



## Brigham Young: American Moses

*Leonard J. Arrington*

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"Brigham Young was the supreme American paradox, not because he contained elements foreign to American soil but because he united them--the business genius of a Rockefeller with the spiritual sensitivities of an Emerson, the lusty enjoyments of the pleasures of good living with the tenderness of a Florence Nightingale. He was not merely an entrepreneur with a shared vision of America as the Promised Land; he was a prophet with visions of his own and he built beyond himself."

## **Brigham Young: American Moses Details**

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## From Reader Review Brigham Young: American Moses for online ebook

### David says

I liked this book mostly because it does NOT deify Brother Brigham. I get pretty tired of books that try to make modern prophets seem like perfect people--they are not, and I'm happy to see a book that shows the weaknesses and the strengths of this remarkable man.

It runs a little long for me--it seems like there are some places where the book might have been condensed a little. But, that's me. I'll bet most people would really love the details presented here. If you're going to read a book about Brigham Young, it might as well be this one. Blemishes and all, you'll get the straight story about a man that was just right for his time.

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### Shauni says

From reading biographies of Joseph Smith (*No Man Knows My History*, *Rough Stone Rolling*) I learned quite a bit about the doctrine and foundations of the LDS Church. From this biography of Brigham Young, on the other hand, I learned much more about church culture and structure. That stems from the fact that Brigham Young was much more of a pragmatist than a theologian.

I was impressed with Arrington's objectivity in this book, especially considering that he served as the official historian for the LDS church. He painted a clear picture of Brigham Young, flaws, strengths, and all. Brigham was a strong and respected leader, that's for sure! He was single-handedly responsible for many unique aspects of Mormon culture that we often take for granted (strict movie/theater standards, modest dress, Word of Wisdom enforcement, etc.). I only wish Arrington had devoted more of the book to Brigham's polygamous relationships and the Mountain Meadows massacre, but I understand that each of those topics warrant a book of their own.

Coming from an LDS background, there wasn't much in the book that was terribly surprising or shocking. There were a few things, though. For example, this was my first exposure to the early Mormon's relations with the Native Americans in Utah. Also, I must say that I was somewhat disgusted at the history of ZCMI, and was outraged when I read about the excommunications of William Godbe and E.L.T Harrison, the editors of the Utah Magazine (which would later become the Salt Lake Tribune). Their defenses sounded so similar to Kate Kelly's and just hit a little too close to home. At the same time, after reading about the siege of Johnson's army and government censure for polygamy, I think I understand better now why the LDS church insists so strongly on unity and conformity among its members. We can thank Brigham Young for that!

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This book was a little bit long and dry at times, but I still recommend it to anyone interested in Mormon and/or Utah history.

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### J Philpot says

After the Work and the Glory I have to find this book and learn more about Brigham young

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### **Alex says**

Solid overview of the life of BY. The book has a good discussion about his decision to move to Utah after the murder of Joseph Smith and his efforts to settle Utah - both key to understanding the LDS Church today. but missing from this book are deeper discussions about how his time as a missionary in England impacted him, any discussion about the influence of his wives, and any serious discussion about his knowledge of the 1857 Mountain Meadow massacre, the initial efforts to sweep the event under the rug, and then eventually to bring some sort of public accountability to a handful of participants.

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### **Kevin Black says**

Thoughtful, balanced, and encyclopedic. No historian is free from bias, but Arrington's approach here seems as close to "just the facts, ma'am" as any human is likely to get, especially when writing about a figure as pivotal and controversial as Brigham Young. If you want a quick read--a novel posing as history--this isn't for you, but despite this book's level of detail and careful footnoting, the text is clear, well-organized and straightforward. Moreover, the author includes frequent savory tidbits (from primary sources) that demonstrate Pres. Young's personality through memorable interactions with individuals.

Personally, I found the book surprisingly inspiring. (Of course I approached this book without neutrality, but that relates to the fact that I also came to it knowing a good bit about the topic.) In many ways, the belief that God does much of His work here on earth through necessarily flawed mortals is foundational to Latter-day Saint belief, and Brigham Young embodies the consequent paradoxes as well as anyone. Although in many ways a pragmatist, Pres. Young's sermons and actions were continually driven by idealism: witness for instance the United Order and the Deseret Alphabet--which could perhaps be called glorious failures--and his public works programs in service of employing the poor. I found his frequent focus on unity within the Church not only quite understandable, given the care Arrington takes to place it in context, but also remarkably timely given recent events in American Mormon culture.

