

## BOOK NOTES

**J. Michael Fezell.** *The Liberation of the Worldwide Church of God.* Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001. 224 pp., with index. \$18.99.

More than anyone else on the margins of Protestant religiosity, it was Herbert W. Armstrong who fashioned the “electronic church.” Starting out in advertising in Oregon, he switched in 1933 to pitching religion on the radio. He amassed a fortune, built a massive headquarters, and founded Ambassador College in Pasadena, California, where he moved his business ventures in 1947. Armstrong blended end-time speculation and the idea that the Brits were Israelites with the slogans of pre-World War II fundamentalist religiosity. Some may remember hearing his booming voice on *The World Tomorrow* radio show or seeing him eventually perform on television, or recall reading his *Plain Truth* mass-circulation magazine. Armstrong could have been the model for the comic Dave Barry’s amusing quip: “Jesus saves, send the money.” He eventually augmented his Radio Church of God with congregations, launching the Worldwide Church of God (WCG). He led the WCG as its pastor general until his death in 1986. His “church” was not without controversy; his troubles surfaced when he ousted his even more gifted son, Garner Ted Armstrong, who turned out to be a high-living, spectacular moral failure. When Herbert W. Armstrong passed away, his financial empire was in decline. Joseph Tkach, who replaced Armstrong, lacked his theatrical skills. In 1995,

Joseph Tkach Jr. replaced his father and was soon forced by massive financial setbacks to cut much of the headquarters staff, sell real estate holdings, and then in 1997 close Ambassador College.

Fezell provides the official, but highly sanitized, account of the fall of the Armstrong empire. He grants that under Joseph Tkach Jr. the leadership of the WCG was driven to abandon various unorthodox doctrines, including much of the end-time speculation and the British-Israel connection (p. 12). This was necessary to salvage what remained after the collapse of the Armstrong empire. Fezell seems to indicate that those who remained at the WCG headquarters believed the bizarre teachings of Armstrong. But Fezell also admits that “despite the poor research skills of certain [unnamed] cult-watchers, Herbert Armstrong did not deny the divinity of Jesus Christ” (p. 216 n. 14). The Armstrong movement, whatever its strange ideology on crucial issues, was also well within the parameters of fundamentalist Christianity. Much like a failed business venture, it tried to hold some of the badly splintered followers of Armstrong together while also finding a way of salvaging something in the aftermath of a dramatic market failure. While downsizing the Armstrong empire, its managers claim to have discovered orthodox religion. With this strategic shift, the WCG was eventually admitted to the National Association of Evangelicals.

Why should any of this be of interest to Latter-day Saints? When on 14 November 2004 Richard Mouw and Rabi Zacharias spoke in the Salt Lake Tabernacle, Joseph Tkach Jr. was on the stand supporting the effort of Greg Johnson (Standing Together Ministries) to evangelize the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Earlier Johnson had introduced Michael Fezell, special assistant to Joseph Tkach Jr., to his Latter-day Saint friends and evangelical associates. Included in this group were the ardent anti-Mormons at Living Hope Ministries who specialize in attack videos. Those folks then produced a video entitled *Called to Be Free*, which purports to tell the story of how and why the WCG found the real Jesus and gained evangelical respectability. This video appears to be an attempt by countercultists to suggest

to the Saints, based on the model of the WCG, how they can gain full recognition as an evangelical denomination.

**Allan D. Fitzgerald, gen. ed. *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999. il + 902 pp., with index, list of entries, general bibliography. \$80.00.**

This is a remarkable collection of more than four hundred essays of varying lengths by nearly one hundred and fifty scholars. Most of the entries contain useful bibliographies citing ancient and modern literature. Since Augustine's speculation is important for both Roman Catholics and Protestants, this authoritative collection should be useful for Latter-day Saints seeking to understand both strands of Christian theology and the disagreements between them. There are valuable essays in this collection setting out the influence Augustine's writings had on various later authors and movements, both Roman Catholic and otherwise, including Luther and the Reformed tradition. There are also essays on such topics as "Deification, Divinization" and "Nature."

