmann's father and said that he would not—did not—hate his son, and then Rust asked him to tell Mark that Rust forgave him. “From that moment on,” Al Rust says with a catch in his voice, “my life changed.” There is something deeply redemptive in Rust's way of putting a face on a concept that Elder Richard G. Scott had put into words: “Forgiveness . . . allows the love of God to purge your heart and mind of the poison of hate, . . . the desire for revenge. It makes place for the purifying, healing, restoring love of the Lord.”<sup>17</sup> This is powerful, real-world theology in action.

Should we retell this Mark Hofmann story? Yes—and I'm glad that *Murder among the Mormons* did so. If the docuseries pushes us to pay attention to the pathos and pain in the victims' perspectives, or to do additional reading and research to get the full story, or to ask bigger questions of deep spiritual significance, then I think there is redemptive value in all of that.

---

J. B. Haws is an associate professor of Church history and doctrine at Brigham Young University.

---

17. Richard G. Scott, “Healing the Tragic Scars of Abuse,” *Ensign* 22, no. 5 (May 1992): 33.