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# Insights

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## Library of Congress Hosts Academic Conference on Joseph Smith

In recognition of the bicentennial of the Prophet Joseph Smith's birth, the Library of Congress, in Washington DC, hosted an academic conference on 6–7 May 2005 titled "The Worlds of Joseph Smith." Carried internationally via webcast, the event featured 17 scholars (nearly evenly divided between Latter-day Saints and those of other faiths) who examined Joseph Smith's theological contributions and evaluated the claim that the church he founded is on track to becoming a world religion.

"Our hope in this conference is to better understand Joseph's life and mission—to position him, to the degree we can, within the larger framework of American spirituality and world religions," said Robert L. Millet, professor of ancient scripture at Brigham Young University, in introductory remarks.

The following report covers the first three sessions of the conference; a report of the remaining two sessions will appear in a subsequent issue of this newsletter.

### Joseph Smith in His Own Time

Richard L. Bushman, an emeritus professor of history at Columbia University, presented the first paper, "Joseph Smith's Many Histories." He noted that "Joseph Smith assumes the character of the history selected for him" and argued that critics have failed to plumb his depths because they shrink his historical context. "Broadening the historical context increases appreciation of the man," he said. Bushman traced the Prophet's struggle for self-understanding and explained that after Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon, his earlier marvelous experiences took on clearer meaning and import and his confidence soared as he came to recognize his prophethood.

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## Lehi's Journey of Faith Topic of FARMS Documentary

FARMS has teamed with award-winning Latter-day Saint filmmaker Peter Johnson to produce a documentary on Lehi and company's route from Jerusalem to the New World.

Based on the most recent research, the 90-minute DVD documentary will feature Latter-day Saint scholars commenting on proposed sites for the party's first base camp near the Red Sea; Nahom, where Ishmael was buried; and Bountiful, the fertile coastal locale where Nephi directed the building of his ship. The documentary will also feature the latest findings on Lehi's ocean voyage and explore candidates for Book of Mormon sites in Mesoamerica.

"Since I was first introduced to Peter Johnson, I have come to appreciate both his superb abilities and the skills of the filming crew who accompanied us on location in the Middle East," said S. Kent Brown, the director of Ancient Studies at Brigham Young University and the lead historical consultant on the documentary. "In my opinion, this film embodies not only the best of scholarship on the trek of Lehi and Sariah but also the finest in artistic presentation."


Johnson previously worked as an executive producer with the Audiovisual Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and before that as director of the BYU Motion Picture Studio, which under his direction became one of the top-rated university film studios in the world. He

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commandment of god. This priesthood is also to remain upon the earth until, the Last remnant of time. (p. 244)

As with all other documents in the collection, this one is reproduced as it was originally recorded. In addition, each document is accompanied by an endnote that offers complete bibliographic information on the source (in this case the journal of Reuben Miller, which is housed in the Family and Church History Department Archives). A concluding bibliography provides details on articles pub-

lished in *BYU Studies* relating to many important events in early church history.

The authors of the chapters in *Opening the Heavens* are Dean C. Jessee, James B. Allen, John W. Welch, Brian Q. Cannon (with the *BYU Studies* staff), Alexander L. Baugh, Steven C. Harper, and Lynne Watkins Jorgensen. By compiling, transcribing, and carefully annotating hundreds of important documents, the authors and editors have produced a rare volume that will prove invaluable for many years to come to both general readers and scholars. 

## Joseph Smith *cont. from page 1*

“As we address the meaning of Joseph Smith in the 21st century, such complex interweavings of experience, text, and history must figure in our narratives,” Bushman said. He then emphasized the need to examine Joseph Smith’s history in light of his own self-understanding. “His mind ranged far beyond his own time and place, and we will have to follow Joseph if we are to understand. A small history will not account for such a large man,” Bushman concluded.

Responding to Bushman’s paper, Robert V. Remini, an emeritus professor of history at the University of Illinois at Chicago and author of the 2002 book *Joseph Smith*, called Smith “the quintessential American” and Mormonism a religion that Americans “ought to be proud of.” Remini, who is not a Latter-day Saint, said that the Book of Mormon is a document in the long tradition of America’s founding documents from the Mayflower Compact to the Bill of Rights, giving Mormonism a clear and lasting identity that other American religions of the time lacked.

