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Abstract Review of *One Nation under Gods: A History of the Mormon Church* (2002), by Richard Abanes.

ABANES'S "REVISED" HISTORY

Michael G. Reed

Not long after the initial publication of *One Nation under Gods*, critics exposed many problems in the book.¹ Abanes has since admitted that such criticisms “proved enlightening” (paperback edition [PB], p. 438) and “raised some thought-provoking issues” (PB, p. 440)—issues that, in fact, persuaded him not only to add a twelve-page postscript (although in order to do so he dropped his original appendixes on Mormon terms and notable Mormons to keep close to his original pagination), but also to make several revisions to his original publication.

1. See, for example, the reviews posted by the Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research (FAIR) at www.fairlds.org/apol/onug/ (accessed 5 May 2004) and Zion's Lighthouse Message Board (ZLMB) at p080.ezboard.com/bpacumenispages (accessed 5 May 2004). I will make only a few observations that will both supplement and support other reviews: Kathryn M. Daynes, *Journal of American History* 90/1 (2003): 228–29; D. L. Jorgensen, *CHOICE: Current Reviews for Academic Libraries* 40/3 (2002): 484; and Louis Midgley, “Editor's Introduction: On Caliban Mischief,” *FARMS Review* 15/1 (2003): xi–xxxvii.

Review of Richard Abanes. *One Nation under Gods: A History of the Mormon Church*. New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2002. xxv + 651 pp., with appendixes, notes, bibliography, and index. Hardback, \$32.00; 2003 reprint (with some revisions) in paperback, \$22.00.

Having read both editions and having had several conversations with Abanes, I conclude that, although his changes may seem commendable, they are actually superficial. Furthermore, many more problems in the revised paperback edition must be attended to before it can begin to resemble “A History of the Mormon Church,” as the book’s subtitle proclaims. Unfortunately, addressing all the errors in Abanes’s book is not possible in a short essay. An earlier reviewer was right: “A topic-by-topic discussion, looking at the evidence and evaluating it, would require a book as long as the book being reviewed; in fact, it would require more space, because weighing evidence, considering pros and cons, simply cannot be accomplished without a more ample treatment of each issue.”² I will make only a few observations that will both supplement and support conclusions found in other published reviews.

The Fun and Games of Scapegoats

In the hardback edition, Abanes takes many quotations out of context, two of which appear in a section of chapter 9 titled “America’s Fighting Prophet.” There he argues that Joseph Smith was the kind of person who would often beat up “individuals who had displeased him in some way.” Abanes supports this claim by mentioning Joseph’s boasting “about his violent deeds” (hardback edition [HB], p. 178). However, the passage he cites actually refers to the popular recreational sport of stick-pulling: “I feel as strong as a giant. . . . I pulled up with one hand the strongest man that could be found. Then two men tried, but they could not pull me up” (HB, p. 179).³ Abanes similarly uses a comment from Joseph Smith about a wrestling match: “I wrestled with William Wall, the most expert wrestler in Ramus, and threw him” (HB, p. 178).⁴

2. “A Dancer/Journalist’s Anti-Mormon Diatribe,” *FARMS Review* 15/1 (2003): 264.

3. Abanes introduces this quotation by claiming that “Smith fought and boasted again of his strength” (HB, p. 179). He cites *History of the Church*, 5:466.

4. Citing *History of the Church*, 5:302. My rebuttal to these quotations, however, should not be perceived as a denial that Joseph Smith was involved in fights during his

Even the Mormon critic J. P. Holding⁵ notes these misrepresentations: “Abanes attempts to show that Joseph Smith was a temperamental and combative sort; . . . he had used examples of Smith engaging in competitive sport and misplaced them as evidence of a specially combative nature.”⁶

How did these errors happen? Abanes defends himself:

