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Watchman on the Tower: Ezra Taft Benson and the Making of the Mormon Right Thunder from the Right: Ezra Taft Benson in Mormonism and Politics

Roger Terry

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*Watchman on the Tower:
Ezra Taft Benson and the Making of the Mormon Right*
By Matthew L. Harris

Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2020

*Thunder from the Right:
Ezra Taft Benson in Mormonism and Politics*
Edited by Matthew L. Harris

Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019

Reviewed by Roger Terry

Although I was already fairly well acquainted with the activities and rhetoric of Ezra Taft Benson, a controversial twentieth-century Apostle, what surprised me when reading these two books about him was their relevance to what is happening in the United States today. Historian Matthew L. Harris authored the biography of Benson titled *Watchman on the Tower* and edited the anthology *Thunder from the Right*. They help explain not only Benson's life and times but also political conservatism and paranoia about government conspiracy among American Latter-day Saints today.

The two books can be profitably read in tandem because, even though they overlap somewhat in content, they also complement each other well and provide a fascinating portrait of the man who served eight years as Dwight D. Eisenhower's secretary of agriculture and went on to become the thirteenth President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Watchman on the Tower is not a full biography but a narrower account of Benson's involvement in right-wing politics. Harris chronicles "how Benson developed a radical form of conservatism" (9), which included his belief in and his dissemination of various conspiracy theories. Harris traces this development to three significant influences in Benson's life: his 1946 humanitarian mission to Europe, his eight years serving in the Eisenhower administration, and his close affiliation with (but not membership in) the John Birch Society. While several other General Authorities were politically conservative, none were as much so, or as outspoken about it, as Ezra Taft Benson. Indeed, his crusade against communism sometimes caused friction within the Church's leading quorums and, Harris argues, likely even resulted in his assignment to oversee the

Church's European mission, which some of his fellow Apostles hoped would serve as a cooling-off period for the right-wing firebrand.

Watchman on the Tower is not a lengthy book, weighing in at just under 130 pages of text, but the 73 pages of endnotes reveal how thorough Harris's research was. Significantly, Harris incorporated material from the previously restricted papers at the John Birch Society headquarters as well as "documents at the Herbert Hoover, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, and Ronald Reagan Presidential Libraries; materials . . . in the William J. Grede Papers at the Wisconsin Historical Society and the George Wallace Papers at the Alabama Archives and History; meeting minutes of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in the David O. McKay Papers at the University of Utah; correspondence and private memos in the J. Reuben Clark and Hugh B. Brown Papers at Brigham Young University; and . . . documents in the Ezra Taft Benson and Spencer W. Kimball Papers at the LDS Church History Library" (11).

Harris organized *Watchman* into five more-or-less chronological chapters. "Socialist New Deal" examines Benson's 1946 apostolic humanitarian mission to Europe, which influenced his views on communism, fascism, and socialism. It also looks at his experience organizing and promoting farm cooperatives during the Great Depression, which affected his belief that Roosevelt's and Truman's domestic policies were a danger to democracy and capitalism but also opened a door for him to be appointed executive secretary of the National Council of Farm Cooperatives in Washington, D.C. This appointment led to his membership in Eisenhower's cabinet.

"Socialized Agriculture" investigates Benson's tenure as secretary of agriculture, where he attempted to scale back government involvement in agriculture, including subsidies that most farmers viewed as essential. Although President Eisenhower supported the policies Benson tried to implement, his efforts were opposed by many farmers and bureaucrats and led to calls for his resignation as well as accusations that he was both overly ideological and inflexible. His experience in government led him to believe that "subversives had infiltrated the federal government" (9). Benson began his tenure in Eisenhower's cabinet in 1953, during the height of Senator Joseph McCarthy's investigations of suspected communists. The Army-McCarthy hearings of the next spring led to the Senate's censure of the Wisconsin politician, though Benson maintained his belief that communists had infiltrated the American government. Harris shows that shortly after being sworn into office, Benson "began a secret surveillance system within the Department of Agriculture to catch suspected communists" (34), and

less than six months after the Army-McCarthy hearings, Benson denied a security clearance to Wolf Ladejinsky, a Ukrainian-born Jew,¹ despite being unable to produce any evidence that Ladejinsky had any communist sympathies or connections.

