

History Is People, Places, Sources, and Stories: An Interview with Milton V. Backman Jr.

Interview by Steven C. Harper

Introduction

After a distinguished teaching and publishing career at Brigham Young University, Milton V. Backman Jr. pioneered the BYU Semester Program in Nauvoo in 1994. My wife Jennifer and I were among the students who participated during the inaugural semester. I was beginning to aspire to a career of writing and teaching history—hopefully Mormon history, and I knew that Professor Backman could show me how. He and his wife Kay were without guile and pretense. They treated Jennifer and me as peers. We enjoyed many visits together, including an especially memorable outing for Chinese food in Keokuk, Iowa. Milt and Kay reminisced as we dined informally together, letting us walk down memory lane with them just as we were beginning to venture along the way they had so successfully passed.

“What are you going to do with a history degree?” I was being asked from every side, including the inside. Milt Backman offered the answer. Here was a model for me. I absorbed as much of his knowledge as I could that semester. He gave me a sense for history. He situates events and personalities in his lectures and in his writings. He makes history live. I determined to emulate Professor Backman as nearly as I could.

The following interview is intended to treat readers to a taste of what

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I relished that evening—the personality and thought of an excellent historian and a better man.

The Interview

STEVEN: Thanks very much, Professor Backman, for giving us this interview. This will be published in *Mormon Historical Studies*. They've been engaged in a series of interviews with distinguished historians, and that list includes you. Tell us about your biography generally. Where you were born and when? What influenced you prior to your teaching appointments after graduate school?

MILT: I was born in Salt Lake City, June 11, 1927. I lived there eight years, but because of my health (I had pneumonia and allergies), the doctor suggested that we move to another environment. So my father left his law office and moved to Los Angeles where he secured employment and eventually passed the California bar. We lived there eight years, so I grew up in Salt Lake and in Los Angeles, and then we moved back to Salt Lake during World War II. I completed my high-school education at East High in Salt Lake in 1945.

After graduating and passing a physical examination, I was preparing to be drafted into the Army, just as the war was approaching an apparent end. While living in Los Angeles, California, I often visited my uncle in San Pedro, and I thought that if I went into the service, I'd like to be a sailor. One of my high-school friends informed me as I was preparing to enter the Army that I could enlist in the Maritime Service and thereby secure an exception from the draft. So I enlisted in that program. I was in that service for one day when the war ended, and I spent a year and a half transporting troops from the Pacific theater to their homes in the United States. Meanwhile, I had the choice of participating in a training program and serving in the steward, deck, or engine departments. I decided to attend cooking, baking, and butchering schools, and I subsequently served as a steward's yeoman (secretary) and baker on various troopships.

Although I was raised in the Church, I was converted to Mormonism while I was in the service. For the first time in my life, I seriously studied and explored principles of the restored gospel and was converted by reading the Book of Mormon. I also started memorizing scriptures. Before I went on my first mission, I had memorized over three hundred scriptures, including some chapters from the Bible. I thought that such knowledge would help me while serving a mission.

After I was released from the Maritime Service, I received a call to

serve in the South Africa Mission, and I thoroughly enjoyed an experience that strengthened my faith. I did not begin attending the University of Utah until five years after I graduated from high school, but that was not unusual in the 1950s. Many freshmen were former veterans and missionaries.

Because my father was an attorney who wanted me to enter his law office, I decided to major in accounting and become a CPA before going to law school. While I was enrolled at the University of Utah, the Korean War erupted; and because I'd been in the Maritime Service, I was not exempt from a new draft. Shortly after I joined the



Milton V. Backman Jr. during his service in the U.S. Air Force, ca. 1953. Photograph courtesy Milton V. Backman Jr.

191st Fighter Squadron, this National Air Force Guard Unit was activated; and I served a year and a half in the Korean War. Because of my experience in the Maritime Service, I was assigned as a baker, and I became a sergeant in charge of the baking department.

After we were transferred to an air base in New Mexico, we prepared the bakery products for twenty-five hundred men daily. During that experience, I decided that instead of becoming an attorney, I wanted to spend my life in the teaching profession. Such a decision was primarily based on my experience in teaching early-morning seminary while I was attending the university. Subsequently, after being discharged from the Air Force, I decided to transfer my major from accounting to history. I had taken only one course in history, but I decided that history was one of the best subjects to prepare me to become an institute teacher. I graduated with a degree in history from the University of Utah in 1954. One year later, I received a master's degree from that same university in history with a minor in geography.