My apparent misappropriation of quotations about Joseph actually is *a result of an editorial error* wherein the quotes about Joseph and his sporting experiences (pulling up sticks) were *juxtaposed with the wrong explanatory comments*. This incorrect positioning of text, as well as other numerous hard cover typos and editorial errors, will be corrected in the soon to be released paperback edition (July/August). Please do compare that edition with the hard bound book. You will see that the quotes remain, but the order of them is inverted and *previously deleted prefacing comments are re-inserted*.⁷

lifetime. As Marvin S. Hill observes in the foreword of *The Essential Joseph Smith*: “We know from newspaper accounts and court records that Smith was involved in more than one fight. Yet the evidence is plentiful that he had to be provoked by direct insult before he would resort to violence. We must remember it was customary in this period for direct confrontations and even duels to be fought over personal differences. Andrew Jackson, Henry Clay, and Senator Thomas Hart Benton, to name but three, were involved in duels to protect their honor or public image. Many a frontier preacher took to brawling when heckled from the crowd. This was a rough age by our standards. As for Joseph Smith, we know that he did not relish fighting, that he felt deep remorse over it. He told Allen Stout in Nauvoo on one occasion that he had been too quarrelsome at times, that ‘in his youth he had learned to fight much against his will,’ and ‘whenever he laid his hand in anger on a fellow creature, it gave him sorrow and a feeling of shame.’ Apparently Smith sought repentance in this area.” Hill continues, “Nonetheless, evidence of his temper does not offset the many examples we have of his general tendency to treat people with courtesy and consideration.” *The Essential Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995), xxi–xxii.

5. James P. Holding is the author of *The Mormon Defenders: How Latter-day Saint Apologists Misinterpret the Bible* (self-published, 2001). For a review of this book, see Russell C. McGregor, “The Anti-Mormon Attackers,” *FARMS Review* 14/1–2 (2002): 315–19.

6. See J. P. Holding, “Handle with Care: A Review of Richard Abanes’ *One Nation under Gods*,” available online at www.tektonics.org/abanesrvw.html (accessed 5 May 2004).

7. *Ibid.*, quoting Abanes, emphasis added.

After making these corrections, Abanes explained to me personally⁸ that Robert W. Grover, his editor, was to blame for the quotations that were taken out of context.

This assertion seems questionable for several reasons: (1) The errors conveniently bolster Abanes's thesis that Joseph was a "fighting Prophet." (2) The prepublished "uncorrected proof" of his book does not verify that Abanes had *originally* placed the quotations in their proper context.⁹ (3) On the very next page, Abanes attempts to substantiate his view of the Prophet by taking out of context yet another wrestling quotation—an error that he did not correct in his paperback edition.¹⁰ (4) The notion that his editor is responsible for the misrep-

8. And then posted comments at p080.ezboard.com/fpacumenispagesfrm64.showMessage?topicID=87.topic (accessed 5 May 2004).

9. The context in which these quotations are found in the uncorrected proof (galley) is identical: "Smith would boast about his violent deeds. In the *History of the Church*, for example, under the date March 13, 1843, we find this entry: 'I wrestled with William Wall, the most expert wrestler in Ramus, and threw him.' . . . On June 30, 1843, Smith fought and boasted again of his strength, saying: 'I feel as strong as a giant. . . . I pulled up with one hand the strongest man that could be found. Then two men tried, but they could not pull me up'" (pp. 164–65).

10. According to Abanes, Joseph "used his physical might in ways that had little to do with fun and games. . . . Jedediah M. Grant, a high-ranking LDS leader under Brigham Young, recalled that on one occasion Joseph accosted a Baptist minister for simply doubting that Smith had seen Jesus Christ. According to Grant, Smith hit the preacher and threw him to the ground so violently that the minister 'whirled round a few times, like a duck shot in the head'" (PB, pp. 178, 179). He *hit* the minister? *Nowhere* in the source that Abanes cites did Jedediah Grant claim this. Rather, Grant reports an entirely different scenario: "The Baptist priest who came to see Joseph Smith . . . stood before him, and folding his arms said, 'Is it possible that I now flash my optics upon a Prophet, upon a man who has conversed with my Savior?' 'Yes,' says the Prophet, 'I don't know but you do; would not you like to wrestle with me?' That, you see, brought the priest right on to the thrashing floor, and he turned a summerset right straight. After he had whirled round a few times, like a duck shot in the head . . ." (*Journal of Discourses*, 3:66, 67). It seems that Wandle Mace may be referring to this occasion when he says: "I have been with him [Joseph Smith] at times when approached by a long faced religious stranger who seemed to think it almost a sin to smile, and the prophet should be as cheerless and sedate as himself—challenge some one for a wrestle—to the utter astonishment of the religious stranger, who would be almost shocked at the mention of a wrestle, but would extol Jacob who seemed to be an accomplished wrestler, and also a great favorite with God." *Autobiography of Wandle Mace*, 70, MS 921, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

resentations has been rejected as false: “I did not, and indeed could not, make any editorial cuts to the book,” Grover said. A late delivery of the manuscript (less than three months before the planned ship date, which the publisher refused to change) and a lengthy manuscript (about three times the expected page count) meant that he was able “to correct grammatical errors only.”¹¹