“Making a Conspiracy Culture” explores the relationship between Benson and Robert Welch, the founder of the John Birch Society, whom Benson first encountered shortly after his return to Salt Lake City from Washington. “Welch’s intelligence, genial nature, and ‘uncanny ability’ to spot communists endeared him to Benson” (56). The Apostle certainly would have joined the Birch Society, but President David O. McKay forbade it. Benson promoted the society publicly, though, and his wife, Flora, joined. Their son Reed became a regional coordinator for the organization. Benson’s devotion to Welch’s conspiracy theories led to some uncomfortable situations, particularly when the Apostle tacitly supported Welch’s assertion that President Eisenhower had been “a dedicated, conscious agent of the communist conspiracy” (58). Although Benson had harbored strong ultraconservative views for many years, it was after his return from Washington and his acquaintance with Welch that he began giving controversial political speeches in general conference and other venues. This chapter also discusses Benson’s short-lived attempts to run for both U.S. president and vice president and his statements about the civil rights movement.

“Reining in the Apostle” recounts the largely unsuccessful attempts by other General Authorities to muzzle Elder Benson. Part of the challenge was that President McKay was also a staunch conservative and an anticommunist, having even delivered some anticommunist addresses in general conference. But McKay’s views were not as conservative as Benson’s, and he did not like personal confrontations. Harris argues that Benson took advantage of this situation by either asking McKay’s permission to speak at Birch events or quoting McKay’s sermons in his own, then going beyond what the prophet would have endorsed while implying that endorsement. This tactic led senior Apostle Harold B. Lee to observe that “as long as McKay ‘can be quoted,’ Benson’s ‘militant diatribe following the John Birch line’ would continue” (84). After McKay’s death, the new First Presidency of Joseph Fielding Smith, Harold B. Lee, and N. Eldon Tanner warned Benson “not to discuss in general conference the John Birch Society, socialism, the welfare state, ‘secret combinations,’ ‘Gadianton Robbers,’ or anything conveying a government

1. Although Harris and some other sources indicate Ladejinsky was born in Russia, it appears he was actually born in Katerynopil, Ukraine, in 1899.

conspiracy” (86). Harris says that “Benson’s Birch crusade was temporarily interrupted when Harold B. Lee became church president in 1972” (87), but after Lee died unexpectedly, “Benson resumed his aggressive partisanship” (88). Spencer W. Kimball, who succeeded Lee and who had been called to the apostleship at the same time as Benson, tried with varying degrees of success to rein in Benson, who was now President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and next in line to the Presidency. Finally, after Benson delivered a particularly controversial 1980 devotional address at Brigham Young University, Kimball asked “Benson to apologize to the Quorum of the Twelve but they ‘were dissatisfied with the response,’” so Kimball “instructed Benson to apologize again . . . to a combined meeting of all the general authorities.” Apparently, Benson took this lesson to heart. He never again “spoke exclusively in public about politics or communism” (103).

The final chapter, “Remaking Benson,” discusses the years of Benson’s presidency, which lasted from November 1985 until May 1994. Because *Watchman on the Tower* is an examination of Benson’s political views, it glosses over some of his more memorable ecclesiastical endeavors, including his emphasis on reading the Book of Mormon, and focuses instead on what he did not do. As Church president, Benson did not engage in any appreciable political discourse, and as his health waned, counselors Gordon B. Hinckley and Thomas S. Monson assumed active leadership and promoted a more moderate image for the Church. But that does not mean that Benson’s earlier fiery political rhetoric became irrelevant. Harris traces some of the influence Benson’s speeches and writings have had on various ultraconservatives—from Glenn Beck to Cliven Bundy and his sons—even after Benson’s death.

Thunder from the Right is a compilation of essays on Ezra Taft Benson’s life and influence in both politics and the Church. Some of the essays expand upon topics raised in *Watchman on the Tower* or fill gaps in that account. Others stretch beyond the scope of *Watchman*. Among the former is Brian Cannon’s fine essay on Benson’s early involvement in farming and cooperatives and on his service in Eisenhower’s cabinet. Cannon gives a thorough account of the complex economic issues facing farmers during the Great Depression, Franklin D. Roosevelt’s attempts to keep the farm economy afloat, Benson’s opposition to FDR’s liberal policies, and Benson’s largely unsuccessful attempts to roll back those policies. In a fascinating essay on Benson’s meeting with Nikita Khrushchev, subtitled “Memory Embellished,” Gary Bergera argues that the story Benson often told about meeting the Soviet leader may not have happened