While enrolled in graduate studies, I considered the possibility of teaching at BYU. One day, I called President Ernest Wilkinson, president

of Brigham Young University, and asked, "What would you recommend to a student who might want to eventually teach at Brigham Young University?" And he said, in essence, "Study at a major university and become a specialist in some area. Learn more about some aspect of your discipline than anyone else. We want specialists with doctoral degrees."

Inspired by those suggestions, I applied, was accepted, and continued my graduate studies at the University of Pennsylvania. Because I had received the GI Bill from my service during the Korean War, I secured financial assistance from the government for my graduate studies. I completed the requirements for a PhD degree in history from the University of Pennsylvania in 1959.

During my graduate studies, I decided to emphasize different aspects of religious history. For every class, I wrote papers relating to some phase of religion. I also wrote a master's thesis at the University of Utah on the rise of religious liberty in Virginia. I located a number of primary sources that contained information on migration patterns and traditions and laws that helped me better understand the background of the rise of religious freedom in that state. Thomas Jefferson wrote the first law passed by a representative assembly that provided complete religious liberty for everyone in a state.

Subsequently, I studied the background of that law, especially the influence of the frontier on what I called the religious revolt in Virginia. During my studies, I continued to concentrate on the subject of the separation of church and state and the rise of religious freedom in America. I wrote my doctoral dissertation at the University of Pennsylvania on Isaac Backus, a champion in the struggle to establish religious freedom in Massachusetts. This work included a biography of his life and concentrated on his publications, theology, and contributions in promoting religious freedom in Massachusetts and other parts of the new nation.

After completing graduate work at the University of Pennsylvania, except for finishing my dissertation, I decided I liked history so much that I would rather teach that subject than seek employment in the Church Educational System, and I was hired at West Texas State University to teach American history in 1958. While there, I finished my dissertation and secured my PhD degree in 1959. We lived in Canyon, Texas, for two years.

It almost seemed as a pure stroke of luck that I was hired at Brigham Young University. I was looking for employment in a history department, and I wanted to move closer to Utah. I was called one day by Professor Truman Madsen and eventually learned that the instructor at Brigham Young University who was teaching a course in the Department of

Church History, “History of Religion in the United States,” had left; and, at the same time, a teacher in the History Department who taught Early American History had left. Rather suddenly, there were opportunities for someone to teach subjects in two departments. Because my doctoral dissertation was on Isaac Backus, a revolutionary leader, and because I had taken many classes in graduate school pertaining to the courses in which there was a need at BYU, I believed I was qualified to teach courses in both departments.

Meanwhile, Dr. Richard Bushman was interviewed; and subsequently, both of us were hired to teach part time in two departments, History and Church History. That new opportunity changed my life because I was invited to teach classes in History of Religion, U.S. History, and LDS Church History.

STEVEN: That seems like the perfect combination.

MILT: I’d never taken a class in LDS Church History, but anyone who has a doctorate in history knows the historical process. I had been reading Joseph Smith’s *History of the Church*, and I had read a few textbooks on that subject, so it was not difficult for me to start teaching LDS Church History while I was teaching other courses in the Departments of History and Church History. I loved the combination.

STEVEN: I do, too. In fact I was inspired by your example to pursue a similar combination. What year did you begin at BYU?

MILT: I was hired at BYU in 1960, and I came to BYU after teaching for two years at West Texas State University. I brought to Provo my wife, the former Kathleen McLatchy, and one daughter and lived in the same house in Edgemont with my wife and three children during most of my professional experience at BYU. Meanwhile, the experience in Texas truly helped me, for when I first started teaching at BYU, I was assigned to teach classes in the History Department that I’d previously taught at another university.

Meanwhile, teaching History of Religion opened a whole new horizon. At first, I was disappointed because I couldn’t find a textbook that accurately described our faith. The standard or most popular textbooks were biased and did not describe accurately our beliefs or history. And when I was teaching the course History of Religion in the Department of Church History, students asked the question, “What are the beliefs of members of other religious communities? We are not interested in limiting our studies to their history. We want to learn what they believed and how they worshiped.” I agreed with their comments and decided to change the course. And because I could not find an acceptable textbook that was currently in print for that class, I decided to write such a work.

After I decided to write a text that would include the history and beliefs of all major Christian faiths, I decided to strive for accuracy by having each chapter reviewed by ministers and historians of their respective faiths. After writing a chapter on a particular religious community, I submitted the work to leaders, historians, ministers and/or lay members of that denomination. Sometimes I sent chapters to the headquarters of the respective churches, and they assigned someone to review the work. My quest was to relate accurately the history and the beliefs of others. I had problems, of course. When I worked on Roman Catholicism, especially during the rewriting in 1970s, it was necessary to revise many of their popular traditional beliefs. But I was not able to get different reviewers to agree on some aspects of their faith. I kept writing and rewriting so the chapter represented the different wings of that religious movement. The result was what I believed to be an accurate reflection of that faith by describing traditional beliefs and contemporary patterns of thought.

