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LDS Scholar, Scientist Weigh In on Talk Radio DNA Debate

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Insights

A WINDOW ON THE ANCIENT WORLD VOLUME 26 | 2006

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FARMS Review Answers Critics, Sizes Up Scholarship

At 500 pages, the new *FARMS Review* (vol. 17, no. 2) nearly bursts its binding with items of interest for anyone desiring to be well-informed on Mormon studies. The coverage ranges from Lehi's encampments in Arabia and the resurgence of the all-but-dead Spalding theory to Jewish-Mormon relations, creation *ex nihilo*, and the Egyptian Hor Book of Breathings.

Reported below are four comprehensive essays bearing on the "countercult" movement. As is customary in the *Review*, they render trenchant appraisals as well as offer much in the way of historical insight and original research that interested readers will want to plumb in their entirety.

The Spalding Theory Redux

In a lengthy review of the 2005 book *Who Really Wrote the Book of Mormon? The Spalding Enigma*, Matthew Roper critiques this latest attempt to explain the Book of Mormon as a fabrication deriving from "Manuscript Found," an unpublished

novel by Pennsylvania minister Solomon Spalding. Promoted in 1834 with the publication of E. D. Howe's book *Mormonism Unveiled*, this theory claims that in writing the Book of Mormon, former Campbellite preacher Sidney Rigdon based the historical portions of the book on Spalding's story and then added the religious content himself—all as part of a conspiracy with Joseph Smith to make money by selling a purported divinely revealed scriptural record from ancient America. The theory lost steam in 1884 when an original Spalding manuscript (known today as "Manuscript Story") surfaced but proved to bear no direct relation to the Book of Mormon.

Die-hard advocates of the Spalding theory have clung to the ad hoc idea of a hypothetical second Spalding manuscript. The authors of *The Spalding Enigma* give new life to this theory, Roper notes, "contending . . . that other critics such as [Fawn] Brodie have wrongly dismissed the Spalding theory as a viable naturalistic explanation." These same authors argue that a large body of evidence for the theory has accumulated over the years and must

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LDS Scholar, Scientist Weigh In on Talk Radio DNA Debate

On 23 February 2006 BYU professor Daniel C. Peterson and DNA scientist John M. Butler were interviewed on the Hugh Hewitt radio program concerning DNA and the Book of Mormon. One week earlier, the *Los Angeles Times* had run a front-page story on how human DNA studies contradict the Book of Mormon because they suggest an Asian ancestry for people native to the Americas; and on that same day the *Times* reporter, William Lobdell, was a guest on Hewitt's program.

Peterson, director of METI and editor-in-chief of the *FARMS Review*, which has published key scholarly studies on the DNA question (see 15/2, 2003), fielded questions about ancient American population size and empirical evidence that supports the Book of Mormon's claim to be an ancient text. Butler, a research chemist at the National Institute of Standards and Technology and leading forensic DNA scientist, outlined the problems of making inferences from broad DNA studies that did not use a reliable genetic marker as a calibration point.

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stitute the real locus of action in coming years.” As a de facto defender of the faith and “first responder” who monitors the currents of criticism with a view to marshaling a resounding scholarly response when needed, Peterson sees beyond the ignorable seething rants on Web message boards and the irritating pseudo-scholarship of dissident publications to the rising tide of elite secularism spilling over from Europe. This ingrained intellectual bias against all things religious, along with a disdain for American culture and tradition, makes Mormonism a target.

“Secular anti-Mormonism is doing real damage to many fragile testimonies [in Europe],” Peterson writes, “and an adequate response has still not materialized. This is a challenge that apologists in Europe itself but also in the church’s American home base urgently need to address.” One repercussion is seen in the media, where liberal journalists tend to be antipathetic toward mainstream Christianity and the politically conservative Mormon church—an adversarial stance that Peterson sees echoed daily in anti-Mormon blogs and publications. He argues in philosophical terms that critics of the Church have no coherent, objective basis for criticism since, for example, they presume to be arbiters of truth and right while rejecting the notion of a moral standard for judgment, a position that is logically self-refuting. Peterson remarks on the bleakness of the secular, naturalistic viewpoint and concludes that the

Church fares quite well on the real crux of the debate: the reality of First Vision and the authenticity of the Book of Mormon.

Much More

This number of the *Review* contains several other contributions that round out its sweeping coverage. Ray L. Huntington appraises S. Kent Brown’s *Voices from the Dust: Book of Mormon Insights*, Richard Dilworth Rust looks at James T. Duke’s *The Literary Masterpiece Called the Book of Mormon*, Jeffrey R. Chadwick brings his archaeological training to bear on George Potter and Richard Wellington’s *Lehi in the Wilderness*, Boyd Jay Petersen draws on his own close association with the Hugh Nibley family to question the accuracy of Martha Beck’s *Leaving the Saints: How I Lost the Mormons and Found My Faith*, Blake T. Ostler casts a critical eye on Paul Copan and William Craig’s studies on creation *ex nihilo*, Israeli scholar Raphael Jospe encourages Jewish-Mormon dialogue while noting similarities and differences in belief, Royal Skousen applies his experience in linguistics and textual criticism to recent work on the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible, and Kerry Muhlestein sizes up the content and scholarly value of Michael D. Rhodes’s translation and commentary on the Hor Book of Breathings.

To view this issue of the *FARMS Review* online or to purchase a copy, please visit the Maxwell Institute Web site (maxwellinstitute.byu.edu). 

DNA Debate cont. from page 1

Butler cited a 2003 study that found that Icelanders’ documented ancestors living only 150 years ago could not be detected based on Y-chromosome or mitochondrial DNA tests. “So . . . why would we expect to see large amounts of Middle Eastern DNA from a people who . . . migrated to the Americas 2,600 years ago?” Butler emphasized. If there is no reliable genetic marker for a source population (the case with Lehi’s group), there is no calibration point, and the results of DNA tests are inconclusive: the fact remains that a group of people can vanish without a genetic trace. And, of

course, as Hewitt observed, “the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.”

The transcript of this interview can be accessed at <http://www.radioblogger.com/archives/february06.html#022306> (to get to the precise segment in the lengthy transcript, search on “The other side of the Book of Mormon DNA debate”). For more on Butler’s views concerning the applicability of DNA studies to the Book of Mormon, see his article “Addressing Questions Surrounding the Book of Mormon and DNA Research” (posted at http://farms.byu.edu/publications/dna/ButlerBofMandDNA_Feb2006.php). 