Through the ages, Christians struggling to account for what God does for human beings through Jesus Christ came to contrast what one might become by realizing one's own nature with what one might become with gifts bestowed by God that could result in *theosis*. Originally nature and grace were contrasted. This helps to explain why one discovers that the Latin *natura*, with its cognates, appears "over five thousand times in Augustine's works" (p. 586). One can also be reminded that "*natura, essentia, ousia, and substantia* denote the same thing" for Augustine (p. 586). And one can also discover that, while "Augustine forcefully distinguishes between nature and grace," "the first use of the word 'supernatural' occurs in Greek and actually postdates Augustine by some one hundred and fifty years" (p. 586). Augustine did not, as we now do, distinguish the natural from the supernatural. We now no longer tend to see nature and grace as correlates but follow a later unfortunate theological accretion in which a quite different distinction is made between the natural and supernatural, a distinction unknown in our scriptures but common in

contemporary loose discourse. This little-known fact should illustrate the kinds of information packed into this wonderful reference tool.

**Sam Harris. *Letter to a Christian Nation*. New York: Knopf, 2006. xii + 96 pp., with no index. \$16.95.**

Several books have gained popularity as weapons in an ideological war to liberate the world from presumably deadly illusions about divine things. Other than those intent on excluding any rational consideration of intelligent design, the two most fashionable of these recent manifestations of an evangelizing atheism are Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion*, published in 2006, and Sam Harris's *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Religion*, which appeared in 2005. *The End of Faith* became a runaway best seller, with all that augurs. Harris is back with yet another diatribe against every faith that has content other than an atheist dogma.

For several reasons ancient atheism was an essentially private matter and not a public dogma. One reason for reticence was that skeptics genuinely feared the consequences of a popular loss of belief in divine sanctions. But modern atheists like Sam Harris are bold and brazen; they seek to liberate others from what Harris calls "collective delusion" (p. 5) or illusion. Ancient atheists fought covertly against faith in God because it tended to spoil what few pleasures there might be. Modern atheists fight against God because they are confident we no longer need consolation for our inevitable miseries. Modern atheists, unlike their grimly pessimistic predecessors, promise a Golden Age that will follow the disappearance of faith in God. Harris fits this mold. He lectures us fools about our "dangerous and divisive mythology" (p. 33), about "preposterous ideas about sin and salvation" (p. 37), and about our failure to ground our "core beliefs" (p. 43) on evidence, corroboration, proofs, and so forth. Unlike skeptical Europeans, we American fools follow a fashionable illusion and thereby make ourselves and others miserable.

Since we American Christians tend to "declare that monsters like Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong, Pol Pot, and Kim Il Sung spring from the womb of atheism" (pp. 39–40), Harris shifts

to complaining about dogma. “The problem with religion—as with Nazism, Stalinism, or any other totalitarian mythology—is the problem of dogma itself” (p. 43). Harris claims that “Auschwitz, the Soviet gulags, and the killing fields of Cambodia are not examples of what happens to people when they become too reasonable” (p. 42). He shifts to moaning about dogma and away from attacking faith in God, since atheism has often clearly “led straight to moral chaos” (p. 46). But is not his atheism itself a dogma? Not according to Harris, since atheism is a “term that should not even exist” (p. 51). And yet he insists that there have been “many brilliant attacks upon religion” before his own efforts (p. 91). Can one not find in this literature core beliefs and hence dogma? Harris detests recent talk about intelligent design (pp. 71–75, 77), indicating that his fondness for reason has its limits. Instead, Harris again appeals to strictly ineffable “spiritual experience(s)” (pp. 87 and 90) or “profoundly transforming experiences” (p. 89). His passionate appeals to mystical reveries offer no hope, since he grants that “it is terrible that we all die and lose everything we love” (p. 56). This book is laced with bald opining and unseemly name-calling. It is, however, one of the signs of the times.

**Richard Neitzel Holzzapfel, Eric D. Huntsman, and Thomas A. Wayment.** *Jesus Christ and the World of the New Testament: An Illustrated Reference for Latter-day Saints.* Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2006. vii + 327 pp., with sources and index. \$39.95.

The ancient world of the New Testament is brought to life with images, photos of artifacts, maps, artistic reconstructions, and timelines. This richly illustrated book provides historical context and cultural, literary, and linguistic background for the place and times in which Jesus spent his mortal ministry. After introducing how the text of the New Testament was transmitted and after exploring the world between the testaments, the remainder of the book is divided into three parts: the world of Jesus’s ministry, the world of the apostles’ early ministry, and the world of the apostles’ later ministry.