The book, *Christian Churches of America*, was first published by Brigham Young University Press; and then after it had been in print for almost ten years, Charles Scribner's & Sons in New York agreed to republish it on condition that it be updated with revisions in the chapter on Roman Catholicism and with information inserted on the Holiness and Pentecostal movements. The revisions were eventually approved, and I was pleased that a book that emphasized religious history and the patterns of faith and including a chapter on Mormonism was published by a national publisher. This book has been circulated in many parts of the world, including China, and is still in print thirty years after its initial publication.

STEVEN: How does that book on the origins and beliefs of major Christian faiths relate to *American Religions and the Rise of Mormonism*?

MILT: The first book I wrote was *American Religions and the Rise of Mormonism*. I wrote that work because no books were available that emphasized the immediate historical setting of Mormonism. Books were available on the Apostasy and Restoration; but generally, authors jumped from the Apostasy to the Reformation and from the Reformation to Joseph Smith's early visions.

Therefore, I decided that we needed a book that concentrated on the period from the Reformation to the Restoration. I had been involved in research on the rise of religious liberty in America, the Second Reformation (a reorientation of Christian thinking during the Revolutionary generation), and the Second Great Awakening, and that information became a significant thrust of that work. I also emphasized

in that publication why, from a historian's perspective, there could not have been a restoration until after the American Revolution. I also included a chapter on Mormonism, which included the early history of the Restored Church and the distinct theological contributions of Joseph Smith, similar to a chapter I later included in *Christian Churches of America*. I emphasized in both publications that Joseph Smith was not merely a popularizer. He unfolded many doctrines not taught by any other religious leader who organized a Christian church.

STEVEN: It seems to me that people still, despite your contributions over a career, do not take Joseph Smith seriously for his theology, which is a pity.

MILT: Many scholars today who are not members of the Restored Church are beginning to recognize Joseph Smith's contributions and are reading scholarly publications that have modified their interpretations of Mormonism. Today, many are beginning to more accurately represent our history and beliefs and are not accepting as reliable works some earlier publications, such as Fawn Brodie's biography of Joseph Smith.

When I was at the University of Pennsylvania, a professor of social and intellectual history delivered an hour-and-a-half lecture on Mormonism, and the basic theme of his discussion was that Joseph Smith was a product of the times. This professor used extensively as his primary source of information Fawn Brodie's *No Man Knows My History*. He suggested that Brodie's work was unbiased history because she was a Mormon and then left the faith so she could write an objective history. Today, many scholars are reading scholarly publications by Mormons and non-Mormons that are more accurate than some of the earlier critical studies on Joseph Smith. Subsequently, many non-Mormon scholars today consider Joseph Smith as a genius and admit that we do not know how to explain his multiple contributions.

STEVEN: You were included among the first wave of historians who sought to publish scholarly works that others outside the Church considered as reliable history. That's a major contribution.

MILT: My emphasis on scholarly publications or reliable history began with *American Religions and the Rise of Mormonism*, and that tone continued in other publications, such as *Joseph Smith's First Vision*.

STEVEN: Could you pick out a historical figure or figures that have influenced you more than any others?

MILT: It would be, of course, the Prophet Joseph Smith because, in one sense, I've written about eight books and many chapters in various books that in one way or another relate to him. And yet I don't know him. In one sense, he's right when he said, "No man knows my history."

The more you write, the more you ask questions. How could he have accomplished what he did? I think of Joseph as two people: a man and a prophet. And they were very different. Joseph the man was not a polished writer. He was not well educated in regards to formal education. Then there was the Prophet who dictated the Book of Mormon and unfolded remarkable revelations. Joseph, the man, without divine assistance, could not have produced these records. Perhaps that's why he said, "No man knows my history." No one can understand from a purely secular perspective how this young man without much of a formal education could have been so influential and accomplished so much.

STEVEN: Could you identify scholars who've had major influences on your thinking?

MILT: Probably the person who influenced me most in regards to the subject of history is Dr. Roy F. Nichols, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania and author of many historical studies. He made history live. He walked into class, and it almost seemed as though he threw away all of his notes and talked and reminisced. He made history live by placing people and places in a historical setting. For example, when he discussed the coming of the Civil War, he discussed the impact of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* on Northerners and Southerners. He emphasized that if we cannot understand the conflicting interpretations of that novel, we cannot understand why there was a Civil War. He did not concentrate on multiple dates and less-important facts, but he described personalities, their backgrounds, their prejudices, and their accomplishments and placed events in a political, economic, and social setting. He also continued to tell stories. I think that's been my emphasis—to try to tell stories and put everything in a historical setting so that history isn't just a list of facts and dates. History is a series of stories. It can really be fascinating, but it can also be deadly.

