NEAL A. MAXWELL INSTITUTE
FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

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Reference *FARMS Review* 19/1 (2007): 1–8.

ISSN 1550-3194 (print), 2156-8049 (online)

Abstract Assistant Church Historian James B. Allen shares his remarks that he made at Davis Bitton's funeral on Bitton's scholarly work.

Davis Bitton: His Scholarship and Faith

James B. Allen

I feel honored to be asked to say a few words at the funeral of a dear friend and deeply honored colleague. JoAn asked me to say something, in particular, about Davis's scholarly work. I am happy to do this, though I can hardly do it justice in these short few minutes; but I would also like to put it in a broader context, particularly the spiritual context that was so important to Davis himself.

I will never forget the morning of May 10, 1972, when Davis and I were each interviewed by Elder Alvin R. Dyer and received our official callings to be Assistant Church Historians, under the leadership of Leonard Arrington. After the interviews the three of us, along with Dean Jessee, met in Leonard's office. There Leonard offered a remarkable prayer of thanksgiving for the confidence that had been placed in us, asking for the blessing of the Lord in fulfilling the responsibilities we had been given. We all felt a wonderful exhilaration, and Davis later wrote of that prayer: "My sense of privacy and aversion to postured piety are sufficient that I will not include in this account [a history of the 10 years in the historian's office] the many examples of answers to prayer. But perhaps it would be appropriate to share the tender experience, after Jim's and my appointments had been approved, of kneeling with Leonard in a prayer of gratitude. We were historians, to be sure,

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This is a slightly expanded version of a talk given at the funeral of Davis Bitton, 17 April 2007, Salt Lake City, Utah.

but we were also committed church members and saw the development as a wonderful opportunity to combine the two."[1] And that *was* Davis—a fine scholar and just as fine a Saint.

It was in this spiritual context that I began to become more intimately acquainted with Davis, whom I had known for several years and whose quick mind and remarkable scholarship I had long admired. But in this capacity I became much more fully aware of Davis's true qualities—the things that made him both a remarkable historian and an exemplary Latter-day Saint.

Over the years Davis authored or coauthored and edited over 20 books and around 100 articles—mostly related to LDS history but also on modern European history—and delivered scores of papers at scholarly conventions. In reviewing Davis's first book, *The French Nobility in Crisis, 1560–1640,* Julian Dent wrote in the *Renaissance Quarterly* that "this subject was long overdue for discussion by someone with Mr. Bitton's clarity of mind and powers of organization."[2] Those two expressions—"clarity of mind" and "powers of organization"—only begin to characterize the qualities that made Davis the remarkable person he was. Another reviewer referred to Davis's conclusions in the book as "wise and temperate"[3]—two more descriptions of what those who knew him best saw in him.

There is no time here to review his many publications, but let me simply note a few of his qualities that I admired most and that characterized him as both a scholar and a Latter-day Saint. As a scholar he knew how to get to the true essence of an issue quickly and clearly, as seen in the penetrating interpretive analysis he always incorporated into his writing. He was a wonderful critic. (I know, because he critiqued my work often.) He could review a colleague's article, or critique it in a conference, without rancor. He had great insight into both the strengths and weaknesses of what he was reviewing and had

1. Davis Bitton, "Ten Years in Camelot: A Personal Memoir," *Dialogue* 16/3 (1983): 11.

2. Julian Dent, review of *The French Nobility in Crisis, 1560–1640,* by Davis Bitton, *Renaissance Quarterly* 24/2 (1971): 244.

3. Raymond F. Kierstead, review of *The French Nobility in Crisis, 1560–1640,* by Davis Bitton, *Journal of Social History* 5/3 (1972): 406.

a way of making the point clearly and effectively but without a belittling attitude.

