

FAULTY HISTORY:

A REVIEW OF *UNDER THE BANNER OF HEAVEN: A STORY OF VIOLENT FAITH*

by Richard E. Turley, Jr.

EDITOR'S OVERVIEW

In July 2003, popular author Jon Krakauer released a book arguing that religious faith in general, and the faith of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in particular, often motivates violence in its believers. Since its organization in 1830, The Church of Jesus Christ has been the subject of many lurid and sensational publications, each purporting to reveal the true and sordid facts of the lives of Latter-day Saint leaders and members. Despite the claims of objectivity and historical accuracy, such publications consistently display the same pattern: an agenda-driven effort selectively drawing on rumor and half-truths, clothed in the trappings of historical scholarship.

Unfortunately for those wanting to know more about Latter-day Saint history or the possible relationship between religious belief and violence, Krakauer's *Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith* suffers from these same fatal flaws.

Although there are numerous problems with the book, sufficient enough to invalidate any conclusion about violence and its relationship, if any, to religious faith, the primary shortcomings of Krakauer's work are as follows:

- **Anti-Religious Bias.** Krakauer, an avowed agnostic, approaches the topic with a decidedly anti-religion bias, a bias that appears to have been the standard used to determine what "facts" should be considered and how they should be interpreted.
- **States Untruths as Fact.** Krakauer states as fact things that "just ain't so," such as the events surrounding the 1826 trial in which Joseph Smith was acquitted, the uniqueness of the Nauvoo City charter, the role and fate of Orrin Porter Rockwell in the assassination

attempt against Governor Boggs, and the dating of Brigham Young's letter ordering the southern Utahns not to meddle with the emigrants at Mountain Meadows.

- **Presents Historical Unknowns as Fact.** Krakauer presents as historical fact and without discussion events for which the evidence is disputed and unconvincing at best, such as an 1831 relationship between Joseph Smith and Marinda Johnson, or for which there is considerable evidence in favor of an alternate explanation, such as the events surrounding the Mountain Meadows Massacre.
- **Main Hypothesis Not Supported by the Evidence.** Krakauer's entire argument fails because he never provides any evidence that religion, or even religious fanaticism, promotes more violence than it does peace. The history of twentieth-century genocide under leaders such as Pol Pot, Stalin, Mao Tse Tung, and Hitler directly refutes Krakauer's hypothesis. While it is true that some religious persons may be violent, it seems to play an insignificant role in most violence reported daily—violence apparently stemming from drugs, domestic problems, alcoholism, immorality, and greed.
- **Patterns of Religious Violence Not Supported.** Even if the "evidence" provided by Krakauer could be accepted as presented, Krakauer presents no evidence, statistics, or argument to support the assertion that this shows a pattern of violence or a tendency towards violence within The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints or among its members and leaders instead of these being a few isolated incidents in a fundamentally peaceful, nonviolent, and tolerant community of believers.



Perhaps the reason for these shortcomings is that Krakauer is not an historian, but a novelist. Perhaps he doesn't know the LDS Church, its membership, or its history well enough to present a factual, unbiased historical picture. Either way, it seems a pointed shame that a celebrated author would package historical lies and religiously bigoted information and serve it to an unsuspecting readership.

RICHARD TURLEY'S REVIEW

In the oft-quoted book *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought*, David Hackett Fischer condemns those who reach generalizations based on insufficient sampling:

There is a story, perhaps apocryphal, of a scientist who published an astonishing and improbable generalization about the behavior of rats. An incredulous colleague came to his laboratory and politely asked to see the records of the experiments on which the generalization was based. "Here they are," said the scientist, dragging a notebook from a pile of papers on his desk. And pointing to a cage in the corner, he added, "there's the rat."¹

Anxious to prove his own hypothesis, Jon Krakauer, author of *Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith*,² uses the anomalous Lafferty murder case of 1984 to "look at Mormonism's violent past" and examine "the underbelly of the United States' most successful homegrown faith."³ Although the book may appeal to gullible persons who rise to such bait like trout to a fly hook, serious readers who want to understand Latter-day Saints and their history need not waste their time on it.

