Jedediah S. Rogers, ed., *The Council of Fifty: A Documentary History*

Reviewed by Adam Jortner
source texts from the Book of Mormon and the Book of Abraham to the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

Donald Lopez’s biography of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is potentially an intriguing and enjoyably provocative read for those interested in Mormon studies. It is at very least creative and unexpected: one of the most prolific scholars of Asian religions and an eminent specialist in Tibetan Buddhism explaining one of the most prominent Tibetan texts in the West through a connection to Mormon history. I suggest that Lopez’s use of the Book of Mormon illustrates one facet of the advance of Mormon studies from a minor academic interest—historically characterized by apologetics, devotionalism, or debunking—to a viable specialization within religious studies. Mormon studies scholars could profitably follow Lopez’s example and thus propel this advance by welcoming conversations with specialists from other fields and by enthusiastically engaging their forays into Mormon topics.

Greg Wilkinson (PhD, religious studies, University of Iowa; MA, religious studies, Arizona State University) is an assistant professor of Religious Education at Brigham Young University. He is currently studying modern editions of the Buddhist canon.


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MORMON SCHOLARS AND CONSPIRACY THEORISTS have been salivating over the publication of *The Council of Fifty: A Documentary History*—a formidable collection of primary sources edited by Jedediah S. Rogers.
The recondite Council of Fifty has been shrouded in mystery ever since its founding by Joseph Smith Jr. in 1844. Consequently, both scholarly and popular thinking on the Council has tended towards terms like “shrouded in mystery” and other clichés more associated with MonsterQuest or Jesse Ventura than with nineteenth-century religion. As Rogers writes, the apprehension of some American voters in 2012 surely stemmed in part from the “rumors about a frontier shadow government” spawned by the secrecy of a Mormon organization that went defunct a century before Mitt Romney campaigned for office (p. xvii).

Indeed, discussions of the Council easily and frequently run into claims of theocracy. For conspiracy theorists, such a term usually ends all debate; for scholars of the Mormon experience, the word opens the conversation. Rogers’s eloquent introduction never directly defines theocracy, but it nevertheless gives readers a tidy overview of the activities of the Council and their blending of religious and political imperatives. The Council’s “ultimate purpose was to establish a worldly kingdom that would usurp all others and receive Jesus at his Second Coming,” Rogers explains. In that sense, the Council was “the embryo kingdom of God upon the earth,” in the phrasing of one Council member, and would, in Rogers’s words, “grow until it achieved its destiny of world domination” (pp. 2–3). In the next breath, however, Rogers reminds readers that these grand dreams never came to pass; after half a decade of active work governing the Latter-day Saint exodus from Illinois and organizing the theoretical State of Deseret, the Council became “non-functional.” Despite a brief renaissance under John Taylor, the Council never again played a significant role in LDS history, and it was certainly not the “shadow government” of Brigham Young’s Utah, as some have claimed (p. 12). Its ultimate disappearance, of course, should not obscure its importance or its merging of secular and religious power. It was intended as a “bridge to the Millennium,” a divinely instituted group tasked with reshaping the networks of power and community. Initially this directive appears to have meant campaigning for Joseph Smith for president; later, it involved legislating moral behavior, economic standards, and other legal matters for Deseret.

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It is impossible to disperse the clouds of uncertainty surrounding the Council, at least until the church releases the documents to the public, but Rogers has made the most thorough effort yet by assembling this volume. Rogers scraped together what might previously have been considered odds and ends—references to the Council, its membership, and its actions—scattered through dozens of different sources. Everything in the History is available elsewhere; these are not secret documents or WikiLeaks esoterica, but rather the diaries, reminiscences, journals, and other documents relating to the debates, decisions, and thoughts of Council members. Although the official minutes of the Nauvoo council are scheduled for publication by the LDS Church, they were not available to Rogers. Rogers proceeded without them, using transcriptions of the minutes found elsewhere. For the most part, however, the volume consists of entries from diaries, letters, and journals that recapitulate or summarize events and discussions from Council meetings. The resulting multiplicity of voices offers a rich documentary vein.

For example, the History includes a transcript of the minutes of an 1882 Council meeting on the Edmunds Bill, as well as journal entries describing the meeting from Wilford Woodruff, Franklin D. Richards, and John Henry Smith (pp. 284–95). Readers can therefore examine the rough recap of the discussion as well as what some members thought of the speeches and their relative importance. In cases where the minutes are unavailable—as for the April 25, 1844, conclave at an unidentified location in Nauvoo—readers can peruse the various versions of the meeting as recorded by participants, in the above case Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, Parley Pratt, and George Miller (pp. 48–50). For Mormon history enthusiasts outside the state of Utah—for whom even a copy of Wilford Woodruff’s diary can be hard to find—this collection is a welcome addition to the repository of printed LDS primary sources.

Professional scholars may be disappointed in the presentation of the documents. Rogers provides an omnibus list of sources at the beginning of the volume, but he also attributes the sources in gray scale at the end of each selection. This organization results in some cumbersome flipping back and forth, especially when the selected documents are
several pages long. The quotations are also arranged chronologically by the event described, not by the date of the document. Thus on occasion events remembered thirty or more years after the fact are placed next to primary sources recorded on the day of the event in question, a schema that gives some historians headaches. Moreover, some of the quotations are quite brief—a sentence or even less—which raises the question of why Rogers bothered to include them. For nonprofessionals, however, these organizational problems will seem little more than a trifle.