He was a marvelous wordsmith, able to write not only with insight but with a flair that almost automatically created interest. A statement in this morning's issue of *Meridian* magazine (the popular LDS online magazine to which Davis often contributed) reflects this trait: "Each article came in as a gem that needed no polishing, a precious stone that reflected light. He sought to give a gift to our readers of their history, and he managed to intrigue us all with sweet surprises from our past and analysis we could count on."[4]

He was thorough as an investigator and he held high the standard of truth. He would not compromise his scholarship by hiding or ignoring important evidence, even if it seemed to contradict his own perspective. But he also always said that whatever he found in history could not affect his commitment to the greater truths of the gospel. History was not the gospel. In 2004 he presented a paper at a conference of FAIR (Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research) with the provocative title "I Don't Have a Testimony of the History of the Church." Explaining, he said,

> In making this declaration, I have no need to deny that our church history is peopled with many inspiring individuals. What they preached and taught can be studied. In the course of enhancing my historical understanding I often find reinforcement for my faith. But I *uncouple* the two — testimony and history. I leave ample room for human perversity. I am not wed to any single, simple version of the past. I leave room for new information and new interpretations. My testimony is not dependent on scholars. My testimony in the eternal gospel does not hang in the balance.[5]

4. Maurine and Scot Proctor, "We Will Remember Our Friend, Davis Bitton," *Meridian,* 17 April 2007; available online at www.ldsmag.com/historybits/070417friend.html (accessed 7 May 2007).

5. This article is reproduced in connection with the *Meridian* article cited above. It may also be found on the FAIR Web site, at www.fairlds.org/FAIR_Conferences/2004_I_Dont_Have_a_Testimony_of_the_History_of_the_Church.html (accessed 9 May 2007) or in the *FARMS Review* 16/2 (2004): 337–54.

He was a master at finding interesting and important topics to study and write about. Even if others, at first sight, did not recognize the importance of a topic, reading what Davis wrote changed their view. Davis did more than just report facts. He could always find meaning in what he was writing about, making his books and articles not only informative factually but also responsibly interpretive, helping the reader see real value in the story he was telling.

He published in the well-known scholarly journals, but he was also happy to publish in more limited LDS-oriented outlets such the *FARMS Review* and the more popular online faith-oriented *Meridian* magazine, as well as the FAIR Web site. His wonderful interpretive ability can by illustrated in his own words by a few of the things he said in some of his publications.

He ended his marvelous little book on the images of Joseph Smith with a commentary on the nature of belief. He recognized that, simply as a *historian* (that is, with all the trappings of scholarship and the need for irrefutable evidence), he could hardly prove that Joseph Smith was truly a prophet. But, in the end, he delivered powerful interpretations of the words of Joseph Smith, then added some of his own:

> When Joseph Smith said, "No man knows my history . . . ," he was admitting that he had no way of providing such irresistible evidence in his favor that all must accept it. "Just wait and see," he was saying. "You will know later who I am." . . .
>
> In essence, the Prophet says, God knows I am his prophet and some day you too will know. In the meantime, if you will sincerely pray to God, if you will put the teachings into your heart and life, confirmation is available. . . .
>
> Back in the days before the corruption of our language, before the flattening of our reality into a stark, naturalist, horizontal plane, there used to be a name for the leap, the signing onto something magnificently demanding and all-encompassing, the living out of something as if it were true,

> the growing conviction of the reality of things hoped for, things unseen. It used to be called *faith*.[6]

As a scholar Davis was curious about many things: his work delved into the gamut of historical studies and demonstrated a remarkably wide interest as well as knowledge. He wrote intellectual history and once published a remarkable article on anti-intellectualism in Mormon history. He also published a marvelous article titled "The Ritualization of Mormon History" in which he dealt with all the ways *other than* reading historical books and articles that Mormons learn, or don't learn, their history.[7]

He often wrote on unique topics that few people would have the interest or imagination to tackle, but that in his hands became important insights into the past. In a coauthored article on the little-known topic of phrenology among the Mormons, he described how the craze that captured many members of the church in the nineteenth century appeared to be supported by scientific evidence and saw a kind of revival early in the twentieth century, but was never supported by church leaders. The last paragraph illustrates the kind of positive assessment and important interpretation that characterized much of Davis's writing: "The refusal of Mormon leaders to subscribe to causes and movements such as phrenology could have its disadvantages at times, for they could seem to be unreceptive to the science and progressive causes of their day. But in the final analysis such a reserved attitude prevented the Mormon religion from becoming too closely linked with fads and contemporary enthusiasms and was a source of strength."[8]

Davis wrote biography. His work on a top church leader (George Q. Cannon) as well his book on an ordinary Saint (a biography of John Pack, which I have often held up as a model of how to write Mormon

6. Davis Bitton, *Images of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Aspen Books, 1996), 169–70.

7. "The Ritualization of Mormon History" was first published in *Utah Historical Quarterly* 43/1 (1975): 67–85. It later appeared, in revised form, in Davis Bitton, *The Ritualization of Mormon History and Other Essays* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 171–87.