Sometimes people also misrepresent others, and some misrepresent events by not understanding historical settings. A good example is the martyrdom of Joseph Smith. Today, some are critical of those who destroyed the press of the *Nauvoo Expositor* in Nauvoo without recognizing that many presses were being destroyed by vigilante action in pre-Civil War America. The press in Nauvoo, however, was not destroyed by a mob but by the local government. When we consider the circumstances that led to the action that set in motion a series of events that led to the martyrdom of the Prophet and his brother, we can better understand why Joseph Smith and other members of the city council considered that they had the legal right to destroy that nuisance.

Today, such action would be considered wrong, but we should not



President Ezra Taft Benson and his wife, Flora, at the dedication activities of the Newel K. Whitney Store in Kirtland, Ohio, 1986. Milton V. Backman Jr. can be seen behind and to the right of President Benson. Keith Perkins, a long-time friend and BYU colleague of Milt's, is to the left of Flora Benson. Photograph courtesy Milton V. Backman Jr.

judge others on the basis of today's perspectives. We need to judge people of the past on the basis of their standards and conditions that existed during their lifetime. We should not impose our beliefs on their beliefs or our actions on their actions because they were different and we are different from many people of the past. I believe that probably one of my greatest emphases, in one sense, has been the attempt to place people and events in a historical setting so that today we can better evaluate and judge the actions of others and not be so critical of some patterns of behavior of the past.

STEVEN: You've talked about earning your PhD at the University of Pennsylvania and writing a dissertation on Isaac Backus. I can see ways that I believe those experiences helped you write Mormon history in this larger perspective and context you're telling us about. Do you want to say anything more about that?

MILT: When I started studying history, I learned that you need to let the sources speak for themselves. That's a basic theme of historians. And

that's what I've tried to do. I learned from historical research that evaluating primary sources is difficult because the sources contain conflicting information. Since I initiated my studies in history, I've been searching for primary sources, such as the writings of witnesses of events, secular and religious documents, and newspapers, although there's so much inaccurate information in early newspapers. We need, however, to examine all known sources. Then, the challenge of a historian is to decide what sources are most reliable.

It's very interesting to read conflicting information and then sit back and say, "Now, which account am I going to include in this work?" Eventually, you have to draw a conclusion. Then, sometimes you might footnote other versions, such as in the case of the healing of Mrs. John Johnson. We have several accounts of that event; and although there are a number of similarities, some details are different. I decided when I published *Heavens Resound* that I would use a non-Mormon account. Maybe another version by a Latter-day Saint was more accurate in a few details. I wanted to emphasize that Joseph Smith by the power of God healed Elsa Johnson. And I liked concepts included in an interesting account published by a non-Mormon. I selected the non-Mormon account over a Mormon account in that instance because, as I said to myself, "That event must have occurred. A non-Mormon published an account that harmonized in most significant details with an account written by a Latter-day Saint."

STEVEN: I was thinking as you spoke that at least once a week I still use your collection of Ohio newspaper accounts. Your gathering of sources continues to have an impact on those of us who are working in that field today. You mentioned *Heavens Resound*, which I take to be, although it's got some competition, perhaps your most important book. Will you tell us about *Heavens Resound*?

MILT: Almost every book I wrote emerged because of some new challenge or because of a problem that I determined should be resolved. I was asked by the Church Historical Department, for example, to write a volume on Ohio for a multivolume history of the Latter-day Saint people. *Heavens Resound* was to be one of a sixteen-volume history. I was disappointed when they asked me to write a work on either Ohio or Missouri because I had already written books on the New York experience. I had, however, recently completed research on Sidney Rigdon and Alexander Campbell. I was interested in knowing the difference between Rigdon and Campbell and why Rigdon refused to unite with Campbell when Campbell began organizing independent Baptist groups into what became Disciples of Christ. I asked the question, "What were the differ-

ences in the beliefs of these two leaders of a new restorationist movement?" Because I had recently completed an article on that theme, when I was asked to write a work on either Ohio or Missouri, I immediately decided on Ohio. I'm so glad. There are so many problems working with the Missouri period.