In support of the regular text, sidebars on many of the two-page spreads feature details, legends, and textual portraits of events, places,

artifacts, and people. For example, the reader can learn of such diverse matters as the background of Claudius, the shroud of Turin, bread and circuses, and the dating of the Pauline epistles through reading these succinct summaries. The Greek, Roman, and Jewish cultures all played a role in the way the gospel was shared and recorded. This volume is a fascinating and informative look at the times and world of Jesus Christ.

**Hugh Nibley and Alex Nibley. *Sergeant Nibley PhD: Memories of an Unlikely Screaming Eagle*. Salt Lake City: Shadow Mountain [an imprint of Deseret Book], 2006. xii + 366 pp., with notes, bibliography, and index. \$24.95.**

This is a truly remarkable book. Those who have encountered Hugh Nibley could hardly have missed the occasional glancing reference to his experience during World War II. From time to time he would include sardonic remarks about Maxwell Taylor and the 101st Airborne, the beastly behavior of soldiers, the endless blunders of those planning and directing battles, the arrogance of officers, or the utter boredom and sheer evil and waste of war. What has not previously been known is that this passionate passivist volunteered for military service, avoided a safe desk job somewhere, and did what he could to actually be there in the middle of those terrible battles that took place in Europe. Alex Nibley has not shied away from the anomaly of his zealously passivist father having volunteered and then fought in World War II. Nibley, it seems, very much wanted to be both an observer and a participant in one of the truly great military encounters in recent history.

Nibley was in on both the planning and execution of the Normandy invasion. He was proud of having driven his jeep shortly after the beginning of the invasion onto Exit Five (aka Madeline) at Utah Beach, and down the causeway and into battle. How he happened to be there and what happened subsequently are all told in detail. Nibley wanted to be an observer; he knew he would survive, but he was a combatant with a carbine. Some of Nibley's war experiences have been recounted by Boyd Petersen, his biographer, in *Hugh Nibley: A Consecrated Life*.

Alex Nibley has fleshed out and contextualized Nibley's World War II experiences. Alex mined letters, various interviews, scraps of diaries, the reminiscences of his father and others who knew him, and whatever other textual materials that could be located to produce a truly stunning book. As reluctant as Hugh Nibley was to have this story told, he was pleased with the result of the valiant efforts of Alex (and others in his family) to tell his story without hiding anything. Alex has also assembled a host of supporting materials. Without these, many of Nibley's stories might seem contrived or embellished. Alex holds nothing back. Even matters that were later troubling to Nibley are set out in detail. For those interested in Nibley, in World War II, in the Normandy invasion, in Operation Market Garden, in so-called military intelligence, or in the virtues and vices of those involved in war, this is a wonderful book. Alex is a gifted writer, and fortunately this book has been well edited.

**Matthew A. Paulson. *Breaking the Mormon Code: A Critique of Mormon Scholarship regarding Classical Christian Theology and the Book of Mormon*. Livermore, CA: WingSpan, 2006. vii + 285 pp., with bibliography, scripture citation index, index of early Christian writings, and subject index. \$15.95.**

Matthew Paulson does not claim, as the title of his book would seem to indicate, that he has somehow broken some insidious "Mormon Code" and thereby discovered the otherwise hidden venality lurking beneath the surface of the faith of Latter-day Saints. Instead, the "code" in the title of this book is what Paulson describes variously as "the Church Education System Honor Code" (p. 271 n. 892), "their Mormon code" (p. 271), or "the BYU Honor Code" (p. 271)—that is, the code of behavior required of students attending Brigham Young University. On virtually every page of his book, Paulson strives to demonstrate that "FARMS contributors and BYU professors have repeatedly, either knowingly or unknowing, violated" the terms of the BYU Honor Code (p. 272). Paulson classifies every defense of the faith and the Saints found in the *FARMS Review* as manifestly dishonest. In the concluding

remarks of his book, Paulson offers his readers a “list of words” that he thinks

might apply to the research of Mormon theology and history: enhancement, aggrandizement, embellishment, clumsiness, exaggeration, redaction, distortion, defraud, over-generalization, heresy, lie, cheat, fraud, and cult. Within this range of words lies the appropriate assessment of Mormon theology. The LDS writers and contributors to FARMS publications will likely choose the descriptions that are on the upper end of the spectrum, i.e., the more optimistic theological assessment. Evangelical Christians might see the infractions of Mormonism on the latter end of the spectrum. (p. 272)

*Breaking the Mormon Code* is filled with confused and confusing sentences; it is also a garbled diatribe against the *FARMS Review* and those who have published in it or who are, in Paulson’s imagination, in any way associated with the Maxwell Institute. “These scholars,” Paulson claims at the beginning of his book, “are too hastily [*sic*] to label critical polemics to be ‘anti-Mormon’ if it slightly challenges Mormonism, although it is honest, factual, and indisputable” (p. 2). This rather typically incoherent sentence also manifests the confrontational, aggressively adversarial mode of evangelizing currently being fashioned by the Walter Martin-inspired, anti-Mormon segment of the countercult.

