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Mormon Studies: A Bibliographic Essay

Blair Dee Hodges

Introduction

Most overviews of the rise of Mormon studies begin with the “New Mormon History,” a title minted in 1969 to describe the increasing professionalization of historical scholarship about the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.1 But by the 1960s, academic studies of Mormonism had been under way for decades. Three years before Moses Rischin coined the label “New Mormon History,” historian Leonard J. Arrington chronicled the twentieth-century rise of “Mormon studies,” an academic legacy that was not limited to history.2 Arrington showed that Mormon studies was born in the context of academic professionalization in the social sciences, economics, and what is now called cultural studies. Non-Mormons and Mormons alike had produced articles, dissertations, and books at a variety of non-LDS universities prior to the establishment of Mormon-centric institutions and journals like Brigham Young University Studies (1959), the Mormon History Association (1965), Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought (1965), Exponent II (1974), and the Journal of Mormon History (1974). Arrington demonstrated that the New Mormon History was actually a latecomer to the Mormon studies party. Even so, history came to dominate mid-century approaches to Mormonism.

In 2002, a spotlight on “Latter-day Studies” in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* acknowledged the centrality of history in Mormon studies while recognizing that the field included “not just specialists in American studies or religious history, but social scientists and cultural theorists as well.”³ History still dominates, but Mormon studies has developed into an interdisciplinary field consisting of scholars, publications, university courses, and endowed professorships from a wider variety of academic disciplines.

Arrington’s 1966 article identified a number of considerations that are still being debated, including the problem of insider-versus-outsider perspectives, the necessity of interdisciplinary research, and the constraints placed upon research by religious institutions as well as the academy. Arrington concludes: “Perhaps eventually a Mormon Yearbook can be published that will contribute to the elevation of Mormon studies.”⁴ Arrington believed such a publication could result in “edification and cultural advancement” by “promot[ing] research and writing which will give the Mormon heritage a fuller and more sympathetic hearing.”⁵ Arrington called for something akin to Gustav von Schmoller’s social science–focused publication *Jahrbuch*, which differs in scope from the *Mormon Studies Review* but shares the goal of evaluating, chronicling, and promoting the best academic research.

Given the diversity of academic approaches to Mormonism, perhaps the only consensus in Mormon studies is the acknowledgment that the field is without a unified vision of what it is and where it is headed. This essay calls attention to the most prominent published discussions of the “what, who, where, and how” of Mormon studies. This bibliographic assessment is not intended to be comprehensive or prescriptive; rather, it aims to highlight various questions, problems, and possibilities facing those interested in academic engagement with Mormon studies.

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Questions, problems, possibilities

Historians dominated Mormon studies during the second half of the twentieth century and periodically paused to assess the field’s direction, noting along the way the changes that have flowered in the new century.6 As the New Mormon History has given way to a “New, New Mormon History,” a number of scholars have evaluated past efforts with an eye to improving future scholarship. Grant Underwood’s “Re-visioning Mormon History” (1986)7 praised the “explosion of Mormon history” that followed Arrington’s 1966 essay, but he saw the need for historians to better adhere to “methodological trends in the broader historical profession.” Doing so would help “correct the institutional bias and refine the monolithic interpretations” that had informed the New Mormon History.8 For instance, Underwood prompted scholars to pay attention to regional differences and internal diversity in order to depict the “kaleidoscopic pattern of Mormonisms;”9 adding that special attention should be paid to the contexts in which these Mormonisms developed in order to analyze the ways that wider culture informed, and was being informed by, Mormons. Underwood’s calls have been repeated to the present, suggesting that the field has long had a sense of what is needed but has remained in some ways locked in traditional patterns.

Jan Shipps and Richard Bushman’s 2007 exchange in the Journal of American History also connected the New Mormon History to more recent developments in Mormon studies. Shipps reviewed Bushman’s 2005 biography Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling, calling it “the crowning achievement of the new Mormon history,”10 which is both a strength and

a drawback of the book. She detailed Bushman’s strategy of presenting supernatural elements of the Mormon experience straightforwardly as the participants themselves—believers and unbelievers alike—described them.\(^\text{11}\) While Shipps argued that Bushman’s biography devotes too much space to addressing problems chiefly of importance to apologists and critics, she predicted that current and future graduate students would follow Bushman’s lead by continuing to “leave the provinciality that made so much old Mormon history inward looking.”\(^\text{12}\) Bushman had at least partially succeeded at discussing Mormonism in a way that was less polarizing for Mormons and non-Mormons, although he could not appeal to all. Bushman responded that apologists, critics, and scholars would continue to scrutinize accounts of Mormon origins. He added the proviso that such conversations should integrate the Mormon experience into the wider American experience with special attention to tone: “We will write better if we are less defensive, more open to criticism, more exploratory and venturesous, but even with our inhibitions and parochialisms, we should come to the table with our Mormonism intact.”\(^\text{13}\) He argued against a univocal view of Joseph Smith, called for greater inclusion of Mormon and non-Mormon voices, and invited further “inquiry from many angles.”\(^\text{14}\)

