

*Life and Times of John Pierce Hawley:
A Mormon Ulysses of the American West*
By Melvin C. Johnson

Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2019

Reviewed by Adam Oliver Stokes

In recent years there has been a growing effort to expand the definition of “Mormonism” within Mormon studies. “Mormonism,” in twenty-first-century scholarship, refers not only to the largest organization in the restoration tradition—namely, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, headquartered in Utah—but also to other branches and movements within the restoration tradition. Joseph Smith’s movement includes the Reorganized Church (RLDS, now known as the Community of Christ), the Bickertonite church (Church of Jesus Christ), the Strangite church, and the Elijah Message church, among others. In large part, this expanded understanding of what qualifies as “Mormon” has come about through collaboration between the Utah Saints and these other branches of the faith. The most recent and notable example of such collaboration is the Joseph Smith Papers Project, an excellent corpus of primary source material published by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints with cooperation and contributions from both Brigham Young University and Community of Christ scholars.

Incorporating a variety of movements and sects has fostered interest in early Church figures and pioneers previously ignored or marginalized within Mormon studies. Particular attention has been given to RLDS personalities, such as John Pierce Hawley, whose stories are an untapped source of history and knowledge of the early Church and of the interaction among the many groups claiming to be the successors of the movement inaugurated by the Prophet Joseph Smith. The present volume, *Life and Times of John Pierce Hawley*, reflects this effort and provides an important contribution to the field of Mormon studies and history.

Melvin C. Johnson’s work on Hawley effortlessly and successfully fuses theological and historical issues. A long-standing gulf has existed between Mormon theologians and historians. At times, historians have

focused exclusively on pioneer culture or on the rise and development of certain organizations (for example, Relief Society) without discussing the theological beliefs undergirding these topics. Johnson notes how various theological controversies within the early religious movement, from plural marriage to the Adam-God doctrine, shaped Hawley's own theology and his and his family's decisions throughout their journey westward, culminating in their settlement in the Lyman Wight colony in Zodiac, Texas.

The structure of the volume highlights different epochs in the life of Hawley, from his upbringing within the early Latter-day Saint movement as a contemporary of Joseph Smith, Orson Pratt, and Brigham Young to his initial acceptance—and then rejection—of various Brighamite doctrines as an adult, which facilitated his eventual affiliation with the RLDS church. Paralleling the structure of Homer's *Odyssey*, Johnson divides the chapters and sections of his book by locales the Hawley family inhabited during their journey. And in a modern parallel to Winston Groom's *Forrest Gump*¹—whose title character, while on his journey, finds himself at the center of key events in American history—Hawley's travels place him and his family in the center of key events within Mormon history, including the flight from Nauvoo and the Mountain Meadows Massacre.

Johnson skillfully avoids certain pitfalls common to even the best of Mormon biographies and histories. In contrast to other biographies, such as the brilliant biography on Book of Mormon witness Martin Harris by Larry Porter and Susan Black,² *Life and Times of John Pierce Hawley* does not deal extensively with the ancestral history of its subject, which keeps the information relevant and does not distract readers from the main issues at hand. Furthermore, Johnson does not attempt to introduce his readers to the story of early Mormonism (for example, Joseph Smith's First Vision and the translation of the Book of Mormon), even though Hawley was a contemporary of this era. Johnson instead assumes, correctly in my opinion, that his readership is familiar with the events surrounding the origins of the Restoration.

Another highlight of Johnson's work is his excellent use of primary source material. He includes not only selections from Hawley's writings but also conversations between Hawley and other early Church figures

1. Winston Groom, *Forrest Gump* (New York: Doubleday, 1986).

2. Susan Easton Black and Larry C. Porter, *Martin Harris: Uncompromising Witness of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies, 2018).

such as Brigham Young and Orson Pratt. Before this publication, such material was largely inaccessible to lay readers. The appendix of the book contains the most important primary sources involving Hawley, including the entire transcript of the Temple Lot Case, a dispute over land in Jackson County, Missouri, that was designated by the Prophet Joseph Smith as the location of both the biblical Eden and of a future temple (LDS D&C 84; RLDS D&C 83). Hawley, as a leader of the RLDS church, was a central figure in this dispute between his church and the Hedrickite Church of Christ (171–83).

As a resource for primary texts dealing with Mormon history, Johnson's work is invaluable to Mormon studies. Johnson's treatment of Hawley, however, is not flawless. At times, in an effort to discuss personae relevant to Hawley, Johnson introduces many figures who are ultimately irrelevant to his main subject. Furthermore, readers may sense that Johnson is trying to do too much. He touches on a variety of issues ranging from polygamy to gender to race; these topics, while discussed in relation to Hawley's life, ironically detract from the book's examination of Hawley. Johnson's work would have benefited considerably by focusing on a single issue rather than on multiple, divergent ones. As a result, readers encounter Hawley only as a distant historical figure rather than as a humanized figure with strengths and weaknesses.³ This feeling of disconnect was particularly pronounced for myself as a member of the Community of Christ since I felt unable to see the relevance of Hawley to my tradition outside of being a Mormon in the pioneer period.

Johnson's work overall is an important contribution to the field inasmuch as it examines an overlooked figure in the Latter-day Saint movements. It is my hope that readers will obtain a more personal and intimate encounter with John Pierce Hawley either in a future work done by Johnson or by another scholar of Mormon history.

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3. For better examples of personalized biographies, see Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005); and John G. Turner, *Brigham Young: Pioneer Prophet* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012).