Richard T. Hughes, professor of religion at Pepperdine University and a specialist in 19th-century-American restoration movements, responded to Bushman’s paper by comparing Joseph Smith to Alexander Campbell. They both had a restoration vision but differed in how they implemented it. As a “child of the Enlightenment,” Campbell had no notion that God spoke to people through direct revelation, but rather through the

Bible, Hughes said. In contrast, Smith, more of a romantic than a rationalist, fused the two worlds of American and biblical culture in “a profound act of creative genius.” Though not a Latter-day Saint, Hughes agreed with Bushman that “any attempt to understand Joseph Smith exclusively in terms of his American setting is bound to fail.”

The next respondent, Grant Underwood, a BYU professor of history, advised caution in doing comparative studies that exaggerate similarities and urged historians to be immersed in extant sources. “In doing transnational comparisons, we must ever keep our feet firmly planted in Joseph Smith’s own time. . . . The more the cultural as well as verbal language of Joseph Smith is understood, in all of its depth and complexity, the more nuanced and compelling will be the comparative histories that are attached to the Prophet.”

## Joseph Smith and the Recovery of Past Worlds

In opening remarks in the second session, Noel B. Reynolds, a BYU professor of political science and until recently the executive director of ISPART, noted that until 1829 none of the many reformers who undertook to reestablish the original teachings and practices of Jesus Christ had produced ancient texts in the biblical tradition. Early converts to the restored Church of Christ saw the Book of Mormon (and the other ancient texts that also came through Joseph Smith) as “clear evidence that [Joseph Smith] was sent by God in these latter days to restore his lost

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## Joseph Smith cont. from page 5

teachings, practices, and authority that were necessary to prepare the world for the second coming of Jesus Christ,” Reynolds said. “While these claims have been soundly resisted by traditional Christians from the beginning, a growing body of serious scholars is convinced that these texts are in fact credible as ancient texts, and most of the alternative theories which have arisen from the early years have not found strong scholarly support in recent years.”

University of Richmond English professor Terryl L. Givens, author of *The Latter-day Saint Experience in America* (2004), addressed the topic “Joseph Smith: Prophecy, Process, and Plentitude.” A Latter-day Saint, he described how Joseph Smith challenged religious orthodoxy by revealing a “gospel plentitude” that contradicted notions of biblical sufficiency and collapsed the metaphysical space between God and man. “His major work was not, or not only, the correction or enunciation of particular theological principles,” Givens noted, “but the complete reconceptualization of the scope and sweep of gospel parameters themselves.” Something else is needed to understand Joseph Smith’s legacy than the development of critical tools and disciplinary sophistication, he said. “It may be that only with the passage of 200 years, or perhaps more, will we have enough distance from the career of Joseph Smith to adequately assess his contributions. . . . One simply has to step back from a canvas as large as the one he painted.”

Responding first to Givens’s paper was Margaret Barker, a recognized authority on the Old Testament and a Methodist preacher from England. She focused on the question of how the Book of Mormon measures up to its claimed roots in the ancient Near East. “If the wickedness in Jerusalem mentioned in the first book of Nephi was Josiah’s temple purges,” Barker said, “we should expect to find information relevant to Mormon tradition in texts outside the Bible. And we do.” She went on to discuss lost scripture, the absence of archaeological support for much of the history in the Old Testament, and differences in various versions of the earliest biblical texts.

Among other interesting parallels, Barker noted that an ancient text discovered in Egypt in 1945 describes the tree of life as beautiful, fiery, and having white grapes. Such mention of white fruit does not exist in any other ancient source she knows of except the Book of Mormon (see 1 Nephi 8:11). She sees other connections between the tree of life visions therein and ancient Asherah/Wisdom traditions: “The revelation to Joseph Smith was the exact ancient wisdom symbolism intact and almost certainly as it was known in 600 BCE.”

The next respondent to Givens’s paper was John E. Clark, a professor of anthropology at BYU and a prominent Mesoamerican archaeologist. He emphasized that believers and critics alike who inflate Joseph Smith’s abilities ignore the most compelling evidence of the Book of Mormon’s authenticity—Smith’s unfamiliarity with its contents. “Many things we now most cherish about the book were simply unknowable in 1830,” he said. Of a large body of relatively recent findings supporting the book’s claims to ancient origins, Clark’s paper focused on evidence of place, time, and population.

