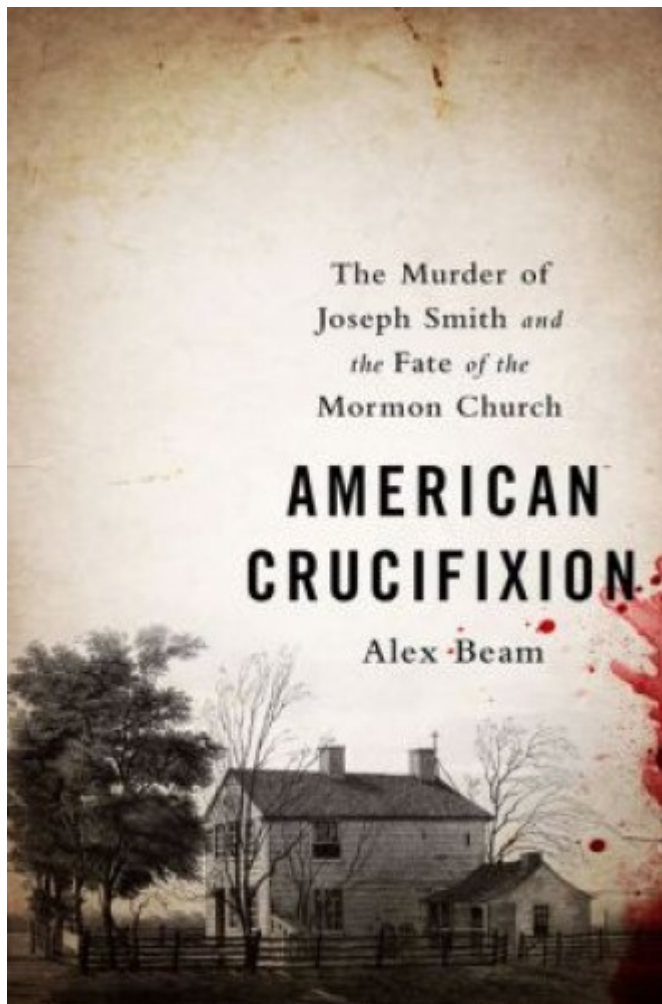


American Crucifixion, by Alex Beam

reviewed by [Benjamin E. Park](#) in the [July 8, 2015](#) issue

In Review



American Crucifixion

By Alex Beam

Public Affairs

Americans pride themselves on living in a nation founded on the principles of religious freedom—a country in which competing denominations live or die on the basis of the persuasiveness of their message, unmolested by external prejudice.

Religious intolerance, in many Americans' view, is something only people in other nations experience.

The story of Joseph Smith, founder of the Mormon Church, challenges this narrative. The Mormons' Illinois neighbors responded to the religion promulgated by Smith—with its ancient golden plates that produced new scripture, the modern appearance of angels who bestowed ecclesial authority, and the introduction of a polygamous practice that boldly assaulted Victorian domestic attitudes—not by allowing the religion to die of natural causes in the marketplace of ideas, but by violently lynching its founder. How could the land of religious freedom witness the killing of someone who was simply promulgating religious beliefs, even if they were odious?

Alex Beam, a veteran journalist with the *Boston Globe*, tells this important story in *American Crucifixion: The Murder of Joseph Smith and the Fate of the Mormon Church*. The book covers the religious and cultural context of Joseph Smith's city on a hill, Nauvoo, founded on the western edge of Illinois in the 1840s. Beam's account of Smith's theological teachings and sexual exploits both spice up the narrative and establish the context of the events that led to Smith's death. Non-Mormon residents of Hancock County were worried that Smith might ascend to political power, disseminate his heretical beliefs further, and steal vulnerable women, and they reacted firmly and zealously to what they perceived as the growing Mormon threat. Smith's decision to destroy a press that his opponents were using to expose his actions gave them the grounds for eradicating him once and for all. Once he was jailed in the county seat of Carthage, a mob stormed the building and killed the prophet, then retreated to prepare for a Mormon retaliatory strike that never came.

A year later, with Mormon witnesses refusing to participate in court proceedings and state prosecutors consistently bungling arguments, the leaders of the mob got off scot-free. Though an official reason for the acquittal was given, the general thinking was that it would be unfair to punish a few for acting on the wishes of the many. In spite of this animosity, the Mormon Church continued to grow, though it was now plagued with schisms that followed Smith's death, and the Latter-day Saints turned their eyes westward toward the Utah territory, where they would eventually settle and where Mormonism would develop into a global faith.

There are no heroes in Beam's tale, on either the Mormon or the non-Mormon side of the story. This is a tale of flawed, sometimes two-dimensional figures struggling to

gather support or invoke hostility. Perhaps the most pathetic figure is Thomas Ford, who seems overmatched by his job as governor of Illinois at the time of Smith's killing. Beam lays a substantial amount of blame for the conflicts of 1844 at the feet of the inept Ford, who was unable to marshal enough control over his state's citizens to avoid an event that was wholly avoidable. And although Mormon citizens of Nauvoo certainly stoked the flames of conflict with their heretical beliefs and alarming actions, the jealous neighbors in the surrounding Hancock County towns arouse no sympathy, either. This wasn't a battle between the good guys and the bad guys as much as a *Lord of the Flies*-style struggle for power on the fringes of America's western frontier.

Although Beam's prose sparkles and his narrative moves swimmingly, his overreliance on secondary sources weakens his argument, which is riddled with interpretive holes. Furthermore, Beam rarely fleshes out the motivations of the book's characters, who rarely appear as three-dimensional figures. Everyone, Mormon and non-Mormon, is stumbling about with misplaced desires, faulty assumptions, a drinking problem, and a general inability to do anything good, inspiring, or correct. I am a fan of warts-and-all history, but I become bored with all-is-warts history. It is difficult to gather not only why so many people were devoted to Smith, but also why their neighbors would want to attack them with murderous rage. Did antebellum Illinoisans of all stripes have no choice but to either support or defame delinquent figures with no rhyme or reason?

Other than the chapter on polygamy and Beam's quixotic ventures into exotic topics that add spice to the tale, the bulk of the book is remarkably pro-Mormon. Especially concerning the events surrounding Smith's murder, Beam largely follows the narrative provided by Mormon sources. In the chapters that lead up to Smith's martyrdom, the story line rarely departs from the standard telling in the *Documentary History of the Church*, an account written by Mormon Church authorities in the 1850s. This is ironic: Beam expresses skepticism about religion in general, but gives more trust to reminiscent Mormon sources than most Mormon scholars do these days.

A generous reading of this dynamic is that Beam is after a good story that is cleanly told, provocative, and engaging. In this sense *American Crucifixion* is a success. I found the book an engrossing read that makes the final months of Joseph Smith's life a relevant story for American history and for a general audience. Beam reminds us that religious intolerance is neither a new problem in the United States nor an

easy one to solve.