AN UNDERLYING AGENDA

Ostensibly focused on murders committed by brothers who had been excommunicated from the Church, Krakauer's book is actually a condemnation of religion generally. The agnostic author writes, "I don't know what God is, or what God had in mind when the universe was set in motion. In fact I don't know if God even exists, although I confess that I sometimes find myself praying in times of great fear, or despair, or astonishment at a display of unexpected beauty." He appears to believe God is unknowable in this life. "In the absence of conviction," he says of his failure to find faith, "I've come to terms with the fact that uncertainty is an inescapable corollary of life." He acknowledges sharing with most of humanity a fear of death, a yearning "to comprehend how we got here, and why," and an ache "to

know the love of our creator." Yet he believes "we will no doubt feel that ache, most of us, for as long as we happen to be alive." The upshot of his (un)belief system is a theme that permeates his book: "Accepting the essential inscrutability of existence...is surely preferable to its opposite: capitulating to the tyranny of intransigent belief," that is, religion.⁴

"There is a dark side to religious devotion that is too often ignored or denied," he posits in the prologue. "As a means of motivating people to be cruel and inhumane—as a means of motivating people to be evil, to borrow the vocabulary of the devout—there may in fact be nothing more effective than religion." Referring to the "Islamic fundamentalism" that resulted in the killings of 11 September 2001, he goes on to say that "men have been committing heinous acts in the name of God ever since mankind began believing in deities, and extremists exist within all religions." He finds that "history has not lacked" for Muslims, "Christians, Jews, Sikhs, and even Buddhists who have been motivated by scripture to butcher innocents. Faith-based violence was present long before Osama bin Laden, and it will be with us long after his demise."⁵

He admits, "In any human endeavor, some fraction of its practitioners will be motivated to pursue that activity with such concentrated focus and unalloyed passion that it consumes them utterly. One has to look no further than individuals who feel compelled to devote their lives to becoming concert pianists, say, or climbing Mt. Everest." Providing no scientific methodology for measuring extremism, he asserts that it "seems to be especially prevalent among those inclined by temperament or upbringing toward religious pursuits."

This glib assertion leads to the hypothesis for his book:

Faith is the very antithesis of reason, injudiciousness a crucial component of spiritual devotion. And when religious fanaticism supplants ratiocination, all bets are suddenly off. Anything can happen. Absolutely anything. Common sense is no match for the voice of God—as the actions of Dan Lafferty vividly attest.⁶

The Lafferty case, the purported subject of the book, becomes merely an illustration of this theory.

AN INACCURATE "HISTORY"

To support his case that the "roots of their [the Lafferty brothers'] crime lie deep in the history of an American religion practiced by millions,"⁷ Krakauer presents a decidedly one-sided and negative view of Mormon history.

Referring to Joseph Smith's well-known 1826 trial, for example, Krakauer asserts that "a disgruntled client filed a legal claim accusing Joseph of being a fraud."⁸ This assertion shows Krakauer's unfamiliarity with basic aspects of the trial in question, as well as his tendency to spin evidence negatively. In actuality, the trial resulted not from "a disgruntled client" but from persecutors who had Joseph hauled into court for being a disorderly person because of his supposed defrauding of his employer, Josiah Stowell. As a modern legal scholar who carefully studied the case has noted, however, Stowell "emphatically denied that he had been deceived or defrauded."⁹ As a result, Joseph was found not guilty and discharged.¹⁰

Krakauer also stretches the truth in writing about modern Church events. He attended the Hill Cumorah Pageant in Palmyra, New York, and portrays it as having "the energy of a Phish concert, but without the drunkenness, outlandish hairdos...or clouds of marijuana smoke."¹¹ Without citing a source, he exaggeratingly asserts that "sooner or later most Latter-day Saints make a pilgrimage there."¹² Although the pageant is popular, most Latter-day Saints have never attended it, and most never will.