I spent the next thirteen years, especially during the summer months, searching for primary sources relating to the Ohio experience in the LDS Church Archives, the BYU Library, and other depositories in Utah and in many libraries and historical societies in Ohio and other states. I spent far more time doing research on that book than on any other publication. I could not find much information in most libraries in Ohio. One of the early sources of information, however, relating to Mormonism written during the 1830s was newspapers. With the help of my family and students, I read about ten thousand newspapers, primarily those published in Ohio, looking for information relating to Mormonism. As part of this study, I also collected articles on health, abolitionism, reform movements, politics, and economics. I took a camera with me so I could take pictures and then reproduce articles as initially published. This study resulted in a four-volume collection of articles on Mormonism and miscellaneous subjects from Ohio papers and became the basis for one chapter in *Heavens Resound* and background material for other chapters.

Meanwhile, during that period of research on the Ohio experience of Latter-day Saints, I gathered information for two other books, *Christian Churches of America* and *Eyewitness Accounts of the Restoration*. I interviewed many ministers in Ohio and searched for information primarily in Ohio, Missouri, and Utah relating to witnesses to the Book of Mormon.

During my research for *Heavens Resound*, I began collecting copies of journals written by early Latter-day Saints; and shortly before retiring from BYU, I decided to reproduce the journals in a format that could be searched in a databank so that individuals could search all the journals and other records with selected words. Because I decided to use a search program, I decided to standardize the spelling in the journals placed in our collection. After I had been called by the Area Presidency over the Nauvoo Historic Site to expand this collection for use in the Land and Records Office in Nauvoo, I secured permission to secure photocopies from Church Archives of hundreds of additional journals that were eventually typed and placed in the collection. I worked on this project periodically for about ten years, and the result (with the help of the BYU Religious Studies Center, many missionaries, and many others, including Dr. Keith Perkins and Dr. Evan Ivie) was a collection of approximately five hundred volumes that emphasized LDS Church History prior to



BYU Religious Education faculty, 10 March 1987. Milton V. Backman is on the back row, second from the right. Milton was a professor at BYU for thirty-two years. Photograph courtesy Richard O. Cowan.

1846. All these records are included in a Nauvoo databank and may be searched with a program called “Folio.” Included in this collection are about 550 autobiographies and approximately three hundred biographies, early Latter-day Saint periodicals, Dr. Susan Black’s *Membership of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1830–1848* (50 vols.), and an index to over a hundred thousand biographies in the BYU Library compiled by Marvin Wiggins. Volunteers in Nauvoo are still working on this project, and the collection is available in Nauvoo, Kirtland, and some LDS Family History Centers. Portions of this collection are also available on various Web sites.

STEVEN: I used that database for my master’s thesis. It was a very useful tool. Let me ask you about your book *The First Vision*, which I take to be also a very important contribution. I know that there were some interesting circumstances that led to your writing of that book. Will you tell us about that?

MILT: *The First Vision* is the first book that I wrote on an event in LDS Church history. While I was researching and writing in the field of history of religion, a Presbyterian minister published a pamphlet in which he argued that Joseph did not write a reliable account of the his-

torical setting of the First Vision. This individual emphasized that there is no evidence of a great revival in Palmyra in 1819 and 1820 and argued that the great revival of Palmyra took place about 1823 and 1824. This theory is still circulated by critics of the Church.

Following the publication of a pamphlet that raised questions regarding revivalism in western New York, I received a grant to study the Second Great Awakening in relationship to New York about 1820. Although others were invited to work on this theme in depositories in other states, I visited churches, libraries, and historical societies located in Palmyra, Manchester, Phelps, Rochester, Syracuse, Ithaca, and many other parts of western and upstate New York.

During this research, I found no evidence of a great revival in Palmyra township in 1819 or 1820 and also recognized that some individuals misrepresented writings of Joseph Smith. Joseph did not state that the revival that influenced him commenced in Palmyra. He declared that after moving to Manchester, an unusual excitement on the subject of religion commenced with the Methodists and that great numbers united themselves to the different religious communities in the whole district of the country. I learned that throughout the Manchester-Palmyra region, within ten, fifteen, twenty, and thirty miles, there was much religious excitement and that large numbers joined churches. In fact, I found that probably there were more revivals and more people joining churches in upstate and western New York in 1819 and 1820 than in any other region of the United States. This revival, in some respects, was a segment of the world's greatest revival, a religious quickening that reached its greatest intensity during the 1830s and 1840s. Joseph Smith wrote an accurate account of the historical setting of the First Vision, and many contemporaries were witnesses of the same awakening that influenced Joseph Smith.

STEVEN: One must put words in his mouth and then prove him wrong.