I have read only a handful of biographies, but I really enjoyed this one. Recommended.

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### **Shad says**

This is an incredibly-well researched book. It is written from an academic perspective. Unfortunately, by that I mean it seemed it was written from an "objective" perspective from which the author appears to know better than the subject rather than deferring to him as a person, let alone as a prophet of God. It does provide a wealth of information and some helpful perspective and points to a treasure trove of other writings, though the scriptures are mentioned as one of many sources rather than keys to understanding who President Young is and what he did.

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## **Samuel says**

As far as biographies go, this one is well met. Although the author is indeed in favor of his subject, he does not go overboard in defending some of Brigham Young's language or statements using direct quotations with errors in spelling and all that demonstrates the crude education to which Brigham Young possessed. The passion, personality, and commitment of Brigham Young to his cause is well established and well presented. There are a few subjects unaddressed that could have made the biography more complete (i.e. Brigham Young's relations with Native Americans are addressed in full but relations with African Americans and Mexicans are brief and wanting). Overall, however, the biography covers a lot of ground and touches on most of the important accomplishments, failures, and events of Brigham Young's unique life.

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## **Zach Alleman says**

It was fun to learn more about Brigham Young. My knowledge of church history seems to get a lot less detailed after the death of Joseph Smith, and so this was fun to learn more about the trek west and Brigham's impact on the church.

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## **Kc says**

I have heard it said: "In the Catholic Church they say that the Pope is infallible, but no one believes it. In the Mormon Church they say that the prophet is fallible, but no one believes it." I was reminded repeatedly of a prophet's fallibility as I read Brigham Young: American Moses by Leonard J. Arrington. While detractors tend to exploit this fallibility and the faithful tend to excuse it, both will have to admit that Brigham Young was an exceptional and effective leader. After reading this book I am more convinced than ever that Young was the only person who could have lead his people away from the mobocrats in the midwest and created the Mormon empire in the desolate Great Basin. This is probably the most even handed biography of the second president of the LDS church out there.

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## **Jason says**

A fine biography of a towering figure in American history. It's for good reason that Atlantic included the man in its much-publicized list of 100 Most Influential People in American History, and Arrington does an excellent job bringing to light Brigham's achievements and failings, without sensationalizing or apologizing for either.

To be honest, the book gave me far fewer stomach-churning moments than I had expected, and I found myself really liking the controversial Mormon leader on a personal level. While the image of the fire-breathing polygamous dictator doesn't come out of nowhere, Brigham Young is far more complicated a man than most the caricatures of him allow. From these pages emerges a fallible man and a prophet of God.

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## Danny says

While Arrington does a good job in the introduction setting up BY's complex and contradictory character, he does not adequately follow that trajectory. Arrington's "great man" approach leads the reader to believe that BY saw knowledgeable about all things and made rational judgments based on the best information available. An approach that was much truer to the depiction in the introduction would have been more effective. Arrington didn't honestly address the "human" BY who was most likely subject to imperfect information, got caught up in and caught in the middle of political battles, let power and ego lead to autocratic leadership style, etc.

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## Marty Reeder says

After reading Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling by Richard Bushman, I felt that I needed another mind-bending analysis of a different giant in the history of Latter-Day Saint church: Brigham Young. With Bushman's Joseph Smith, I got to understand the details of Joseph's life, but more importantly I understood the scope of his transcendent vision; I saw the frailties and human qualities of the prophet, but more importantly I saw his purpose and how he did the best he could in his limited circumstances to attain that lofty goal; ultimately, after reading I wanted to be a better, more exalted person. Okay, Leonard Arrington, can we get that with a Brigham Young biography?

Looking back, you can see that I am setting myself up for disappointment. Arrington, a local hero historian in my region, presents an admirable biography of Brother Brigham. In some ways, I feel that his biography was more thorough than Bushman's. Arrington is careful to not leave any stone unturned, meticulously approaching Brigham's life with his family, governing policies, church policies, Indian policies, colonizing policies, etcetera. While thorough, the character--and purpose--of Brigham remains hidden behind these acts that are remarkable, yes, but understandable given his circumstances.

