

# INTERPRETER



A JOURNAL OF LATTER-DAY SAINT  
FAITH AND SCHOLARSHIP

Volume 38 · 2020 · Pages 107 - 110

## **Sensationalism: A One-sided Perspective**

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Offprint Series

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ISSN 2372-1227 (print)  
ISSN 2372-126X (online)

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## SENSATIONALISM: A ONE-SIDED PERSPECTIVE

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Susan Easton Black

Review of Benjamin E. Park, *Kingdom of Nauvoo: The Rise and Fall of a Religious Empire on the American Frontier* (New York City: Liveright Publishing, 2020). 336 pages. \$28.95 (hardback).

**Abstract:** While Benjamin Park shows promise as a writer and historian, his book, *Kingdom of Nauvoo*, opts for poorly sourced sensationalism instead of illuminating the joy of Nauvoo's true history.

Benjamin E. Park, an assistant professor of history at Sam Houston State University in Huntsville, Texas, has undertaken, in his first book on LDS history, to examine and explain the history of Nauvoo, Illinois. Park holds a bachelor's degree from Brigham Young University and a Ph.D. in Political Thought and Intellectual History from the University of Cambridge. As the author of *American Nationalisms*<sup>1</sup> and a piece writer for the *Washington Post*, *Newsweek*, and the *Houston Chronicle*, Park is at the beginning of what could be an illustrious career. Through the years, works of Benjamin Park may fill library shelves and lead to multiple invitations to speak to receptive audiences, such as his invitation to speak earlier this year to the Maxwell Institute at Brigham Young University.<sup>2</sup>

I was pleased The Interpreter Foundation invited me to review *Kingdom of Nauvoo*. The promise of writing a short review gave me reason to pause from my life's ventures to read yet another book on my favorite travel destination. I saw myself reading the works of a new, rising historian—a budding Richard Bushman, in his own right. Park,

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1. Benjamin E. Park, *American Nationalisms: Imagining Union in the Age of Revolutions, 1783–1833* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

2. Park spoke about his book on February 28, 2020. See <https://mi.byu.edu/events/2-28-lecture-park/>.

having a publisher that requires a literary agent, captured my attention. His publisher, Liveright, is a division of the W. W. Norton & Company of New York City, a publishing house owned by its employees and known for its anthologies and textbooks, not for studies of Joseph Smith and the merits of Mormonism. A professor away from Utah and a publisher whose publications are not readily seen in the Deseret Book or Seagull bookstores looked like a huge win to me.

Putting aside the cares of the day, I blocked out an afternoon and sat down to read. I was delighted to find that Benjamin Park has a flare for writing. His words are accessible to scholar and lay reader alike, a rare talent indeed.

But what of the content of *Kingdom of Nauvoo*? The emphasis on polygamy, Council of Fifty, and denigrating quotes and thoughts attributed to Joseph Smith that went unsourced left me feeling sorry for the young author and wondering who had been his mentor. I found myself wishing I was at my home in Nauvoo, having an afternoon with the author at the site where the Council of Fifty once met, talking about the individuals who attended their meetings and reviewing with him some of their journals. I wanted to show him the parade grounds of the Nauvoo Legion, the tucked-away graveyards, and Emma's rentals. I wanted the author to see the remains of small Latter-day Saint settlements in and around Nauvoo and the Mississippi River at dusk. Most of all, I wanted to share with the author additional facts and clear up the speculations in his work that mar the publication and his future career.

The bottom line is that I came away from my first read of *Kingdom of Nauvoo* knowing the author missed the joy of Nauvoo's true history as he reached for sensational topics that sell in today's market — polygamy and the Council of Fifty. I asked myself why this author, with an academic background from Brigham Young University and a bright academic future, aligned himself with scholarship that degrades a prophet of God. I came up with no answer.

The difference between young Benjamin Park and myself is more than longevity in the field of Latter-day Saint Church history. It is perspective. In his prologue, Park begins, "A gloomy pall hung over the Mormon city of Nauvoo when Joseph Smith and his closest allies gathered to replace the American Constitution" (2). This sensationalistic beginning hooks readers into moving on to succeeding chapters, but it starts the book on a faulty premise. The author has taken a leap that more cautious historians in yesteryear rejected. The author acknowledges that the "proposed Mormon constitution was incomplete and required further revision" (2)

but does not hesitate to conclude it was still a constitution to replace the U.S. Constitution.

Without much of an introduction to the topic, the author jumps to the issue of polygamy, which has been sensationalized in tabloids for generations. Because of curiosity and sexual innuendos presented as facts in *Kingdom of Nauvoo*, small circles of supposed intellectuals will find the book a page-turner and reason enough to malign prophetic teachings. But the able scholar, the one who has gone beyond the internet to the library and small repositories, will quickly see that the author uses few dates, his documentation is infrequent and causes the reader to search for sources to quotation marks, and his summaries are superficial.

As I reread *Kingdom of Nauvoo*, I reminded myself that two people can read the same document and reach divergent opinions; it is a matter of perspective. When perspective guides history, the picking and choosing of facts must support perspective. When facts don't support perspective, too often they are discarded. The better historian studies the sources to find truth and then perspective follows. The author would have been wise to follow the latter course.

Can it really be concluded that the Council of Fifty was formed in reaction to tensions and the threat of violence by suspicious outsiders? Was Nauvoo an "asylum" for God's chosen people? Is the law of plural marriage and clandestine domestic arrangements synonymous? Did Joseph Smith get his ideas from popular theologian Thomas Dick or mystical elements from Emanuel Swedenborg? Did stories of adultery, fornication, and other illicit sexual dalliances fill Nauvoo's civic and ecclesiastical courts? I think not.

No matter the talent of the author, historians know their writing is only as good as the facts presented. Like the works of all historians, this author's work will be surpassed. But in the end will the reader view Benjamin Park as a scholar? Truth edifies the writer and the reader. On which page should I have been edified in *Kingdom of Nauvoo*? Where is the author's knowledge that Joseph Smith was a prophet and the Lord revealed his words to him? To take out faith, a belief that God speaks to his prophet, and the sacrifice of thousands of early Latter-day Saints to build up Nauvoo (and their reason why) is to miss the mark.

May this author present truth in his next work. Anything less will not serve him or his readers well.

**Susan Easton Black** is an emeritus professor of Church History and Doctrine at Brigham Young University. She is also past associate dean of General Education and Honors and director of Church History in the Religious Studies Center. Dr. Black was the first woman to teach religion at BYU and the first woman to receive the Karl G. Maeser Distinguished Faculty Lecturer Award for her research and writing, the highest award given a professor at BYU. She has authored, edited, and compiled more than 100 books and 250 articles, including several books related to Joseph Smith Jr. and the early history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. She has served two missions for the Historic Sites Department, a mission as a psychologist for LDS Social Services, a mission to the Nauvoo Illinois Temple, and a mission in the St. George Temple Visitors' Center.