8. Davis Bitton and Gary L. Bunker, "Phrenology among the Mormons," *Dialogue* 9/1 (1974): 58.

biography) are fine examples of thorough scholarship and integrity. He was concerned about making sources available to others. His *Guide to Mormon Diaries and Autobiographies,* published in 1977, provided a remarkably valuable guide to 2,894 unpublished sources available for research in various libraries. He liked political history, as exemplified in his first published article on Mormon history, a 1957 article on the struggle over seating B. H. Roberts in Congress. He delved into pioneer history, literary history, social history, women's history, natural history, and many other specialized topics.

In 1979 he and Leonard Arrington coauthored *The Mormon Experience,* a book written especially for non-Mormons. Published by Knopf, a major New York publisher, it dealt topically with a variety of subjects in LDS history. He wrote numerous insightful book reviews, including some very important ones dealing with anti-Mormon works. He even published a little book called *Wit and Whimsy in Mormon History.* It was filled with wonderfully humorous quotations and stories from General Authorities and other early Latter-day Saints, as well as curious situations that may not have seemed funny then but that provoke a smile today. Realizing that a few things in the book might raise the eyebrows of a few modern Saints, he wrote in his introduction:

> But is it not disrespectful to find amusement in the sayings and activities of previous generations when they did not intend them to be funny? Well, there were some people even then who were amused by the same things that tickle our fancy. Besides, it seems safe to say that there is plenty about our modern life that our ancestors would find amusing. They would laugh at us, if they had the chance, in the spirit of a loving parent chuckling at the foibles of his children. In the same spirit, mingling affection and bemusement, we are entitled to enjoy the past.[9]

9. Davis Bitton, *Wit and Whimsy in Mormon History* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974), ix.

Time permitting, we could go on and on about the scholarship of Davis Bitton. But the important thing here is that, as much as anything, Davis was as fine an example as could be found of someone who took seriously President Spencer W. Kimball's charge to LDS scholars that they must exemplify both impeccable scholarship and unmistakable faith:

> Your double heritage and dual concerns with the secular and the spiritual require you to be "bilingual." As LDS scholars you must speak with authority and excellence to your professional colleagues in the language of scholarship, and you must also be literate in the language of spiritual things.[10]

Davis did just that. He was a man of both scholarship and faith. As a result, I am confident that he was always comforted by what he read in the book of Alma about what happens at the time of death. Said Alma to his son Corianton:

> Now, concerning the state of the soul between death and the resurrection—Behold, it has been made known unto me by an angel, that the spirits of all men, as soon as they are departed from this mortal body, yea the spirits of all men, whether they be good or evil, are taken home to that God who gave them life.
>
> And then it shall come to pass that the spirits of those who are righteous are received into a state of happiness, which is called paradise, a state of rest, a state of peace, where they shall rest from all their troubles and from all care and sorrow. (Alma 40:11–12)

And I have a testimony that, with respect to Davis, we can accurately paraphrase Alma this way: "Behold . . . as soon as Davis departed from the mortal body . . . he was received into a state of happiness, which is called paradise, a state of rest, a state of peace, where he is resting from all his troubles and from all care and sorrow." In fact, Davis anticipated this on paper—you read it in his obituary where he

10. Spencer W. Kimball, "Second Century Address," *BYU Studies* 16/4 (1976): 446.

said: "As you read this, I am having a ball rejoining my parents and grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, and dear friends and associates I knew on earth. I am wide awake, no longer struggling with the narcolepsy that handicapped but did not defeat me, and cheerfully taking in the new state of affairs and accepting the callings that will occupy me there."

All who knew him knew that he had a deep and abiding testimony of the gospel and of the atonement of Jesus Christ. I share that testimony.