The author evinces some understanding of the Church's doctrine and administrative structure, yet makes gaffes that signal his generally poor command of the subject matter. For example, he refers to Mark E. Petersen, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, as the "LDS President,"¹³ an obvious error. Krakauer shows his ignorance of the Book of Mormon and the Bible when he refers to Laban as "a scheming, filthy-rich sheep magnate who turns up in the pages of both the Book of Mormon and the Old Testament."¹⁴ The Old Testament Laban, who is the uncle and father-in-law of the patriarch Jacob and brother to Rebekah, lived many hundreds of years before the Laban of the Book of Mormon.

Accepting an uninformed assertion, Krakauer writes that Nauvoo, headquarters city of the Church from 1839 to 1846, possessed "sovereign rights and powers unique not only in Illinois, but in the entire nation" as a result of "a highly unusual charter."¹⁵ His interpretation is not informed by recent scholarship. Glen M. Leonard's *Nauvoo: A Place of Peace, a People of Promise* correctly notes:

During the previous two years, the Illinois legislature had granted city charters to the lead-mining city of Galena on the northern border of Illinois, to the new state capital at Springfield, and to Quincy, Nauvoo's charitable Adams County neighbor. Prior to that, only Chicago and Alton had been issued city charters, both in

1837. Each of the charters in that succession had built upon its predecessors, creating a pattern of familiarity for Illinois legislators. Quincy's planning committee had referenced the charters issued to Chicago and Alton and one in St. Louis, Missouri. Nauvoo's proposal patched together provisions imitating those already approved in the three more recent franchises—Galena, Quincy, and Springfield. A lengthy treatise on the Nauvoo city council's legislative authority was copied verbatim from the Springfield charter—a common and legitimate practice.¹⁶

Krakauer acknowledges that although Joseph Smith "venerated the U.S. Constitution," he "in both word and deed...repeatedly demonstrated that he, himself, had little respect for the religious views of non-Mormons, and was unlikely to respect the constitutional rights of other faiths."¹⁷ Serious scholars of Joseph Smith, however, understand that he generally had very high regard for the rights of others. Speaking to his followers in a Sabbath service near the uncompleted Nauvoo Temple on 9 July 1843, Joseph declared:

If it has been demonstrated that I have been willing to die for a Mormon I am bold to declare before heaven that I am just as ready to die for a [P]resbyterian[,] a [B]aptist or any other denomination.—It is a love of liberty which inspires my soul, civil and religious liberty.¹⁸

Krakauer also accepts the view that Orrin Porter Rockwell tried to assassinate former Missouri governor Lilburn W. Boggs after Joseph Smith purportedly prophesied Boggs would die. Then he writes that "Rockwell had no difficulty eluding arrest. Neither he, nor any other Saint, was ever brought to justice for the deed."¹⁹ Harold Schindler, however, in his critically acclaimed biography of Rockwell, concludes that whether Rockwell shot Boggs "is a matter for conjecture...If Rockwell did fire the fateful shot, it would appear the decision was of his own making."²⁰

Rockwell was eventually arrested on "flimsy testimony," chained, imprisoned for months, and fed what "could only be described as hog slop."²¹ Repeatedly, he was harassed and nearly lynched. "As the weeks passed the once husky Mormon wasted away until he was little more than an apparition. His hair grew long and shaggy, infested with vermin from his dank, tomb-like cell; his beard became matted with sweat and dirt; his eyes sank into the dark hollows of his face." After months of suffering, he was finally brought before a judge, who informed him that the "grand jury had refused to bring an indictment against him" for the original charge but

had decided to indict him for trying to escape. “Rockwell was returned to his cell to contemplate his absurd quandary: He was free of one charge, only to be tried for escaping jail when the law admitted he should not have been jailed at all.” Eventually, a jury found him guilty of attempted escape and sentenced him to five minutes in jail. He was soon ordered released and was “a free man for the first time in nine months.”²²

Referring to the runaway federal officials of early Utah, Krakauer admits that “many...were corrupt to the core, and had come to Utah intending to enrich themselves on graft,” an assessment that, if harsh, has at least some basis in fact. Krakauer goes on to say that most of these officials left Utah for fear “that if they stayed they would receive an unannounced visit from Porter Rockwell and turn up dead—which in fact happened to an undocumented number of federal agents.”²³ He does not explain how he knows about these deaths, or what credible evidence he has of their occurring, when they are, by his admission, undocumented.