False Equations

Abanes argues in both editions of his book that early leaders of the church taught that Joseph Smith’s character was “on par with Jesus Christ’s.” He substantiates this claim by relying on quotations that declare the Prophet to be the greatest man who “lived upon the face of this earth”¹² and that affirm that no person in the world has had “a better character” (PB, p. 174).¹³ In so doing, however, Abanes does not note that the Saints would have understood the existence of an unmentioned qualification within these declarations. Brigham Young, for instance, declares: “I do not think that a man lives on the earth that knew [Joseph] any better than I did; and I am bold to say that, *Jesus Christ excepted*, no better man ever lived or does live upon this earth.”¹⁴ George Q. Cannon qualifies his proclamation that Joseph was the greatest prophet that “ever stood before God upon the earth” by adding the phrase “*excepting the Lord Jesus Christ*.”¹⁵ Concurring with this distinction, Wilford Woodruff declares: “No greater prophet than Joseph Smith ever lived on the face of the earth *save Jesus Christ*.”¹⁶ The Doctrine and Covenants contains John Taylor’s declaration that the Prophet Joseph Smith did more, “*save Jesus only*, for the salvation of men in this world, than any other man that ever lived in it” (D&C 135:3).

11. Robert W. Grover, e-mail to Michael G. Reed, 28 April 2004.

12. Citing Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 1:41.

13. Citing Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 14:203.

14. *Journal of Discourses*, 9:332, emphasis added.

15. *Journal of Discourses*, 11:31, emphasis added.

16. *Journal of Discourses*, 21:317, emphasis added.

Abanes likewise turns a blind eye to the fact that Joseph himself understood his own imperfections and that he was subordinate to Jesus:

I never told you I was perfect.¹⁷

I told them I was but a man, and they must not expect me to be perfect; if they expected perfection from me, I should expect it from them; but if they would bear with my infirmities and the infirmities of the brethren, I would likewise bear with their infirmities.¹⁸

None ever were perfect but Jesus; and why was He perfect? Because He was the Son of God, and had the fullness of the Spirit, and greater power than any man.¹⁹

Who, among all the Saints in these last days, can consider himself as good as our Lord? Who is as perfect? Who is as pure? Who is as holy as He was? Are they to be found? He never transgressed or broke a commandment or law of heaven—no deceit was in His mouth, neither was guile found in His heart. . . . Where is one like Christ? He cannot be found on earth.²⁰

I do not, nor never have, pretended to be any other than a man “subject to passion,” and liable, without the assisting grace of the Savior, to deviate from that perfect path in which all men are commanded to walk!²¹

Although I was called of my Heavenly Father to lay the foundation of this great work and kingdom in this dispensation, and testify of His revealed will to scattered Israel, I am subject to like passions as other men, like the prophets of olden times.²²

17. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 368.

18. *History of the Church*, 5:181.

19. *History of the Church*, 4:358.

20. *History of the Church*, 2:23.

21. *Messenger and Advocate* 1 (December 1834): 40.

22. *History of the Church*, 5:516.

