
Reading Church History

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This has been a difficult talk for me to prepare. The First Presidency asked me to speak to you, but I was not sure what would be appropriate for me to say on this occasion. Several years ago President James E. Faust spoke of your illustrious ancestor, Amasa M. Lyman, and I obviously did not want to repeat that subject. Richard L. Bushman will be speaking to you tomorrow, and I obviously don't want to try to cover the same ground as one so well versed on the writing of Church history. At length I decided to speak to you about the reading of Church history. In this I revisit a subject I addressed 23 years ago this month—just a year after I was called to the Twelve. I was speaking to a CES symposium at BYU. I assume that if any of you was present on that occasion you have long since forgotten what I said there, so I am free to repeat parts of it.

As I reviewed that earlier talk, it seemed just as important and current today as it was nearly a quarter century ago. There is even an added interest in looking at some parts of this subject with the benefit of hindsight. When I spoke then, I could only issue cautions. Now—with the knowledge of what actually happened—we can measure those cautions against what has now become notorious history.

As I spoke to those religion teachers, we all knew that I was speaking in an atmosphere of unusual excitement about Church history. For several years important documents from the earliest period of Mormon history had been appearing with remarkable frequency, most associated with an eccentric young documents specialist named Mark Hoffman. In 1980 Hoffman discovered the Anthon manuscript. In 1981 he brought forth an original document recording the blessing Joseph Smith gave to his son, Joseph Smith III, designating him to succession in the prophetic role.

Most intriguing was the 1984 disclosure of a letter Martin Harris wrote in October 1830 describing his young acquaintance, Joseph Smith, and reporting Joseph's experience in obtaining the golden plates. One of his descriptions caused this to be dubbed the "salamander letter." Acquired by the Church, its contents were disclosed in April 1985, and the media and the professional historians were having a field day

speculating about the significance of its contents. As I recall, many stories in the media proclaimed that the salamander letter seriously undermined the official history and spiritual claims of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

As we know now, just sixty days after my talk—on October 15, 1985—some murderous bombs exploded in Salt Lake City and the ensuing investigation eventually disclosed that Hoffman was a world-class deceiver as well as a murderer, and that all of these documents and many others were forgeries. If you wish to pursue that fascinating chapter in our recent history, it is thoroughly and reliably described in Richard E. Turley’s 1992 book, *Victims*, published by the University of Illinois Press.

With that background, I now proceed to quote from my talk of August 15, 1985.

“New histories and biographies are being published at an unprecedented rate. Heretofore unknown documents bearing the names of early Church leaders are coming forth. Experts are studying their authenticity. Scholars are debating their meaning.

“In the process, the news media are having a field day. Controversy makes good copy, especially when it concerns a church with some doctrines that diverge sharply from those of mainstream Christianity. . . .

“I will not comment on the content of any of [these] recent Church histories [or] biographies. Nor will I discuss the important issue of how scholarly history or faithful history should be *written*. Instead, I have chosen to speak on how Church history should be *read*, especially the so-called “history” that comes in bits and pieces in the daily or weekly news media. . . . I will be suggesting *general principles* for the guidance of Latter-day Saint readers of Church history and biography. I hope to be helpful to you as teachers, and through you to your students and to members of the Church generally.

“Some of these general principles should cause readers and viewers to apply the discount of skepticism to media stories about developments in Church history. Other principles apply to all writings on Church history and biography. . . .

“1. Scientific Uncertainties

“Some recent news stories about developments in Church history rest on scientific assumptions or assertions, such as the authenticity of a letter. Whether experts or amateurs, most of us have a tendency to be quite dogmatic about so-called scientific facts. Since news writers are not immune from this tendency, news stories based on scientific assumptions should be read or viewed with some skepticism. . . .

[Here I gave an example, which I omit in the interest of time.]

“This example suggests that the news media—print and electronic—are not reliable sources for historical facts based on scientific uncertainties. This is understandable. Most of the news media go to their readers or viewers on a daily or hourly basis, often under great pressure to scoop their competition. As a result, they frequently cannot obtain irrefutable scientific verification of the facts they will report. Furthermore, limitations of time and space mean that they cannot explain their scientific foundations in sufficient detail for the reader or viewer to understand their implications. The contents of most media stories are dictated not by what is necessary to a full understanding of the subject but by what information is currently available and can be communicated within the limitations of time and space.