A TITILLATING “HISTORY”

Again accepting at face value a titillating story—one that appears in Fawn Brodie’s biography of Joseph Smith, a chief source for his book—Krakauer writes:

“In the summer of 1831 the Johnson family took Joseph and Emma Smith into their home as boarders, and soon thereafter the prophet purportedly bedded young Marinda. Unfortunately, the liaison apparently did not go unnoticed, and a gang of indignant Ohioans—including a number of Mormons—resolved to castrate Joseph so that he would be disinclined to commit such acts of depravity in the future.”²⁴

Although Marinda likely became a plural wife of Joseph Smith later, Brodie and Krakauer present only part of the evidence—the portion that satisfies a lust for the sensational.

Consider the more balanced analysis in Todd Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith*:

The motivation for this mobbing has been debated. Clark Braden, a late, antagonistic, secondhand witness, alleged in a polemic public debate that Marinda’s brother Eli led a mob against Smith because the prophet had been too intimate with Marinda. This tradition suggests that Smith may have married Marinda at this early time, and some circumstantial factors support such a possibility. The castration attempt

might be taken as evidence that the mob felt that Joseph had committed a sexual impropriety; since the attempt is reported by Luke Johnson, there is no good reason to doubt it. Also, they had planned the operation in advance, as they brought along a doctor to perform it. The first revelations on polygamy had been received in 1831, by historian Daniel Bachman’s dating. Also, Joseph Smith did tend to marry women who had stayed at his house or in whose house he had stayed.

Many other factors, however, argue against this theory. First, Marinda had no brother named Eli, which suggests that Braden’s accusation, late as it is, is garbled and unreliable. In addition, two antagonistic accounts by Hayden and S. F. Whitney give an entirely different reason for the mobbing, with an entirely different leader, Simonds Ryder, an ex-Mormon, though the Johnson brothers are still participants. In these accounts the reason for the violence is economic: the Johnson boys were in the mob because of “the horrid fact that a plot was laid to take their property from them and place it under the control of Smith.” The castration, in this scenario, may have only been a threat, meant to intimidate Smith and cause him to leave Hiram [where the Johnsons lived]

After describing the event, Marinda wrote only, “Here I feel like bearing my testimony that during the whole year that Joseph was an inmate of my father’s house I never saw aught in his daily life or conversation to make me doubt his divine mission.” While it is not impossible that Marinda became Smith’s first plural wife in 1831, the evidence for such a marriage, resting chiefly on the late, unreliable Braden, is not compelling. Unless more credible evidence is found, it is best to proceed under the assumption that Joseph and Marinda did not marry or have a relationship in 1831.²⁵

A ONE-SIDED “HISTORY”

Because the Mountain Meadows Massacre fits Krakauer’s thesis so well, he gives it generous space, even if he does so again without critically examining the facts for himself. For example, he swallows the trendy view that Brigham Young’s meeting with Indian leaders on 1 September 1857 constituted a death order for the Fancher company because

Brigham explicitly “gave” the Indians all the emigrant cattle on the Old Spanish Trail—i.e., the Fancher’s [sic] prize herd, which the Paiutes

had covetously gazed upon when they camped next to the emigrants exactly one week earlier. The prophet's message to the Indian leaders was clear enough: He wanted them to attack the Fancher wagon train. The morning after the meeting, the Paiutes left the City of the Saints at first light and started riding hard for southern Utah.²⁶

Like other writers who want to believe this theory, he misses crucial evidence. Dimick Huntington's account of his interactions with the Indians (the crux of this argument) suggests that someone—perhaps Brigham Young or perhaps Huntington himself—gave the Native Americans the cattle on the road south. But nothing in the historical record particularizes this direction to the Fancher company. Other evidence demonstrates that the Indians in the north were also given the cattle on the road north. In other words, this so-called “smoking gun” that is the lynchpin in recent ballyhooed publications on the massacre amounts to little more than a generalized expression of the Saints' war strategy at the time of allowing Indians to take cattle in exchange for their alliance. That is a far cry from ordering the massacre of a train of men, women, and children. Moreover, substantial evidence suggests that the Indians who participated in the famous meeting did not participate in the massacre.