MILT: While I was gathering information on revivalism, I gathered data on the historical setting of Palmyra and the settlement of the area primarily by former residents of New England. Subsequently, *The First Vision* is a book that concentrates on revivals in western and upstate New York during a period of a great awakening. It also places the First Vision in a general historical setting and discusses the transformation of Palmyra during the early 1800s, including the construction of the Erie Canal and other changes in Palmyra village and township during the 1820s.

STEVEN: It's a very important book for the reasons that you've mentioned. It also includes several different accounts of the First Vision. It

was one of the earliest places where different accounts of the First Vision were published.

MILT: Right. One of the faculty members at BYU, Paul Cheesman, was one of the first Latter-day Saints to gather accounts of the First Vision, and then I decided to include in my work on the First Vision accounts by Joseph Smith and accounts by his contemporaries. Although information on that subject had been published in periodicals by James Allen and others, as far as I know, Joseph's accounts and those of his contemporaries were published in book form for the first time in that work. These important accounts have also been published by Dean Jessee and are currently in print.

STEVEN: Tell us about *Eyewitness Accounts of the Restoration*.

MILT: One of the most interesting books that I wrote was *Eyewitness Accounts of the Restoration*. If I were to identify one of the most positive supports of the Prophet Joseph Smith or one of the best evidences in a sense of his divine calling, it would be the testimonies of witnesses. We have to be careful, however, with the use of the word "evidence" because religious or spiritual things are not based on evidence. But if you look for something to support it, or evidence, it would be the testimony of witnesses.

While I was traveling to and from the northeastern part of the United States, I gathered information on the witnesses to the Book of Mormon. And then I decided to combine Joseph's four accounts of his First Vision into one account. During this search, I also found about ninety-one testimonies of David Whitmer, so I took these ninety-one testimonies, which were based on his writings and those of his contemporaries, and combined them. I also combined Oliver Cowdery's testimonies regarding his experiences with Joseph, including Oliver's accounts of the restoration of the priesthoods. By combining the writings of Joseph Smith and writings and records based on interviews of Oliver Cowdery, Martin Harris, and David Whitmer, I unfolded the story of the early history of the Church, as it had not been previously written. Although this book was different, it was similar in some respects to harmonies of the New Testament. The testimony of witnesses is a powerful support of the divine calling of Joseph Smith.

This year one of my lectures for BYU Education Week was entitled "Sixteen Witnesses of the Divine Calling of Joseph Smith." I planned on discussing sixteen people who testified that they were either witnesses of the plates or witnesses of one of his visions. As I prepared a new PowerPoint presentation, I identified about twenty-two witnesses of his visions in Ohio. Eventually, I included in that discussion references to

more than thirty-two witnesses who testified of the divine calling of Joseph Smith. These were men and women who were present when he dictated the Book of Mormon, recorded revelations that are in our Doctrine and Covenants, or were present when he received visions. Those present during his visions testified that they saw some of the same heavenly beings who appeared to Joseph.

Another emphasis that I included in the theme of witnesses of the divine calling of Joseph Smith was that Oliver Cowdery was the only witness in the history of modern visions who actually testified that he felt the hands of a heavenly being upon his head.

Such a statement, as far as I know, is not reported in any other accounts of visions since the time of Christ. When Joseph and Oliver wrote and published accounts of the restoration of the Aaronic Priesthood by a heavenly being, they declared that they felt the hands of the heavenly being upon their heads. How could they have been deceived?

I am not aware of critics of the Church who have suggested an explanation of the testimony of the witnesses that has been generally accepted by many other critics. Some have also suggested that one of the most difficult challenges in explaining the testimonies of the witnesses is the testimony of the Eight Witnesses of the plates—because they claimed that they handled and hefted the plates, and many non-Latter-day Saints conclude that there were no Book of Mormon plates. But of course “evidence” might be a preliminary to conversion, but it doesn’t convert. We know that conversion comes as a result of a personal spiritual experience.

STEVEN: It is impressive that the people who knew Joseph Smith best are the ones who testify that what he said is true. And the critics are the people who don’t know Joseph well but have an axe to grind against



Milton V. Backman Jr. and his first wife, Kathleen McLatchy Backman, ca. 1990. Kathleen passed away in 1999. Photograph courtesy Milton V. Backman Jr.

his story.

MILT: That's right.

STEVEN: That is compelling to me.

MILT: Another type of support for Joseph's divine calling was that some of the witnesses of the Book of Mormon left the Church and rejected Joseph's leadership—but never denied their religious experiences with him. And two of the Three Witnesses returned to the Church, which I regard as another powerful support of his divine calling.

STEVEN: I'd expect that *Eyewitness Accounts of the Restoration* is probably one of your most popular books. Is that right?