The Latter-day Saints also understood that Joseph Smith had imperfections:

Now, was not Joseph Smith a mortal man? Yes. A fallible man? Yes. Had he not weaknesses? Yes, he acknowledged them himself, and did not fail to put the revelations on record in this book [the Book of Doctrine and Covenants] wherein God reprov'd him. His weaknesses were not concealed from the people. He was willing that people should know that he was mortal, and had failings.²³

I thanked God that He would put upon a man who had those imperfections the power and authority He placed upon him . . . for I knew that I myself had weakness, and I thought there was a chance for me.²⁴

[I] knew all the time that Joseph was a human being and subject to err.²⁵

And just such phases to a degree have I witnessed in the life and character of our great Prophet, who stood in the presence of both the Father and the Son and personally conversed with them both, being often visited by holy angels, while continually receiving by revelation the word of the Lord to his people. And yet he was altogether of “like passions with his brethren and associates.”²⁶

Latter-day Saints understand that Joseph Smith, Brigham Young,²⁷ or any other servant who has been called to lead Christ’s church is

23. George Q. Cannon, in *Journal of Discourses*, 24:274. See Doctrine and Covenants 3:3–9 for an example of the Prophet being reprov'd.

24. Lorenzo Snow, quoted in Neal A. Maxwell, “Out of Obscurity,” *Ensign*, November 1984, 10.

25. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 4:297.

26. Benjamin F. Johnson, “Patriarch Benjamin F. Johnson’s Letter to Elder George F. Gibbs: Johnson Tells of His Close Association with the Prophet Joseph Smith,” *Doctrine of the Priesthood* 7/5 (1990): 4.

27. Abanes continues: “Eventually Young came to be viewed as practically a god on earth to the Saints” (PB, p. 222).

subordinate to the Savior. For those who have acquired an understanding of the faith of the Saints, this should go without saying.

In the hardback edition of *One Nation under Gods*, while attempting to expose the Saints' veneration of Joseph Smith "as a god" (HB, p. 175), Abanes inadvertently changes the meaning of a statement made by Brigham Young. "Brigham Young, for instance," according to Abanes, "warned that no one would ever get into God's celestial kingdom 'without the consent of Joseph Smith. . . . He reigns there as supreme a being in his sphere, capacity, and calling, as God does in heaven'" (HB, p. 175).²⁸ But Brigham Young was merely teaching that Joseph Smith, as head of a dispensation, holds keys necessary for us to enter into the celestial kingdom.²⁹ Abanes uses the elision to create the false impression that Brigham Young was equating Joseph Smith's status in the celestial kingdom with God's. When Brigham Young declared that Joseph "reigns *there* as supreme a being in his sphere," the "there" spoken of was not the celestial kingdom, but, rather, the spirit world.³⁰ Brigham Young's parallel, therefore, would no more have equated Joseph's status to God's than the apostle Paul's statement would have equated the status of husbands to Jesus Christ's: "For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body" (Ephesians 5:23).

28. Citing *Journal of Discourses*, 7:289.

29. "Joseph Smith holds the keys of this last dispensation, and is now engaged behind the veil in the great work of the last days." Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 7:289. "I bear this testimony this day, that Joseph Smith was and is a Prophet, Seer, and Revelator—an Apostle holding the keys of this last dispensation and of the kingdom of God, under Peter, James, and John. And not only that he was a Prophet and Apostle of Jesus Christ, and lived and died one, but that he now lives in the spirit world, and holds those same keys to usward and to this whole generation. Also that he will hold those keys to all eternity; and no power in heaven or on the earth will ever take them from him; for he will continue holding those keys through all eternity, and will stand—yes, again in the flesh upon this earth, as the head of the Latter-day Saints under Jesus Christ, and under Peter, James, and John. He will hold the keys to judge the generation to whom he was sent, and will judge my brethren that preside over me; and will judge me, together with the Apostles ordained by the word of the Lord through him and under his administration." Parley P. Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 5:195–96.

30. Within the text replaced with ellipses, Brigham Young indicates where Joseph Smith reigns: "He holds the keys of that kingdom for the last dispensation—the keys to rule in the spirit-world; and he rules there triumphantly." *Journal of Discourses*, 7:289.

Having had this pointed out to him, Abanes nevertheless continues to insist that he did not misrepresent President Brigham Young. “Where is the celestial kingdom?????” Abanes asks. “Answer: In the spirit world. . . . [He rules] ‘in the spirit world’—i.e., celestial kingdom.”³¹ Abanes prides himself on being a “highly regarded authority on cults”³² but did not seem, at least originally, to understand the distinction between the spirit world and the celestial kingdom. In his paperback edition, Abanes makes the wise decision to give Brigham Young’s quotation in its entirety. However, he does not clarify the difference between these two postmortal realms by providing an explanatory footnote.