He showed a graph that plotted the status of evidence for and against the authenticity of the Book of Mormon over time. Since 1900 the “book as fiction” line has been steadily dropping while the “book as history” line moves up as new archaeological evidence comes to light. Mesoamerica was clearly the most densely populated spot in the Americas, with an “order of magnitude [in the millions] that supports the plausibility of Book of Mormon demography.” Comparing the Jaredites with the lowland Olmecs, two ancient peoples that disappeared from the scene at the same time and share many other characteristics, Clark said, “The correlation is stunning.”

Among many other Book of Mormon claims confirmed since 1900, Clark listed steel swords and metal plates from the Near East and, in the New World, barley, cement, highways, military regalia, assorted weapons, Hebrew words, and evidence of reading and writing—findings that “constitute a strong and even compelling case that the Book of Mormon is an ancient Mesoamerican record,” he said.

John W. Welch, the Robert K. Thomas Professor of Law at BYU and founder of FARMS, agreed with Givens that the texts restored through Joseph Smith must submit to examination as the historical records they purport to be. But who will judge the merits of the evidence, and on what basis? he asked. He noted many compelling evidences (e.g., chiasmus in Alma 36, some 40 elements in the Book of Abraham that are not found in the Bible but turn up in obscure Jewish and Islamic traditions, an inscribed silver scroll dating to Lehi's time, a seventh-century-BC altar in Yemen bearing the name *Nahom*) but emphasized that not all the evidence is in and that arguments can always be made on both sides. "Good science takes time. We need to wait for conclusive answers that still evade us. Indeed, in all matters of religious faith, important evidence will always be lacking," he said.

Responding to Givens's point that historians might profitably focus on the process rather than the product of Joseph Smith's thought, Welch identified 10 "dynamics" that figured into the Prophet's revelatory process. He concluded by discussing Joseph Smith's unprecedented claim to priesthood authority and how his concept of lines of authority attaches him more to the past than to his own time. "More potent in the minds of his followers than his truth claims was the attraction of his [priesthood] power claims," Welch said. "It would seem that nothing was more important to Joseph's perception of his own mission than the recovery of lost priesthood authority. . . . He saw the past as the repository of divine powers, and the recovery of that authority has everything to do with what the past meant to the essential Joseph Smith."

### Joseph Smith in a Personal World

The third session, on the personal dimensions of Joseph Smith's life and legacies, was a special opportunity for participants to hear Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles speak on the importance of revelation in the church and in people's personal lives. "A major focus in my personal view of Joseph Smith is his role as a prophet and his teachings on the reality of revelation," Elder Oaks said. He noted that Joseph Smith taught that he was directed by

a continuing flow of revelation throughout his life and that everyone could enjoy personal revelation in their own lives.

Revelation is the principal difference between Latter-day Saints and those of other faiths, Elder Oaks said. "This is not a technicality; for us it is big. It is the foundation of our church doctrine and governance, and it is also fundamental to personal conversion, personal decision making, and how we understand and apply the inspired texts we call scriptures." Joseph Smith, like George Washington, "got the big things right" because his mind was "uncluttered with sophisticated intellectual preconceptions," said Elder Oaks, who attributes the genius of the unlearned Mormon prophet to revelation from God.

Among other things, Elder Oaks discussed the concept of an open canon and the difference between public and private revelation. He noted that learned commentaries on the scriptures help with interpretation but that spiritual nourishment comes from personal revelation. "Latter-day Saints believe that, as a source of sacred knowledge, the scriptures are not the ultimate but the penultimate. The ultimate knowledge comes by personal revelation through the Holy Ghost. . . . The scriptures, which are the revelation of the past, cannot be understood without openness to the revelations of the present."

An exhibit outside the conference hall featured books, manuscripts, and artifacts relating to Joseph Smith and the church, including the 1829 copyright application of the Book of Mormon and a proof sheet of its title page.

Cosponsoring the event were Brigham Young University, the Public Affairs Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, BYU Studies, and BYU's Richard L. Evans Chair of Religious Understanding. The conference proceedings, which were made available in real time to people worldwide via the Internet, can be accessed in both audio and video formats at [www.lds.org](http://www.lds.org). Transcripts of the proceedings of this conference are being prepared by BYU Studies for publication at a later date. 