MILT: No, probably not. *The First Vision* was popular, for it was reprinted by Bookcraft and Deseret Book and is still being quoted by others. It has not been replaced by another similar volume. And some publications have remained in print for many years. *Christian Churches of America* was initially published in 1960 and is still in print. And *Heavens Resound* has been reprinted. That study of the early history of Latter-day Saints in Ohio has probably been, in some respects, my most significant contribution.

STEVEN: *Heavens Resound* remains the only narrative history of the Ohio period in print.

MILT: Yes. And unfortunately at least two-thirds of what I had written on the historical setting of the Ohio experience was removed. I had initially written about sixty pages of background information, similar to chapters in the New American Nation series. Editors, however, complained that Joseph did not arrive in Kirtland until after people would have read about sixty pages. So I rewrote that work and placed some of the background information in various chapters.

STEVEN: Tell us about your last book, *People and Power of Nauvoo*. I recognize in it much of what I learned from you.

MILT: I retired from BYU one year prior to my sixty-fifth birthday after I had taught there for thirty-two years with the understanding that my wife and I would go on a mission. Because her health was declining and she couldn't pass the physical, our doctor suggested that she couldn't serve a mission. But one of my cousins is Elder Robert L. Backman, a General Authority, who was chairman of the Missionary Department. He evidently instructed the Missionary Department to send us to Nauvoo for six months during the summer season. And we went and had a wonderful experience and then served another six-month mission in Nauvoo.

While serving in the City of Joseph, I was given the opportunity of preparing discussions for the missionaries on different aspects of the Nauvoo experience. I used as a search tool for information for these talks

an early version of the Nauvoo databank, which included journals of early Latter-day Saints, Joseph Smith's *History of the Church*, early Mormon periodicals, and many other primary sources. After I'd delivered these discussions and later taught classes on the Nauvoo experience in the BYU Semester Program in Nauvoo, I decided to revise my lectures and write *People and Power of Nauvoo*. That work is people oriented because I used, as a major source, the autobiographies of Latter-day Saints who lived in Nauvoo.

STEVEN: I was very fortunate to be one among tens of thousands of your students over the years. I took courses from you in American History, LDS History, and Doctrine and Covenants. I wonder if you would tell us about the way you taught. What principles guide the way you teach?

MILT: I believe that history is fascinating because it is a series of stories. It is something more than just dates. It's life experiences. It's unfolding the past. It's reconstructing patterns of living. If we limit our knowledge to the present, we're eliminating a broad aspect of the life of mankind. And my thrust has been to place events in historical settings and make people of the past come alive. And you can make people live only if you put them in their lifestyle, with their habits and their way of life. I've tried to make history interesting so that people want to learn more. So I've often cited stories from the writings of the people. I like to talk about the conversions of Parley P. Pratt and Philo Dibble and the experiences of many other early converts. And I love to talk about, say, the American Revolution, Paul Revere, Sam Adams, Patrick Henry, and Thomas Jefferson. These are people who made history, and history needs to be people oriented. With such an emphasis, history becomes fascinating because everyone likes stories. That basically is my philosophy.

STEVEN: After what was already a very productive and distinguished career at BYU, you set off on a series of missions that pioneered the Nauvoo travel study program. I was very fortunate to be in the very first semester of that. Will you tell us how that program got started and what your involvement was in it.

MILT: The first year I was a missionary in Nauvoo I was asked by the director in charge of the missionaries to consider how we could increase winter activities in Nauvoo. There was a problem of missionaries serving in that historic site during the long winter months when there were few visitors, and I learned that there were about fifteen empty homes during that season. Missionaries were serving a year and a half, usually two summers and one winter. I responded by asking myself the question regarding how we could benefit from this condition and help the missionaries

servicing there. I remembered that faculty in Church History had considered some kind of semester program in Palmyra or Kirtland, but plans did not materialize because of the lack of housing.

As I continued to ponder an issue raised by our director, I asked myself, "How could the empty homes in Nauvoo best be utilized?" And I thought, "Why not establish a BYU winter semester program in that historic site?" Because there were concerns at BYU regarding restricted enrollment and some students delaying their graduation, I recognized that a Nauvoo semester program not only should emphasize Church history but also should include other subjects that would not delay significantly a student's progress toward graduation. Then, I thought that nearly every student needs English and that many could benefit from taking U.S. History—courses that are required at many universities. Subsequently, every semester we have offered these and other courses. One of my close friends is an artist, and he agreed to serve in the new program; so we initially offered an art class.

From the beginning of the BYU Semester Program in Nauvoo, I also decided to offer classes and establish programs for missionaries and townspeople. Many, not enrolled in the semester program, have appreciated the opportunity of attending community programs and classes in art, LDS Church History, Doctrine and Covenants, and many other subjects that are available during a period when the missionaries are not as busy as they are during the summers.