I believe that one final false equation, which is central to the book’s thesis, should not be overlooked—this one is so pervasively laced throughout Abanes’s publication that the book’s very title celebrates it. Abanes believes that “LDS leadership has not yet given up on its long-held dream of taking over the U.S. government (and the world) should the opportunity ever present itself” (PB, p. xvii). Latter-day Saints believe “that they were divinely chosen vessels destined to rule the earth *along with Christ* during his millennial reign” (PB, p. 95) and that “in the end, the Mormons would come out as the sole rulers over every other government” (PB, p. 266). “Mormons saw themselves as the only legitimate rulers of the United States and the world” (PB, p. 336). “Will The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints ever. . . ascend to the place of pre-eminence over America, and eventually the world, as Joseph Smith prophesied? Brigham Young thought so, as did every other nineteenth century Mormon, especially LDS leaders. Throughout the twentieth, and now into the twenty-first century, the belief has continued to be an integral part of Mormonism” (PB, p. 434). “What would such a scenario mean for America? Continued freedom? Greater liberty and prosperity? Widespread pluralism? Perhaps not. . . . That question, of course, will have to be answered in years to come” (PB, p. 436). His claims that the Saints are convinced that they are destined to “one day enjoy global

31. See pub26.ezboard.com/fpacumenispagesfrm58.showMessage?topicID=97.topic (accessed 5 May 2004).

32. See front cover flap of hardback edition.

domination” (PB, p. xviii) blurs Latter-day Saint doctrine and falsely equates the Church of Jesus Christ with the kingdom of God.

To these gods in the making, America’s day of doom has always been just around the proverbial corner, right along with the realization of their grandiose vision. Celebrated Mormon historian B. H. Roberts put the Latter-day Saint vision of America’s future in even starker terms, saying: “[T]he kingdom of God . . . is to be a political institution that shall hold sway over all the earth; to which all other governments will be subordinate and by which they will be dominated.” (PB, pp. xviii–xix [pages misnumbered])³³

To look at this quotation in context, Roberts explains in *The Rise and Fall of Nauvoo* that “it is proper for the reader to know that Joseph Smith[,] when speaking strictly[,] recognized a distinction between ‘The Church of Jesus Christ’ and the ‘Kingdom of God.’ And not only a distinction[,] but a separation of one from the other.” Abanes quotes Roberts that “the Kingdom of God . . . is to be a political institution that shall hold sway over all the earth; to which all other governments will be subordinate and by which they will be dominated.” However, Roberts further says:

While all governments are to be in subjection to the Kingdom of God, it does not follow that all its members will be of one religious faith. The Kingdom of God is not necessarily made up exclusively of members of the Church of Christ. In fact the Prophet taught that men not members of The Church could be, not only members of that Kingdom, but also officers within it. It is to grant the widest religious toleration, though exacting homage and loyalty to its great Head [Jesus Christ], to its institutions, and obedience to its laws.³⁴

33. Quoting B. H. Roberts, *The Rise and Fall of Nauvoo* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1900), 180.

34. *Ibid.*

Why doesn't Abanes provide this information that Roberts believed was "proper for the reader to know"? Was he so blinded by his own agenda that he overlooked Roberts's distinction? Does Abanes simply not want to tell his readers since doing so would undermine the conclusion toward which he is leading them? Or is he unaware of the distinction because he is actually quoting from a secondary (perhaps anti-Mormon) source? Whatever the answer, any one of the above possibilities casts doubt upon Abanes's ability to draw an "objective sketch" of Mormonism (PB, p. x).³⁵

Conclusion

One Nation under Gods is not a "history," despite what the title may claim. The publication does not meet the basic standards of scholarship. Abanes repeats the same sensational distortions as the anti-Mormon sources and writers who have preceded him and faithfully employs their faulty methodology. Although Abanes has made a few corrections in his paperback edition, readers looking for a "history of the Mormon Church" should look elsewhere.

35. See also Allen L. Wyatt, "Chapter 10, A New Beginning: Brigham and the Kingdom of God," available online at www.fairlds.org/apol/onug/pg222b.html (accessed 5 May 2004).