“As a result, the news media are particularly susceptible to conveying erroneous information about facts, including historical developments that are based on what I have called scientific uncertainties. This susceptibility obviously applies to newly discovered documents whose authenticity turns on an evaluation of handwriting, paper, ink, and so on. Readers should be skeptical about the authenticity of such documents, especially when there is uncertainty where they were found or who had custody of them for 150 years. Newly found historically important documents can be extremely valuable, so there is a powerful incentive for those who own them to advocate and support their authenticity. The recent spectacular fraud involving the so-called Hitler diaries reminds us of this, and should convince us to be cautious.

“2. Lack of Context

“Another reason why news stories are unsuited to communicate historical understanding is that their format is such that they invariably report such facts out of context. An individual historical fact has meaning only in relation to other events. Outside that context, a single fact is almost certain to convey an erroneous impression. . . .

[Here I gave the example of a discussion I viewed in my capacity as chairman of the board of the Public Broadcasting Service. Media executives said they would carry a particularly “juicy” news story even though the lack of time to portray the context would inevitably be misleading and even highly inflammatory. I continued as follows:]

“Even in matters where context is a prerequisite to understanding, the news media tend to compete in terms of immediacy rather than accuracy. As a result, when the media report historical facts, they may provide information but they rarely provide illumination.

“President Gordon B. Hinckley described another kind of lack of context in his talk at October Conference two years ago [1983]. His example applies to all writings on church history and biography:

We have those critics who appear to wish to cull out of a vast panorama of information those items which demean and belittle some of the men and women of the past who worked so hard in laying the foundation of this great cause. They find readers of their works who seem to delight in picking up these tidbits, and in chewing them over and relishing them. In so doing they are savoring a pickle, rather than eating a delicious and satisfying dinner of several courses. . . .

To highlight the mistakes and gloss over the greater good is to draw a caricature. Caricatures are amusing, but they are often ugly and dishonest. . . .

I do not fear truth. I welcome it. But I wish all of my facts in their proper context, with emphasis on those elements which explain the great growth and power of this organization (In Conference Report, Oct. 1983, p. 68; or *Ensign*, Nov. 1983, p. 46). . . .

[Here, in the interest of clarity, I will alter the order of two of the points in my 1985 text.]

“[3.] Bias

“Readers and viewers also need to be sensitive to the bias of the writer or the publisher. That bias may be religious or irreligious, believing, skeptical, or hostile.

“In the latest issue of *Brigham Young University Studies*, Dean Richard H. Cracroft describes one aspect of bias, with particular reference to Church-member historians:

Too often, Mormon writers, particularly those of what Edward Geary has called “Mormondom’s Lost Generation,” have attempted to write from a position of apparent faith, only to reveal their axe-grinding differences with Mormonism in a prose fraught with art but very little Mormon heart; thus they belie the very traditions they are attempting to re-create. (Book Review, *BYU Studies*, Spring 1984, pp. 243-44.)

“The bias of a partially committed Latter-day Saint author can be particularly misleading to Latter-day Saint readers, especially if the author bills himself as Latter-day Saint. . . .

“An author’s bias on the miraculous aspects of religion can be quite evident in the way he portrays sacred experiences. For example, here are [various] ways of recounting

Joseph Smith's First Vision, presented in order from the most positive to the most negative.

- “1. Reporting the event as having happened. . . .
- “2. Relating the event in the witness's own words while disclosing the author's belief that the witness's account is truthful. . . .
- “3. Stating that the person who reported the event believed that it happened. . . .
- “4. Relating the event, but implying that it probably did not happen. . . .”
- “5-6. Ignoring the event or distorting it, or stating that it did not happen.”

I gave examples for most of these and continued:

“Bias can also be exercised in decisions on what news stories to publish and what to omit. This kind of bias is difficult to detect, but it can be discerned over a period of time. For example, it is striking that we read so many stories in the media about the discovery of letters or historical facts that supposedly *contradict or discredit* early leaders of the Church, but no news accounts of letters that *support* those leaders. . . .

“Isn't there more than a suggestion of bias in the fact that the news media have ignored all of [the positive evidence], and then expended so many lines on supposedly negative disclosures?

“[4.] Balance

“Balance is telling both sides. This is not the mission of official Church literature or avowedly anti-Mormon literature. Neither [of these] has any responsibility to present both sides. But when supposedly objective news media or periodicals run a feature or an article on the Church or its doctrines, it ought to be balanced. So should a book-length history or biography. Readers of supposedly objective authors and publishers have a right to expect balance in writing about the Church or its doctrines. Some such writing is balanced, but much is not. In this arena, readers should beware of writings that imply balance but do not deliver it. . . .