The closest I came to understanding the mindset and drive of Brigham Young came in the years preceding his ascendency to the head of the church: the humble, earnest convert, the soft-spoken apostle, the fiercely loyal follower of Joseph even when all his peers fell to the wayside. Here, I felt as if I started to get a sense of the Brigham behind the legend. Once he becomes the prophet, however, the transition is fairly complete. Within a chapter, Brigham is the folksy and powerful prophet who managed all church affairs from the well-established Great Basin headquarters.

For as thorough as Arrington is, I felt that he skipped some very crucial years that I think would have been the most telling years of development for Brigham as a person, leader, and prophet: the years immediately following the Latter-day Saints' arrival in the Salt Lake Valley. In one chapter Arrington capably details the Saints' crossing of the prairies and entry into the empty Great Basin, in the next chapter Brigham Young is wealthy, in several large houses in a developed, downtown Salt Lake and sending out colonizing parties to remote, unsettled parts of the Great Basin. Wait? What about settling Salt Lake? How did he, and the Saints, go from wagons to civilization? What were the challenges and how did they overcome them--and what role did Brigham take in all of that? How did Brigham organize and choose leaders for the church in that embryo period within the valley? I feel that something important is missing there, perhaps even the key to this laudable, though enigmatic figure in history.

Overall, however, my experience was mainly diminished by the unexpectedly positive results of an atypical

biography of Joseph Smith, which I unfairly applied to my expectations of this biography. On the whole, the biography is undoubtedly efficient and noteworthy, especially for someone looking to familiarize themselves with the basic facts, chronology, and actions of Brigham Young and the young Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

I actually have the biography Brigham Young: Pioneer Prophet that I planned on reading sometime after finishing Arrington's (perhaps my subconscious expected the need for multiple sources). Maybe between the two biographies, Brother Brigham and I will have another revelatory, life-changing enlightenment. Or maybe I should just lower my expectations a tad.

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## **Tim Button says**

I'm giving up on Arrington's Brigham Young biography. I am sure it as balanced treatment as a church historian can possibly be expected to write (and he was, in fact, pushed out of that job for excessive honesty) but those are very low expectations indeed.

A sample passage, describing one of Joseph Smith's lower points.

"Because most of the wealth of Mormon Kirtland was in real estate ... Smith and his associates felt the necessity of a bank, which could make assets more liquid and supply the credit for further expansion....The bank failed to receive a charter from the Ohio legislature, however, and Smith, after consulting legal opinion, organized the Kirtland Safety Society Anti-Banking Association to perform the same function. (If the establishment of a bank was illegal, the founding on an antibank was not.) Because the anitbank's notes were not well received by non-Mormon merchants, it soon failed. Inevitable, Smith was blamed both for the failure of the bank oand for the economic deterioration that followed."

Notice that the bank failed because the notes were not "received well by non-Mormon merchants." This is like saying the problem with Bernie Madoff was that people tried to withdraw their money.

This is repeated over and over. Everything is worked into a narrative of persecution. And indeed, Joseph Smith was persecuted. But it never stops to ask why that might have been.

I'm fascinated by Mormon history, it's a important part of American history, and is perhaps the best documented birth of a religion we have. I admire Joseph Smith, in certain respects. Brigham Young is a fascinating example of why people followed Smith, how the emotional chinese finger trap of a prophet works. He is also the key figure to understanding the limits of American secular society, and how theocracy can operate without and despite it's prophet.

But the gap between a pious history and a skeptical history is vast. Trying to read a pious history as a skeptic requires constant work, and I'm not really well enough informed to manage it.

I guess I'll try the new biography that just came out.

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### **Sandra Strange says**

This biography is relatively objective and positive look at a complex, contradictory man who changed history more or less singlehandedly. His history and personality are fascinatingly told, with quotations from his own journals and those of his peers in the adventure of saving persecuted Mormons, organizing them and leading them across a continent, and leading them to build settlements all over the Intermountain West. This biography was fun to read, but I'm already positively prejudiced, since some of my ancestors were in those first settlements.

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### **Christy says**

I appreciate Arrington's biography of Brigham Young; you can tell he had access to a lot of source material from which he quotes extensively, and it gives a nice chronological history of Brigham from his humble beginnings to his rule of the intermountain West. I think the approach historians use has changed in the thirty years since its publication, because I found it lacking much about women - I expected a lot more Eliza Snow and about his wives - and I wanted more synthesis and less direct quotation. I'm glad I read it, but man, there's a lot of Brigham Young there!

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