While Shipps was not uncritical of Bushman’s work, her review did not offer prescriptions for an ailing patient. Rather, and in harmony with Bushman, she pointed to the vitality of Mormon studies. Their exchange sparked a roundtable discussion in the *Journal of Mormon History*: “What Will We Do Now That New Mormon History Is Old” (2009).\(^\text{15}\) Organizer Keith A. Erekson described the ten-member roundtable, consisting of

11. This method of including the miraculous in historical accounts without either demanding readers’ acceptance or evoking their disdain is discussed further in Matthew Bowman, “Finding the Presence in Mormon History: An Interview with Susanna Morrill, Richard Lyman Bushman, and Robert Orsi,” *Dialogue* 44/3 (Fall 2011): 174–87.


PhD students and early-career academics, as a “polyphonic expression of a collective research agenda.” Among other topics, participants called for greater inclusion of Joseph Smith–inspired religious movements beyond the Salt Lake–based church; stressed the importance of utilizing Mormonism to inform wider American and international histories, politics, and culture; and invited scholars to push “Mormon historical scholarship in new interdisciplinary, transnational, temporal, comparative, and theoretical directions.”

Repeated calls for interdisciplinarity continued to bear fruit. In a second roundtable published in the *Journal of Mormon History*, six young scholars discussed the topic “New Ways In: Writing Interdisciplinary Mormon History” (2012). They called for more studies focused on Mormon women and children, who often play second fiddle to male hierarchical figures. They also noted that Mormon liturgy is ripe for analysis; that literary studies offer a host of insights for a massive body of Mormon fiction, history, and autobiography; and that “lived religion” (the symbolic and material dimensions of faith) offers avenues ripe for inquiry. Both roundtables—still dominated by historians—nevertheless provide a sample of rich research possibilities and hint that a generation of scholars is poised to answer the long-standing appeals for expansion and diversity.

The articles discussed thus far have focused more on the “what” and “how” more than the “who” or “where” of Mormon studies. With regard to “who,” Joanna Brooks locked on to the long-standing insider/outsider problem in her “Prolegomena to Any Future Mormon Studies” (1997). Brooks wrote explicitly from the perspective of a Mormon scholar who sensed some suspicion from the wider academy about Mormon participation. She described tensions resulting from the perception among

some cosmopolitan circles in the academy that Mormonism entails provincialism. She discouraged Mormon scholars from watering down the Mormon side of things in order to achieve academic respectability, but she also warned against the tendency of some Mormon scholars to play the role of orthodoxy police within the faith: “Collectively and critically examining Mormon culture and staking exclusive claims to ‘Mormon-ness’ are two very different academic enterprises. From one emerges a vital school of thought in Zion, while the other marks turf in Provo [Utah, the location of Brigham Young University].”

Brooks promoted activist-oriented approaches to Mormon studies by inviting Mormon scholars to “step out of your ivory tower and put your shoulder to the wheel,” to see what critiques Mormon beliefs and practices might bring to bear on wider cultural contexts, as well as what wider cultural contexts might have to offer Mormonism in return. She spent little time discussing what role non-Mormon scholars might play in Mormon studies, however. Non-Mormon Massimo Introvigne approaches the insider/outsider problem by critiquing the work of Terryl Givens, one of the most prolific Mormon scholars, in “LDS Apologetics from Oxford?” (2002).

Introvigne called for continued resistance against demands for scholars to adjudicate truth claims and supernatural occurrences. He argued that most scholars are more interested in questions about the “meaning, historical function, and consequences” of elements of Mormon belief than in arguing about whether golden plates really existed.