“Balance needs to be guided by relevance, especially in the narrow confines of a newscast or a newspaper article. . . . Balance for the sake of complete understanding is justifiable; balance for the sake of matching positives with negatives is not. That kind of

news reporting is too common. . . . The inclusion of negatives that are irrelevant or trivial is evidence of bias, not balance.”

Now I come to the last two of my six suggestions about reading Church history. What I have quoted thus far was ignored in the news coverage of my August 1985 talk. But two small points—one from each of the next two cautions—were the subject of sustained critical media coverage that continues to the present. I will identify each of these two points as I continue with the quotation of this earlier address.

“[5.] Truths and Half-truths

“Satan is the great deceiver, the father of lies (see John 8:44). This is not because Satan tells only lies. His most effective lies are half-truths or lies accompanied by the truth. A lie is most effective when it can travel incognito in good company, or when it can be so intermarried with the truth that we cannot determine its lineage. As the Lord revealed in the Doctrine and Covenants, truth is a “knowledge of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come; And whatsoever is more or less than this is the spirit of that wicked one who was a liar from the beginning” (D&C 93:24-25).

“Suppose, for example, we referred to Paul as “an apostle who went about to destroy the Church.” Or suppose we referred to King David as a “servant of the Lord who was an adulterer.” As students of the Bible, we can recognize the elements of truth in each statement. Yet we know that each statement, by itself, conveys a lie. This example shows how easily a deceiver can discredit an individual by mingling events from different periods in his life. None of us is immune from that kind of deception. Youthful folly and the mistakes of inexperience can easily be used to discredit a person and detract from later accomplishments. In this manner, the deceiver can attempt to undercut the repentance and forgiveness made possible by the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. In this manner, the adversary can attempt to discredit the principle of eternal progress that is central to the Gospel plan.

“Satan can even use truth to promote his purposes. Truth can be used unrighteously. True facts, severed from their context, can convey an erroneous impression. Persons who make true statements out of an evil motive, such as those who seek to injure another, use the truth unrighteously. A person who preaches the truths of the gospel “for the sake of riches and honor” (Alma 1:16) commits the sin of priestcraft. Persons who reveal truths that they hold under obligations of confidentiality, such as medical doctors or lawyers, or bishops who have heard confessions, are guilty of wrongdoing. And a person who learns some embarrassing fact and threatens to reveal it unless he is paid off commits a crime we call blackmail, even if the threatened disclosure is true.

“The fact that something is true is not always a justification for communicating it. [That is the first of my noteworthy points.] While instructing the Corinthian Saints not to partake of meat offered in sacrifice to idols, the Apostle Paul explained: “All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but all things edify not” (1 Corinthians 10:23).

“By the same token, some things that are true are not edifying or appropriate to communicate. [There, I said it for the second time!] Readers of history and biography should ponder that moral reality as part of their effort to understand the significance of what they read. . . .

“As members of the Church, we have the Gift of the Holy Ghost. If we will use our spiritual powers of discernment, we will not be misled by the lies and half-truths Satan will circulate in his attempts to deceive us and to thwart the work of God.

“6. Evaluation

“My final category concerns not what actually happened or what an author says about it, but how the reader analyzes and reacts to the report. I call this evaluation. It has two dimensions, intellectual and spiritual.

“In terms of the intellectual, readers and viewers clearly need to be more sophisticated in evaluating what is communicated to them. For example, we often hear it said that when two witnesses give two different accounts of the same event, “one has to be lying.” Not so. It is rare for two witnesses to observe the same event from exactly the same point of observation at exactly the same time. This fact accounts for some differences in testimony. But even assuming identity of time and place in observation, different accounts of what happened can be attributable to at least five reasons other than the fact that one witness is lying: (1) both are lying, (2) one perceived incorrectly, (3) both perceived incorrectly, (4) one remembered incorrectly, or (5) both remembered incorrectly.

“Another source of differences in the accounts of different witnesses is the different meanings that different persons attach to words. We have a vivid illustration of this in the recent media excitement about the word *salamander* in a letter Martin Harris is supposed to have sent to W. W. Phelps over 150 years ago. All of the scores of media stories on that subject apparently assume that the author of that letter used the word *salamander* in the modern sense of a “tailed amphibian.”

