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Exploring the Role of Divine Providence in History

Most modern historians view social, economic, and political factors as the sole shaping influences of history. For other scholars, the role of divine providence in history cannot be denied and is a topic worthy of serious consideration. Last year, Latter-day Saint scholars who embrace the notion of “providential history” shared their perspectives at a symposium titled “A Latter-day Saint View of History,” held at Brigham Young University on 6–7 February 2003. Among the 21 presenters at this unique event was John W. Welch, publications director for the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History, editor in chief of *BYU Studies*, and founder and board member of FARMS. His paper, “Early Mormonism and Early Christianity: Some Providential Similarities,” contemplates a number of intriguing parallels that will be of interest to FARMS readers. A sampling follows (all quotations are from Welch’s Presentation).

Similarities between the rise of early Christianity and early Mormonism invite “the belief that the world was prepared in many of the same ways for Jesus as it was for Joseph. . . . With relatively few followers and plenty of defectors, schismatics, and opponents, both movements needed to come forth at times when certain conditions were present that would allow for the possibility of success.” Such conditions included improved travel methods, new religious freedom, widespread literacy, and legal protections for newly created religious associations—conditions that have not always existed.


In 31 BC the Pax Romana, a new era of peace, was established when Augustus Caesar defeated Mark Anthony; likewise, 30 years before the birth of Joseph Smith Jr., the American colonies suc-

ceeded in defeating the British and established their own nation dedicated to liberty and peace. “The feelings of instability that result from overturning traditional orders were in both cases assuaged by elevating new figures or families to demi-divine status”—the Caesar line in the Roman Empire and the leading families of Virginia and Massachusetts through whom came the first several presidents of the new American

republic. This social order reflected a desire for a single, unifying leader and led many people of faith to embrace unifying leadership under God or his prophets and apostles on earth. “Thus one is not surprised to see, both in the letters of Paul and in the Doctrine and Covenants,

the virtue of unity accentuated and demanded.”

Other factors conducive to the establishment of the churches were prepared long before either Christ’s or Joseph Smith’s time. About 200 BC the Hebrew scriptures were translated into Greek, creating a standardized Old Testament. Similarly, 200 years before Joseph Smith’s birth in 1805, the King James Version established a standardized English translation of the Bible. “Without such a text, the gospel could not have been spread abroad as it was in either dispensation.”

Welch goes on to highlight many other similarities between the two churches, such as those pertaining to the work of early apostles and patterns of growth. These rare similarities, though admittedly circumstantial, suggest to Welch that the superintending hand of providence is discernible in human affairs as “God purposefully orchestrates or capitalizes on the confluence of certain conditions that make the achievement of divine purposes possible.” A complete collection of the symposium proceedings will be published by the Religious Studies Center later this year. Watch for a publication notice in *Insights*. 

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