Like other recent writers, Krakauer must somehow confront the fact that when Brigham Young learned about a possible attack on the train, he sent a letter ordering the southern Utahns not to meddle with the emigrants. The letter is clear on its face, though some writers, anxious to prove a circumstantial case against Brigham Young, try to make *no* mean *yes* by asserting that the order not to attack the train was really just the opposite. To further undermine the letter, Krakauer asserts:

The actual text of Brigham's letter remains in some doubt, because the original has disappeared (along with almost every other official document pertaining to the Mountain Meadows massacre). The excerpt quoted above is from a purported draft of the letter that didn't surface until 1884, when an LDS functionary came upon it in the pages of a “Church Letter Book.”²⁷

Although the letter was indeed cited in 1884, it did not first surface then, and its “actual text” does not remain “in some doubt.” Most correspondence from Brigham Young was copied immediately after it was produced and before being sent. The copies—equivalents of today's photocopies—were made by pressing the original inked letters between wetted pages of a bound book of onion-skin. The moisture caused fresh ink from the originals

to seep into the onion-skin, creating mirror images of the letters. A perfect mirror image of Young's famous letter is right where it should be in Brigham's 1857 letterpress copybook. It is a contemporaneous copy and was available to and used by the prosecution in the trial that led to John D. Lee's conviction and subsequent execution in the 1870s.

On a more recent topic, Krakauer refers to Mark Hofmann's famous forgeries of the 1980s and asserts that “more than 400 of these fraudulent artifacts were purchased by the LDS Church (which believed they were authentic) and then squirreled away in a vault to keep them from the public eye.”²⁸ This is a gross exaggeration. Actually, most of the documents acquired from Hofmann were insignificant legal or government documents. Although they were assigned a low cataloging priority because of their unimportance, they were not “squirreled away in a vault” in a deliberate attempt “to keep them from the public eye.”²⁹

CONCLUSION

Although other examples could be given, these suffice to demonstrate that Krakauer does violence to Mormon history in order to tell his “Story of Violent Faith.” The vast majority of Latter-day Saints in the nineteenth century, like today's Saints, were peace-loving people who wished to practice their religion in a spirit of non-violence, allowing “all men the same privilege, let them worship how, where, or what they may.”³⁰

NOTES

1. David Hackett Fischer, *Historian's Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 109.
2. Jon Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith* (New York: Doubleday, 2003).
3. Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven*, advance reading copy, back cover.
4. Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven*, 287.
5. *Ibid.*, xxii.
6. *Ibid.*, xxiii.
7. Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven*, advance reading copy, front cover.
8. Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven*, 39.
9. Gordon A. Madsen, “Joseph Smith's 1826 Trial: The Legal Setting,” *Brigham Young University Studies* 30 (Spring 1990): 105.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven*, 47.

12. Ibid., 44.
13. Ibid., 53.
14. Ibid., 132.
15. Ibid., 80.
16. Glen M. Leonard, *Nauvoo: A Place of Peace, a People of Promise* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company and Brigham Young University Press, 2002), 101.
17. Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven*, 81.
18. *The Words of Joseph Smith*, edited by Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980), 229.
19. Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven*, 82.
20. Harold Schindler, *Orrin Porter Rockwell: Man of God, Son of Thunder* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1983), 72–73.
21. Ibid., 75–90.
22. Ibid., 90–99.
23. Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven*, 168.
24. Ibid., 90.
25. Todd Compton, In *Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2001), 231–232.
26. Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven*, 179.
27. Ibid., 182.
28. Ibid., xxi.
29. See Richard E. Turley, Jr., *Victims: The LDS Church and the Mark Hofmann Case* (Urbana and Chicago, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1992).
30. The Articles of Faith of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Article 11, first published in 1842.

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