Two book-length treatments also address insider/outsider dynamics. In the first, Sojourner in the Promised Land (2000), Jan Shipps combined


her experiences as a self-described “insider-outsider” to Mormonism with an overview of Mormon history. Philip Barlow evaluated Shipps’s careful inside/outside methodology in “Jan Shipps and the Mainstreaming of Mormon Studies” (2004). Shipps’s approach requires the researcher to engage sympathetically with Mormonism in order to analyze and describe it, but not to authenticate or debunk its revelations, or to try to change it. This method resonates with Introvigne’s suggested approach. It also bears similarity to Bushman’s, with an important difference. Bushman has also argued that Mormons should come to the table with their Mormonism intact, ready to use Mormonism to critique other perspectives in certain projects. This aspect of his approach is closer to Brooks’s prescription. The second book-length treatment on the insider/outsider problem is Armand Mauss’s Shifting Borders and a Tattered Passport (2012). Mauss’s memoir covered a similar time frame as Shipps’s, which he narrates in order to explore tensions that Mormon academics like him might encounter. Mauss is more direct about problems Mormon scholars might face if their work appears to be critical of the LDS Church. Thus Mauss, Shipps, Introvigne, Bushman, and Brooks offer sympathetic engagements with Mormonism, but they differ by degrees as to the appropriate levels of criticism that Mormon claims can leverage on wider culture or that wider culture can bring to bear on Mormonism.

As the title of Barlow’s essay on Shipps suggests (“Jan Shipps and the Mainstreaming of Mormon Studies”), he devoted much of his attention to the cultural circumstances that contributed to Shipps’s popularity as


an authority on Mormonism within and beyond the academy. Thus, Bar-
low’s essay is useful not only in its evaluation of Shipps and the
insider/outsider problem, but also in its attention to the wider cultural
changes that facilitated the rise of Mormon studies.26 As the twentieth
century turned to the twenty-first, Mormon studies played an increas-
ingly prominent role in academic institutions in Utah and beyond. A
number of published articles have discussed these developments. Dou-
glas J. Davies recounted the development of Mormon studies programs
and conferences during the late 1990s in “Mormon Studies in a European
Setting,” bringing the “where” of Mormon studies into the discussion.27
Davies called attention to some of the practical and political issues that
institutions must consider when becoming involved in Mormon studies.
For example, goodwill must be fostered in the religious community as
well as in the academic community in order to gain enough support to
sustain the scholarship. Such considerations are perhaps most salient in
Utah. Brian Birch discusses the difficulties of establishing courses in
Mormon studies at a public academic institution in Utah in “Between
Scylla and Charybdis: Championing Mormon Studies at Utah Valley
State College.”28 He offers perspective about why Mormon studies may
have been easier (but not necessarily easy) to institutionalize at a non-
Utah school like Claremont Graduate University in California.

Thus, by the time the 2002 Winter Olympic Games arrived at the
doorstep of the LDS Church in Utah, the “what, who, where, and how”


27. Douglas J. Davies, “Mormon Studies in a European Setting,” Dialogue 34/3–4 (Fall,

played a crucial role in promoting Mormon studies in Utah academic institutions, par-
took in two Sunstone Symposium panels on the subject. See Eugene England, “The
Academic Study of Religion: Prospects and Perils,” Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium, 3 Au-
gust 2000; and “Calculated Risk: The Quest for Freedom and Diversity in Utah Higher
Education,” Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium, 4 August 2000. Audio recordings are avail-
able at http://www.eugeneengland.org/bibliography/video.
of Mormon studies had been addressed in various publications. Within the next several years, more university programs and endowed Mormon studies chairs would appear. It was an opportune time for Loyd Ericson, a graduate student at Claremont Graduate University, to offer one of the more systematic portraits of the state of Mormon studies in his article “Where Is the ‘Mormon’ in Mormon Studies?” (2011). Ericson painted an inclusive portrait of Mormon studies that included critics, apologists, non-Mormons, and Mormons. Claremont had established a chair in Mormon studies in 2008 and began publishing the *Claremont Mormon Studies Newsletter* in fall 2009, providing an institutional context in which Ericson could survey the field. The University of Utah's Tanner Humanities Center began publishing its *Mormon Studies Newsletter* in fall 2011. The former includes reflective articles on Mormon studies by students and faculty alongside news and event notifications, while the latter is used to announce lectures, classes, and other Mormon studies events at the University of Utah. Both publications continue to be good resources for announcing conferences and other Mormon studies events.

