

*Joseph Smith for President: The Prophet, the Assassins,
and the Fight for American Religious Freedom*
By Spencer McBride

New York: Oxford University Press, 2021

Reviewed by Jordan T. Watkins

In *Joseph Smith for President*, Spencer McBride provides an illuminating and reader-friendly account of Joseph Smith's presidential campaign. McBride, who is a scholar of American religious and political history and an associate managing historian of the Joseph Smith Papers Project, firmly situates the early history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints within antebellum contexts. In doing so, he contributes to a body of scholarship that examines the early Saints' experiences in ways that shed light on and correct assumptions about American historical developments. In one recent example, which addresses some of the same themes, Benjamin E. Park's *Kingdom of Nauvoo* (New York: Live-right, 2020) describes the Saints' unique political, legal, and economic responses to a culture that had failed them and, in doing so, underscores the unsettled nature of democracy in antebellum America. Similarly, McBride's study challenges popular narratives that assert the universal enjoyment of religious freedom by showing that states' rights doctrine shaped the government's unresponsiveness to the Saints' petitions.

McBride's attention to national and local contexts is indicated in his narrative scope, which begins with Smith's trip to the nation's capital in late 1839 and concludes with the Smiths' assassination in mid-1844. His chapters neatly narrate political developments in Illinois, governmental developments in Nauvoo, attempts to extradite Smith, Smith's successful use of local legal resources, the Saints' persistence in seeking federal support, national politics and presidential campaigning, the creation of the Council of Fifty and its role in Smith's campaign, national and local nominating conventions, the rise of anti-Mormonism in western Illinois, and Smith's assassination. At times the narrative wanders from its central characters and concerns, but overall McBride's contextual approach yields a rich account of Smith's campaign.

Smith's visit with President Martin Van Buren is a familiar tale, but McBride's telling clarifies Smith's desires. We learn that he hoped Van Buren would mention the Saints' plight in his annual address to Congress (known today as the State of the Union), because Smith believed that this executive attention would pave the way for a favorable legislative response to the Saints' petition. When Van Buren failed to acknowledge the Saints' suffering and Congress ruled that it had no jurisdiction in the case, Smith directed his righteous indignation at the president. While McBride might have done more to connect Van Buren's statements and Congress's decision to the era's federalism, which supports his overall argument, McBride's close attention to a large cast of characters provides helpful insight into the Saints' hopes and their subsequent actions.

McBride's succeeding chapters highlight local legal and political developments. He narrates the Saints' manipulation of state politics to secure a liberal charter, Smith's successful use of local laws and powers to avoid extradition, and the Saints' unpredictable bloc voting. McBride shows how these developments contributed to the rise of anti-Mormonism in western Illinois. In his discussion of Smith's use of the right of habeas corpus, McBride does not detail how Nauvoo's city council bolstered this right over time, a process that contributed to anti-Mormon sentiment. If this kind of omission is the cost of a streamlined narrative aimed at a general audience, the price is minimal, since McBride still demonstrates that the Saints' use of local powers drew contempt from onlookers such as anti-Mormon newspaper editor Thomas Sharp.

McBride explains how the rise in anti-Mormon sentiment led Smith to again seek federal help and shows that when this latest effort failed it sparked his presidential campaign. McBride details Smith's correspondence with five prospective presidential candidates, some of whom responded with the tired excuse of a lack of jurisdiction, as in the cases of Lewis Cass and John C. Calhoun, or by expressing sympathy but promising nothing, as in the case of Henry Clay. McBride shows that during the same period, Nauvoo's city council approved a plan to petition Congress to make Nauvoo a federal territory, which, if successful, would have resolved the issue of jurisdiction. While pursuing multiple means of redress, Smith fumed at the politicians' responses, which instigated the Saints' desperate attempt to elect him as president.