Like almost any historical discussion of the Council of Fifty, this volume is haunted by the work of Klaus Hansen, who wrote the foreword, and D. Michael Quinn, whose transcriptions of LDS Church materials provided the documentary base for some of its texts. “In cases where I was able to verify Quinn’s transcripts against the originals,” Rogers notes in the bibliography, “they proved accurate” (p. 394). Because Hansen and Quinn worked without the Council of Fifty minutes, some of what they wrote was speculative, which in turn has generated a historiography and public discussion freighted in uncertainty. “Possible,” “alleged,” “supposed,” and the aforementioned “shrouded in mystery”—these are the terms of the discussion involving the Council of Fifty. But no more: Rogers’s volume has collected the works of the members of the Council themselves, who in turn were mostly open about their objectives and operations. Documents from the 1880s reveal that the Council, with President Taylor, chose the territorial delegate to Congress and instructed members “as to who to vote for” (pp. 307–8). Forty years previous, the Council played a central role in Smith’s presidential campaign, according to an 1855 letter of George Miller: “It was further determined in council that all the elders should set out on missions to all the States, get up electoral tickets, and do everything in our power to have Joseph [Smith] elected President” (p. 49). These documents have been used before, by Hansen, Quinn, and others. Their collection and presentation, however, especially in a volume largely free of an interpretive or argumentative structure, should permit historians of all stripes—professional and amateur, Saint and Gentile—to lay aside the language of caution or accusations of unreliability and fully integrate the Council into the history of the Mormon experience.
Yet if historians must jettison their hesitant tone, they must probably lose any subtext of subterfuge. If anything, the History reveals the banality of theocracy. Much of the Council’s time in the 1840s was spent writing letters to Congress and governors; from 1848 to 1850, there is a surprising amount about the care of cattle. Yet such were the concerns of the Council, acting as a de facto government in Salt Lake. The Latter-day Saints won their Rocky Mountain fastness, but running their kingdom involved a terrific amount of the day-to-day upkeep familiar to any local politician.

Indeed, these pedantic moments make for some of the best reading in the volume. Controlling cattle—“many of which were perishing from cold & Hunger”—in 1849 drove several members of the Council to despair. The Council’s committee on cattle threatened to disband, prompting a response by Brigham Young. The president declared that while natural feelings were to let the owner and their cattle “go to Hell . . . duty Says if they will not take care of their cat[t]le, we must do it for them. We are to be saviours of men in these last days” (p. 139). The committee continued its work. If Young was, in John Turner’s phrase, “the Great Basin’s theocratic sovereign,”¹ that title seems just a little smaller when considering that Young needed to ply his close associates with a millennial harangue just to get them to secure a basic food source.

The arrangement of the documents in the History allows for numerous such contextualizations that should question the emphasis if not the content of scholarly discourse on territorial Utah. Turner’s characterization of Young as a theocrat in Brigham Young: Pioneer Prophet, for example, is followed by Turner’s brilliantly argued discussion of the fate of Ira E. West, a Saint accused of theft. Young wanted West executed; the Council eventually agreed to sell West at auction. (There were no buyers.) There is no doubt the events occurred, nor is there any doubt of the egregiously violent language of Young and the Council. “I want their cursed heads to be cut off that they may atone for their Sins,” said one Council member (p. 161).

It is easy to read these 1849 pronouncements, as Turner implies, as initial steps down a road that eventually led to Mountain Meadows. Yet West’s case occupies barely two paragraphs in the Council of Fifty documents and is embedded in a much longer and more technical series of directives concerning fencing, collection of fines, canal construction, mail delivery, and bounties to be paid for hunted animals, including 530 magpies (pp. 157–64). The extraordinary vehemence of Utah justice was part of a larger bureaucratic regime; punishment was part of the problem of government. If mid-century Utah was a theocracy—and it was, by most definitions of that term—then the documents contained herein have a great deal to tell us about both Utah and theocracy. It is tempting to interpret theocrats of all kinds through their most extreme pronouncements, to see in the fate of West the explanation for LDS control over Utah: the iron grip of retributive justice keeping frightened Mormons in thrall, Mountain Meadows a teleological framework for Utah history. It is harder, but perhaps more valuable, to try to interpret the prosecution of West (and the massacre) in the context of dealing with delivering the mail and feeding the cattle. Rogers’s collection should encourage the academy to try a little of the latter approach.

The LDS Church has scheduled the Nauvoo minutes for publication as part of the Joseph Smith Papers. Yet as Hansen writes in the foreword, “We don’t yet know what the contents of the minutes might be, but . . . the church’s editors will find themselves hard-pressed to produce anything as thorough and fine” as the History. Rogers has compiled a fair number of the minutes, but more importantly, he has set those minutes in context, showing how Council members interpreted their mission and how exactly they put their decisions into practice. This History is not a comprehensive account of the Council, but it is a nigh-comprehensive look at the world of the Council and its ideology. It is a vision of “Mormon political aspirations before Americanization” (p. 15)—a sober collection of the fierce and hallowed ideology that established hegemony in a Rocky Mountain homeland. No discussion of Mormon theocracy or organization can be complete without it, and it deserves a place on the shelf of every serious scholar of the Latter-day Saint experience.