“One wonders why so many writers neglected to reveal to their readers that there is another meaning to *salamander*, which may even have been the primary meaning in this context in the 1820s. . . . ‘a spirit supposed to live in fire’” [Here I gave some examples of this usage, which I omit here since we now know that the whole reference to a salamander was a forgery.]

“In view of all this, and as a matter of intellectual evaluation, why all the excitement in the media, and why the apparent hand-wringing among those who profess friendship or membership in the Church? The media should make more complete disclosures, but Latter-day Saint readers should also be more sophisticated in their evaluation of what they read.

“For Latter-day Saints evaluation also has a spiritual dimension. This is because of our belief in Moroni’s declaration that “by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things” (Moroni 10:5). That promise assures spiritually sensitive readers a power of discernment that will help them evaluate the meaning of what they learn.

“In connection with our spiritual powers of evaluation, we need to remember that the Spirit of the Lord will not guide us if our own attitude is one of fault-finding. That principle applies to readers and writers. The scriptures abound with the commandment that Christians should abstain from evil-speaking (see Ephesians 4:31; 1 Peter 2:1; D&C 20:54; D&C 136:23). We should stress the positive, and seek to strengthen one another in all our communications (see D&C 108:7). President Gordon B. Hinckley gave valuable counsel on that subject in a General Conference address several years ago:

We live in a society that feeds on criticism. Faultfinding is the substance of columnists and commentators, and there is too much of this among our own people. It is so easy to find fault, and to resist doing so requires much of discipline. But if as a people we will build and sustain one another, the Lord will bless us with the strength to weather every storm and continue to move forward through every adversity. (In Conference Report, Apr. 1982, p. 69; or *Ensign*, May 1982, p. 46.)”

The next paragraph from my 1985 talk contains the second caution that many critics found objectionable. Today we would say that it was not “politically correct.”

“Criticism is particularly objectionable when it is directed toward Church authorities, general or local. Jude condemns those who “speak evil of dignities” (Jude 1:8). Evil speaking of the Lord’s anointed is in a class by itself. It is one thing to depreciate a person who exercises corporate power or even government power. It is quite another thing to criticize or depreciate a person for the performance of an office to which he or she has been called of God. It does not matter that the criticism is true. As

President George F. Richards of the Council of the Twelve said in a conference address in April 1947:

“When we say anything bad about the leaders of the Church, whether true or false, we tend to impair their influence and their usefulness and are thus working against the Lord and his cause (in Conference Report, Apr. 1947, p. 24).

“The young warrior David recognized that we are never justified in any gesture or act against the Lord’s anointed. Saul, the wicked king, was pursuing David without cause and seeking to take his life. While King Saul slept with his troops around him, David and one of his soldiers stealthily crept to his side. Declaring that God had delivered him into their hands, David’s companion was about to kill Saul with his own spear. “Destroy him not,” David ordered, “for who can stretch forth his hand against the Lord’s anointed, and be guiltless?” (1 Samuel 26:9).

“The Holy Ghost will not guide or confirm criticism of the Lord’s anointed, or of Church leaders, local or general. This reality should be part of the spiritual evaluation that Latter-day Saint readers and viewers apply to those things written about our history and those who made it. . . .

“Our individual, personal testimonies are based on the witness of the Spirit, not on any combination or accumulation of historical facts. If we are so grounded, no alteration of historical facts can shake our testimonies. Our Heavenly Father gave us powers of reason, and we are expected to use them to the fullest. But he also gave us the Comforter, which he said would lead us into truth and by whose power we may know the truth of all things. That is the ultimate guide for Latter-day Saints who are worthy and willing to rely on it.”

That concludes my thoughts on Reading Church History, quoted from my talk of many years ago. I pray that these teachings from the scriptures and from our Church leaders will be helpful to all who seek to read, to understand, and to explain the various accounts of the past that we call Church History.

We have been given the precious gift of the Holy Ghost, whose mission is to testify of the Father and the Son and to lead us into truth. As we keep the commandments of God, including weekly and appropriately partaking of the sacrament, we have the promise that we will always have that Spirit to be with us.

I testify of God our Eternal Father and of His Son, our Savior Jesus Christ. I testify that we are not saved by our own powers or by any earthly force or favor. Salvation and

exaltation come by the mercy of God, by the plan He has prescribed, by the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ, and by the priesthood He has restored.

I pray His blessings upon each of us as we seek to serve Him and to realize the choicest blessings He has for each of His children. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.