as Benson later recollected. Robert Goldberg's essay, "From New Deal to New Right," expands significantly on Harris's account of Benson's involvement with Birch Society founder Robert Welch and the Apostle's controversial speeches during the McKay presidency. Newell Bringhurst examines Benson's efforts to win the U.S. presidency in "Potomac Fever," an essay that illustrates just how interested Benson was in pursuing high political office and just how uninterested his fellow Apostles were in his quest. Matthew Harris goes into much finer detail about Benson's anti-civil rights statements in his essay, "Martin Luther King, Civil Rights, and Perceptions of a 'Communist Conspiracy,'" than he did in *Watchman*. In particular, he discusses the Apostle's accusations that Martin Luther King Jr. and the entire civil rights movement was a communist conspiracy.

Of the essays that extend beyond the scope of Harris's political exploration in *Watchman*, the one I found most intriguing was Matthew Bowman's "The Cold War and the Invention of Free Agency." Bowman proposes that Benson took the notion of agency that is deeply embedded in LDS theology and gave it new meaning in economic and political contexts. Andrea Radke-Moss, in "Women and Gender," examines Benson's coming of age in a world of male dominance and his later attempts to preserve that patriarchal system in the Church in the face of powerful societal impulses promoting an expanded role for women. Finally, J. B. Haws discusses Benson's presidency years, juxtaposing his first three years as prophet, when he was active and traveling and speaking, against his "final five-plus years, when health challenges severely limited his day-to-day involvement in church leadership" (211). Several important events punctuated these two periods: the Mark Hofmann forgeries and murders, the dedication of a temple in communist East Germany, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the organization of the first stake in Africa outside of South Africa (in Nigeria), the "Rodney King" riots in Los Angeles and Latter-day Saint relief efforts in their aftermath, the excommunication of the "September Six," and Pulitzer Prize-winning political cartoonist Steve Benson's public renunciation of his faith (Steve is a grandson of Ezra Taft Benson). All of these events created a tumultuous backdrop for the notably *nonpolitical* Church presidency of Ezra Taft Benson.

These two books are well researched and present a comprehensive picture of the political and ecclesiastical life of an influential Apostle and Church President. But perhaps most significant for me was what the books only hinted at but did not address directly. As I read, certain ideas seemingly jumped off the page and connected with what I was seeing

in the here and now. While I was reading these volumes, America was experiencing the most divisive presidential election in memory, which culminated in an assault by insurrectionists on the U.S. Capitol while Congress was in the process of certifying the election results. These insurrectionists were operating under the false belief that the election had been stolen. They had accepted conspiracy theories that, like almost all conspiracy theories, do not hold up well under scrutiny. I could not help but see echoes in the present of the conspiracies Ezra Taft Benson believed and promoted fifty to sixty years ago.

By coincidence, my elders quorum presidency had asked me to present the lesson (by Zoom) to the quorum on January 10, 2021. As I was preparing this lesson, the January 6 attack on the Capitol occurred. I was impressed that we needed to address the issues underlying the insurrection instead of the planned topic; so, with my quorum president's approval, I presented some ideas on how to obtain reliable information. Afterward, along with several complimentary responses, I received from a friend in the quorum a surprising email expressing concern about the direction my lesson had taken. He felt strongly that I should have addressed what he described as a worldwide conspiracy that has taken over mainstream media and controls both major political parties. He then quoted to me three fairly lengthy excerpts from the writings and speeches of Elder Ezra Taft Benson. This underscored to me the fact that even though the Church has tried to distance itself from these controversial statements (including omitting mention of them from Benson's official biography and from the Melchizedek Priesthood and Relief Society manual containing his teachings), they are still alive and well in certain circles and are influencing some Latter-day Saints.

As mentioned above, the life and political beliefs of Ezra Taft Benson have great relevance to the issues and divisions we see in America today. Matthew Harris has produced two books that give fascinating insights into a controversial and still-influential Apostle of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Twentieth-century Church history is a field that lay fallow for many decades. I am grateful to Harris and others who are finally plowing this field and beginning to reap a rich harvest of insight into our more recent past.

Roger Terry is the editorial director at BYU Studies, a former faculty member in BYU's Marriott School of Business, and the author of *Economic Insanity: How Growth-Driven Capitalism Is Devouring the American Dream*.