I also decided that we needed to use Nauvoo as a base for a traveling experience. From the inception of the program, we decided to visit historic sites in Illinois, Missouri, Iowa, Ohio, and New York. It is a thrilling and spiritual experience for students to study events that occurred in New York, such as the First Vision, and then travel to Palmyra and Manchester and visit the Sacred Grove and partake of the spirit that prevails there and in other historic sites.

One of the miracles of the program is that it continued with the strong support of LDS Church leaders in Illinois, the community, and faculty and administrators at BYU (without any extra financial support from BYU) for a number of semesters during the winter months, and then a major problem developed. Because of the increase in the number of visitors to Nauvoo and increase in the number of missionaries serving there, Nauvoo Restoration Incorporated (NRI, a unit in charge of physical facilities) decided that homes rented to the BYU Semester Program in Nauvoo would no longer be available. At the same time that this problem developed, Roman Catholics sold their property across from the temple to the Church. Before that sale, the nuns had closed their high school because of diminishing enrollment. This purchase by the Church

of a convent and Catholic high school meant that there would be no interruption in the BYU Semester Program in Nauvoo. Today, we have available for this program classrooms, dormitories, auditorium, gym, computer rooms, library, dining room, and kitchen. Currently, over a hundred students participate every fall and winter semester in a program that is still being approved on a yearly basis.

STEVEN: It was one of the most formative educational experiences I ever had to go there and to study with you and to see history come alive in context as you taught it. Joseph Smith came to life. I remember ice skating there in Nauvoo and the same day reading in Joseph's journal that he went out with Frederick to slide on the ice. Abraham Lincoln and Mark Twain came to life as we read their writings and went to their homes. It was a great experience. Is your involvement with that continuing, or are you done with that for now?

MILT: I taught in the BYU Semester Program in Nauvoo for six semesters. I taught three semesters, and then my wife became too ill to continue and then passed away. After she passed away, leaders from Nauvoo called and invited me to return. I said, "I'm not married." Shortly thereafter, I met at a singles fireside a beautiful, talented lady, Sharon Richey, who had lost her husband. Shortly after I met her, I asked her, "Would you like to go back to Nauvoo?" I was not going to return without a wife. We were married, went back to Nauvoo, and continued to serve for three semesters. During one year of that experience, we served as missionaries in that program and had the privilege of being there during the construction of the Nauvoo Temple. We also served as missionaries in Rantoul, Illinois, and Kirtland, Ohio, thereby spending half of our early married life in the mission field.

STEVEN: The last time I saw you was, in fact, in Kirtland when you were on your mission.

MILT: We enjoyed that. And now that I am no longer serving as a missionary, I feel for the first time that I'm really retired and can concentrate on writing articles, working on family history, attending temple sessions and missionary reunions, and spending more time with our eleven children, their spouses, about fifty-two grandchildren, and a new group of great-grandchildren, with more on the way.

STEVEN: I'll bet you keep busy doing productive things.

MILT: Right now I'm also preparing eight PowerPoint presentations for BYU Education Week. I didn't know anything about creating PowerPoint presentations until a few months ago. But a number of people in this neighborhood know that program and have been helping me. So I'm busy learning something new and enjoying it very much. I am securing pictures from the Web and scanning pictures from various



*Milton V. Backman Jr. and his second wife, Sharon Richey Backman, 2004.
Photograph courtesy Milton V. Backman Jr.*

sources. I am attempting to enrich discussions of Church history with text (including copies of manuscripts) and pictures of people and places.

STEVEN: That seems to bring full circle your emphasis on making places and people from the past live. Well, I'm thankful for your time and for all you've said, for all you've written and done and taught me and many, many others. The question was put to some prominent American historians that if you could have been present at any single event in American history, which would you choose and why?

MILT: Probably Joseph Smith preaching, maybe delivering the King Follett discourse or some other sermon he delivered in the west or east groves. We don't know what Joseph precisely said. We view Joseph through the eyes of his contemporaries who recorded in their words what he taught.

STEVEN: I would give anything I possess to listen to him for five minutes. I could learn so much.

MILT: He spoke by the Spirit, and you can't fully recover that Spirit when you read his writings. And because we do not have available today his sermon outlines or written sermons, if he created them, what we're trying to do is to view Joseph Smith through the eyes of scribes, through the writings of his contemporaries. I would love to hear what he actually said and how he said it.

Milton V. Backman Jr. Bibliography
Compiled by Steven C. Harper and Alexander L. Baugh

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