McBride's approach allows him to identify the ordinary and unique aspects of Smith's presidential platform as contained in his campaign pamphlet. In celebrating the founding era and the decades that followed, the pamphlet partook of a broader narrative tradition before it departed from that tradition in ascribing the nation's recent decline to Van Buren's

presidency. It is worth noting that other groups, including abolitionists, also narrated progress and decline and, like the Saints, anticipated divine justice. McBride addresses each plank of Smith's platform, which included calls for a reduced Congress, a stronger executive, measured territorial expansion, compensated emancipation, a new national bank, and legal justice reform. McBride explains how each of these issues related to existing political conversations and to the Saints' own experiences. In discussing Smith's call for prison reform, for example, he usefully describes the rise of the American prison system and refers to Smith's own prior imprisonment.

McBride's emphasis on the Saints' varied efforts to secure their religious freedoms sets the stage for his discussion of Smith's creation of the Council of Fifty in March 1844. While the council was meant to serve as a governing body during Christ's millennial reign, Smith also found it useful in organizing his campaign and, alternatively, seeking a place of refuge in the West. During the same months, the Saints petitioned the government to place Smith at the head of a group of U.S. Army volunteers aimed at protecting western settlers and to provide the Saints a large tract of land. As McBride demonstrates, the beleaguered Saints were willing to pursue almost any means necessary to secure their religious freedoms.

On this score and others, McBride's narrative compares well with John Stauffer's *The Black Hearts of Men* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), which details an interracial alliance among four abolitionists. These figures also advanced a millennial vision that reimaged a pluralistic nation ordered on righteousness. Their group coalesced in the short-lived Radical Abolition Party in 1855. While pursuing abolition through politics, they proved willing to abolish slavery by any means necessary. Like Stauffer, McBride highlights crucial developments on the margins of antebellum society through the examination of a failed political campaign.

In discussing Smith's use of missionaries as electioneers, McBride describes how his campaign aligned with and departed from broader developments. This differs from Derek Sainsbury's *Storming the Nation* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2020), which brings to light the work of the electioneers and their enduring impact on the Church. McBride's wide lens reveals that while this was an unprecedented electioneering force, the Saints followed contemporary trends in holding elections to select electors, organizing a national convention, and making use of a burgeoning print culture. McBride explains that the Saints' efforts to select electors in each state demonstrates Smith's seriousness about the campaign, while also noting that Smith recognized the unlikelihood of success, as indicated in his pursuit of other resolutions.

McBride answers several other popular questions about Smith's campaign, including queries about its relationship to his assassination. McBride's investigation of both local and national developments indicates that Smith was not killed because he was a presidential candidate. His campaign may have exacerbated local political opposition, but in the wake of the *Nauvoo Expositor's* destruction, it was the anti-Mormon sentiment in western Illinois and internal dissension in the Church that conspired to bring about Smith's demise. By situating Smith's campaign firmly within the antebellum context, McBride corrects some of the assumptions about Smith's presidential aspirations and the murderous motivations of his assassins.

McBride's account underscores the fact that universal religious freedom in America has been more an ideal than a reality, though he might have pursued this theme in greater depth. Outside of the introduction and conclusion, explicit discussion of this topic is sparse. Although McBride explains the Saints' efforts to secure religious freedom, he does not situate those efforts in relation to similar efforts made by other religious minorities. Doing so would allow us to locate Smith's proper place among those who have argued for religious freedom. In a few instances, McBride does describe the era's anti-Catholicism. When discussing this topic in a later chapter, he makes the critical point that "to many Americans . . . defending religious freedom meant defending their own rights to worship—freedom for certain types of Protestants, but certainly not for all Americans" (157). A sustained examination of the ways in which this restricted form of religious freedom functioned in antebellum society might reveal even more about how the Latter-day Saint experience uniquely complicates and clarifies the history of religious freedom.

Even still, in his account about Smith and the Saints, McBride succeeds in demonstrating that "the states' rights strategy was as effective at impeding efforts to establish the full citizenship rights of religious minorities as it was at blocking efforts to establish the personhood of men and women of African descent enslaved in the American South" (209). This is a crucial historical and historiographical insight. Resting on a foundation of extensive primary source research and informed by sharp scholarly insight, McBride's book is a supremely accessible landmark study of Smith's presidential campaign.

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