
PRESS & TELEVISION

conference in the summer of 1983 to denounce alleged anti-Israeli bias in the Western news media.

But how real was that bias? To find out, Stock, a former Middle Eastern news analyst at the University of Michigan, examined the coverage of two of the world's top newspapers: the Paris newspaper *Le Monde* (circulation: 550,000) and the *New York Times* (circulation: 934,000).

Stock argues that the French daily paper embarked on a "crusade to expose the brutality of Israeli actions" and to promote the views of the PLO. It ran numerous articles highlighting the sufferings of Beirut's inhabitants, as well as letters by pro-Palestinian groups protesting Israeli conduct of the war. The title of an August 5 front-page editorial even described the invasion as "An Enterprise Which Dares Not Speak Its Name." Many of *Le Monde's* editors were "clearly outraged" by the Israeli bombings, although they made some effort to balance the news by offering background to the Arab-Israeli conflict and by paying "considerable attention to Israeli government views and the feelings of French Jews."

The *Times*, on the other hand, was "objective," Stock argues, though its coverage was occasionally flawed. It highlighted Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin's "optimism" about PLO withdrawal from Beirut early on, and some stories lacked historical context. But overall its coverage showed "no obviously consistent attempt . . . to bias the news either for or against Israel." In one incident on August 4, the *Times's* Beirut bureau chief, Thomas L. Friedman, filed a story describing the Israeli shelling of Beirut as "indiscriminate." Editors in New York, on guard against editorializing in news stories, deleted the word.

By and large, Stock contends, each newspaper remained faithful to its own traditions: the *Times* striving to limit opinions to the editorial page, *Le Monde* taking a far more didactic approach. Readers of the *Times*, in other words, were invited to make up their own minds about Israeli actions in Lebanon.

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

Mormon Letters

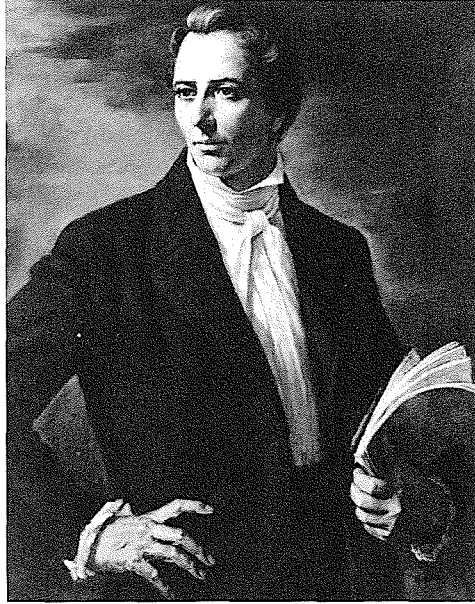
"Secrets of the Mormons" by David Brion Davis, in *The New York Review of Books* (Aug. 15, 1985), 250 West 57th St., New York, N.Y. 10107.

In April, the Mormon Church in Salt Lake City, Utah, printed a surprising letter in the official *Church News*. Dated 1830, the 637-word document was penned by Martin Harris, one of the church's "Three Witnesses" to a divine revelation by the Mormon Prophet, Joseph Smith, Jr. (1805–44).

This letter has stirred controversy because it appears to contradict the church's liturgy, reports Davis, a Yale historian. Mormon teaching, based on Smith's official account, is that God and Jesus—through an

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

Mormon Prophet Joseph Smith, Jr., experienced his divine revelation in 1827, at the age of 14. His "official" account first appeared in 1842, in the Times & Season, a Mormon newspaper in Nauvoo, Ill., and was published in the Mormon scripture The Pearl of Great Price (1851).



angel, Moroni—led Smith to sacred golden tablets, buried by ancient Israelites near present-day Palmyra, N.Y. From those plates, Smith translated the *Book of Mormon*, considered the holiest book (along with the Bible) of the 5.4 million members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

The Harris letter (dated seven months after the *Book of Mormon* was first published) says that "an old spirit" told Smith to "dig up the gold." Smith told Harris that "the spirit transfigured himself from a white salamander in the bottom of the hole." Harris mentions no angel, or God, but instead talks of "money digging" and of using a "seer stone" to find buried treasure. Harris suggests that a magical stone may have helped locate the buried scriptures.

Does this historical discrepancy undermine the Mormon doctrines? Davis thinks so. He argues that all this historical muckraking has contributed to a Mormon crisis of faith and egged on skeptics. The best way to clarify the liturgy's questionable passages, he argues, is to allow independent professional scholars to examine Mormon archives.

But the Mormon Church does not want outsiders meddling with its archives in Salt Lake City, Davis writes. Leonard Arrington, the church's first official historian, from 1972 to 1982, believed that "free scholarly inquiry could only strengthen faith among Mormon intellectuals." But in 1982, Mormon elders grew tired of his "unorthodox" approach, fired him, and clamped down on research.

Where does that leave the controversy? In limbo, says Davis. Without access to crucial sources, historians cannot "write confidently about Mormon beginnings."