How did Paulson come to be an anti-Mormon? Paulson actually tries to explain how this happened. He indicates that he knew virtually nothing of Jesus until, at age 28 (in 1985), he heard “Dr.” Walter Martin on the radio. Paulson experienced an emotional conversion to Martin’s brand of evangelical religiosity. As one might expect, this soon included pestering (and amusing) Latter-day Saints (p. 4) with a crude pamphlet and bizarre correspondence. Martin’s disciple, the litigious Kurt Van Gorden, “who helped in the finalization” of this book (p. 22), insists in a blurb on the back cover that Paulson has set “straight the lie that Mormonism is changing into biblical Christianity.” High among Paulson’s targets are people like Richard

Mouw (see pp. 1–2) and anyone else—either evangelical or Latter-day Saint—who is not down with him (and his anti-Mormon countercult associates) slugging it out in the rhetorical gutter.

**Ronald J. Sider.** *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience: Why Are Christians Living Just Like the Rest of the World?* Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005. 140 pp. \$12.99.

This book is a fascinating look at the societal impact of the adoption of Calvinist theology. Ronald J. Sider uses information from Gallup polls and the Barna Group to survey the lifestyles of those classified as evangelicals based on criteria developed largely by George Barna. These criteria include the assent to various intellectual propositions or theological positions. Tracing connections between the theological tenets held by evangelicals, particularly Calvinists, and their behavior in matters such as abuse, almsgiving, divorce, sexual morality, and race relations, Sider notes that their behavior does not align with biblical teachings. Sider bemoans the fact that most evangelical institutions do little about the problem and, indeed, are often part of the problem. He also holds out little hope that with the organizational chaos in the movement much will change in either theology or behavior.

**Vickie Cleverley Speek.** *“God Has Made Us a Kingdom”: James Strang and the Midwest Mormons.* Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2006. xii + 396 pp., with bibliographical references and index. \$34.95.

Vickie Speek has produced a remarkable book that enlarges our understanding of James J. Strang and those believers who followed him as a claimed successor to Joseph Smith the Prophet. An important and instructive episode in Mormon history, the story of the Strangites has often been neglected in considering the plight of those who fled Nauvoo but stayed in the Midwest rather than go West under Brigham Young’s leadership.

Strang was a remarkable personality who gained quite a few followers during those turbulent times. He claimed to have received a letter from Joseph Smith that pointed to him as successor after Joseph’s death. The letter, written in block letters, has been greatly disputed,

but, along with Strang's claim to angelic appointment, helped him to gain converts. To his people he appeared to be one of authority like Joseph Smith, and this is what attracted some of Joseph's followers. He claimed to have unearthed and translated ancient plates and to have received other revelations. Especially important were the Book of the Law of the Lord and the very brief *Rajah Manchou of Vorito*. He appointed apostles and organized his church in Wisconsin and later moved to Beaver Island in Michigan, where he had himself crowned king. He attempted a law of consecration and the united order, and while first rejecting polygamy, later took additional wives, as did some of his followers. He sent out missionaries and was successful in gaining some converts, especially among those who had previously been followers of Joseph Smith. His own disciples scattered after experiencing much friction and antagonism with the nonmembers in Michigan and after Strang's own violent death at the hands of some of his disillusioned and disgruntled associates. Many of the Strangites later joined with the RLDS Church. The present Strangite church consists of about one hundred persons.

Speek—a former newspaper and radio reporter and now a feature writer and columnist in the Midwest—proves herself an able sleuth in ferreting out sources on the history of this movement. Past works on Strang have stressed the man himself. Speek provides a great deal of information on what happened to his people and traces the lives of Strang's wives and families after his death. Appended are the texts of important documents and a fine collection of photographs.