The most comprehensive overview of recent institutional developments in Mormon studies through 2007 is M. Gerald Bradford’s “The Study of Mormonism: A Growing Interest in Academia.” As Bradford noted, a number of theses and dissertations dealing with Mormon topics were published in the past decade. Two in particular deal directly with Mormon studies. John-Charles Duffy’s “Faithful Scholarship: The Mainstreaming of Mormon Studies and the Politics of Insider Discourse” (2006) related a history of the rise of academic studies of Mormonism within the LDS Church. By outlining some of the fault lines between apologists and

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revisionist-minded Mormons, Duffy highlighted insider/insider problems as much as insider/outsider problems. He proposed that Mormon studies be viewed as a “contact zone” in which a number of parties with competing or sometimes complementary interests can examine Mormonism from a variety of academic and religious perspectives.32

Ronald G. Helfrich Jr.’s “Idols of the Tribes: An Intellectual and Critical History of 19th and 20th Century Mormon Studies” analyzed how the professionalization of various academic fields has contributed to the present state of Mormon studies.33 He argued that scholars and intellectuals have not entirely avoided the polemical edge that has characterized apologetic defenses and critical attacks of Mormonism. To Helfrich, academic studies tend to take at least an implicit stand on the reality of Mormon claims about revelation by attributing the development of the LDS Church to demographic, psychological, economic, political, and cultural forces. He concluded that scholars should remain humble in their conclusions by recognizing the potential reductionism at the heart of any academic approach.

Finally, two Mormon studies “readers,” or anthologies of essays, have been published: Dimensions of Faith, edited by Stephen C. Taysom (2011), and New Perspectives in Mormon Studies, edited by Quincy D. Newell and Eric F. Mason (2013).34 In contrast to popular Catholic studies and Jewish studies readers,35 these Mormon studies readers devote little space to dis-


cussing the development of the field or to considering theoretical or methodological questions. Taysom and Newell describe their collections as exemplary offerings of already-in-progress Mormon studies.36 Two important essays in the final section of Newell and Mason’s collection more directly address the relationship of the Mormon faith to the academy. Eric F. Mason’s “The Saints and the Scrolls: LDS Engagement with Mainstream Dead Sea Scrolls Scholarship and Its Implications” is one of the only published pieces directly engaging the question of how ancient studies fits within Mormon studies.37 Richard Bushman’s “Commencement of Mormon Studies” concludes that while history will continue to attract significant attention in Mormon studies, a “new wave of Mormon studies” is flowing from “all the humanities, the social sciences, and the arts” in an increasing variety of publications, conferences, and institutions.38

Conclusion

Relatively few discussions about what constitutes Mormon studies have been published to date. Most scholars appear to be more interested in pursuing their academic projects than in participating in reflective discussions about the field and its methodologies. Nevertheless, the articles, reviews, roundtables, and books included in this essay provide a sense of the ongoing issues being debated and the direction of the overall field. The LDS Church has also weighed in with positive remarks about Mormon studies, including an announcement on the church’s news site of

36. The Mormon studies readers are more similar to Norman Ravvin and Richard Menkis, eds., The Canadian Jewish Studies Reader (Markham, Ontario: Red Deer Press, 2004), which presents articles about aspects of Canadian Judaism in order to call attention to research possibilities that the already-established field of Jewish studies is underutilizing.
the recently created Mormon studies chair at the University of Virginia. Matthew Bowman identified church-directed efforts like the Joseph Smith Papers Project, as well as non-Mormon John Turner’s biography of Brigham Young, both of which drew heavily on the church’s extensive archival materials as being “signs of a new openness” to academic inquiry by the LDS Church, which has helped fuel financial and academic support for Mormon studies. Additionally, over the past decade, students and scholars have taken to the blogosphere—or the “Bloggernacle” in Mormondom—to raise concerns or offer descriptions and prescriptions about the state of Mormon studies. A representative sample of online discussions is available at the Maxwell Institute Blog.

Whether in print or online, discussions about the “what, who, where, and how” of Mormon studies will undoubtedly continue to map and shape Mormon studies while highlighting the stakes involved for scholars, students, and academic and religious institutions. As evidenced by the androcentric and Eurocentric makeup of these representative discussions, more women’s and international voices are needed to contribute to the ongoing explorations of the borders and intersections of Mormon studies. Despite this relative homogeneity, the present essay also suggests that Mormon studies is not a monolithic field. At present, Mormon studies is conducted among an informal community of scholars who bring a variety of academic approaches to bear on Mormonism in order to better understand the faith, and religion more generally, by attending to the ways Mormonism informs—and is informed by—wider cultural, theological, and political contexts. The present state of Mormon studies portends a bright and vibrant future.


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