



Insights: The Newsletter of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship

Volume 28 | Number 3

Article 5

January 2008

The Joseph Smith Papers Project

Ronald K. Esplin

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/insights>



Part of the [Mormon Studies Commons](#), and the [Religious Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Esplin, Ronald K. (2008) "The Joseph Smith Papers Project," *Insights: The Newsletter of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship*: Vol. 28: No. 3, Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/insights/vol28/iss3/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Insights: The Newsletter of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

It is also true, however, that some writers and editors have been refreshingly fair minded. “I am of the opinion,” wrote William Owen, “that . . . the Golden Bible will bear a very good comparison with the Holy Bible. I find nothing in the former inconsistent with the doctrines or opposed to a belief in the latter; on the contrary, the one seems to corroborate the other” (New York *Free Enquirer*, Sept. 10, 1831).

“This collection offers an important perspective on what early missionaries were hearing—and saying—about the Book of Mormon,” observes Roper. “It’s fascinating to see the variety of opinions expressed. The Book of Mormon was the object of considerable discussion before it was even published.”

Along with being accessible and searchable, the electronic database will also be easily updated. “You can never be sure that you have everything,” says Roper. “We will add new documents—and make corrections to existing ones—whenever needed.”

Current plans call for “Book of Mormon Publications” to be posted as one of the Harold B.

Lee Library’s digital collections beginning early autumn of this year. Other digital collections at BYU (accessible online at www.lib.byu.edu/online.html) include such diverse electronic resources as the sermons of John Donne, the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, and a collection of Mormon missionary diaries. The Harold B. Lee Library electronic collection is directed by Scott Eldredge. As noted on the library Web site, “The digital library is a combination of unique collections and services that support learning, teaching, course development, and research and are directed specifically at supporting the institutional objectives of the university through the acquisition of electronically published information, the creation of reformatted digitized resources, and by providing access points to a repository of digital materials.”

Notes

1. Keith W. Perkins, “Francis W. Kirkham: A ‘New Witness’ for the Book of Mormon,” *Ensign*, July 1984, 53.
2. Emphasis in original.

The Joseph Smith Papers Project

Editor’s Note: While *The Joseph Smith Papers* will be published by the Church History Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Maxwell Institute will benefit vastly from its volumes. Andrew H. Hedges, a volume co-editor with the Joseph Smith Papers Project and newly appointed editor of the *Journal of Book of Mormon and Restoration Scripture*, indicates that the Joseph Smith Papers Project will “result in a huge amount of information about the creation and textual history of the Doctrine and Covenants” and will provide “a treasure trove of insights into other restoration scriptures.” The anticipated publication of *The Joseph Smith Papers* was one of the factors the administrators at the Maxwell Institute considered when they decided to expand the format of the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* to incorporate further studies on restoration scriptures. Hedges hopes *The Joseph Smith Papers* will promote studies into the development and context of the D&C and other scriptures and that scholars will consider publishing their findings in the pages of the *Journal*. (More information about the *Journal of Book of Mormon and Restoration Scripture* will appear later this year.)

* * *

The Joseph Smith Papers Project seeks to do for Joseph Smith what has been done (and is being done) for George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin and other important early

Americans: Make their papers easily accessible and more intelligible by publishing them in a carefully prepared, comprehensive scholarly edition. Historians rely on documents to gain insight into the facts, relationships, and other realities of the past, the raw materials from which they construct their narratives and interpretations. The task of scholars functioning as documentary editors is to help readers and other scholars understand the documents without getting too much in the way themselves, leaving others to construct their own narratives from these (and other) documentary resources.

The task of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, then, is to make available complete and reliable texts of all surviving Joseph Smith documents and present them with supporting information, including historical context, that help make them as intelligible to modern readers as they would have been to participants in the history they document. The editors are preparing and publishing not histories of Joseph Smith or early Latter-day Saint history but the “raw materials” from which such histories can be written. Our task is not to “connect the dots” or present a narrative

so much as to provide information that will allow others to do so. Though stuffed with 19th-century documents, neither will our set of reference volumes be a documentary history, bringing together everything about Joseph Smith—but a documentary edition of papers that were authored by Joseph Smith, or in some cases “owned” by him (as with incoming correspondence), or that were created by those working under his direction.

Today’s scholars of American religious history recognize Smith as a significant part of the 19th-century American religious landscape and acknowledge the importance of having access to his papers. This was explicit in the blind reviews of our project solicited by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) before they granted our application for endorsement. Every reviewer noted the importance of Joseph Smith. The main question, then, was not the importance of the project, which all agreed on, but whether or not we had demonstrated that we were up to the task of doing professional, credible work.

And we are up to that task. These volumes will meet the standards set by the NHPRC and will be works that scholars can rely on and use with confidence. In addition to capable scholars editing each volume, we have a panel of the best Latter-day Saint scholars with expertise on the Joseph Smith period of our history helping to enrich our work and ensure accuracy. Moreover, our project has had and will have more peer review than most projects of this nature and has benefited from the suggestions of many experts. We have consulted with and invited detailed critiques from nationally known non-LDS scholars, several of whom will read each volume before publication.

One scholar who provided a blind review of our project for the NHPRC concluded that the project is important on two levels. It will serve to illuminate the life and times of a major American religious figure, a benefit for all who would understand the religious history of our country. But the work will also, this reviewer concluded, serve as a source of inspiration to Latter-day Saints. He did not see these outcomes as incompatible but urged “extreme caution” in putting an official stamp of approval on the one without implying any endorsement of the other.

We do not seek any such stamp of approval, official or otherwise, on “the religious validity

of Joseph Smith’s life and work” (to quote the reviewer). Indeed, the goal of the project is not so much to affirm Smith’s life or work as to present the surviving records that will help us all to better understand them. Fundamentally, rather than building a particular case, we are after insight and understanding of the man, his work, his world. We see no need to protect him and his reputation from himself, even if that were possible. Convinced as we are that both scholars and Latter-day Saints will be well-served by a comprehensive scholarly edition of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, we have set ourselves the task of presenting the full record in such a way as to be as accessible and intelligible as possible. Nothing less would be worthy of our efforts as scholars or worthy of the man. ■

by Ronald K. Esplin

Managing Editor, The Joseph Smith Papers
condensed from full-length article found on
www.josephsmithpapers.org

INSIGHTS

Paula W. Hicken, Jacob D. Rawlins, *Editors*

A Publication of

THE
NEAL A. MAXWELL INSTITUTE
FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP
M. Gerald Bradford, *Executive Director*

Academic Council

M. Gerald Bradford, S. Kent Brown, Morgan Davis,
John Gee, Carl Griffin, Kristian Heal, Daniel C. Peterson

Publications Department

Alison V. P. Coutts, *Director*
Donald L. Brugger, Paula W. Hicken,
Larry E. Morris, Jacob D. Rawlins, Shirley S. Ricks

The Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship encourages and supports research on the Book of Mormon, the Book of Abraham, the Bible, other ancient scripture, and related subjects. The Maxwell Institute publishes and distributes titles in these areas for the benefit of scholars and interested Latter-day Saint readers.

Primary research interests at the Maxwell Institute include the history, language, literature, culture, geography, politics, and law relevant to ancient scripture. Although such subjects are of secondary importance when compared with the spiritual and eternal messages of scripture, solid research and academic perspectives can supply certain kinds of useful information, even if only tentatively, concerning many significant and interesting questions about scripture.

The Maxwell Institute makes reports about this research available widely, promptly, and economically. These publications are peer-reviewed to ensure that scholarly standards are met. The proceeds from the sale of these materials are used to support further research and publications.

