



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

Volume 23 | Number 3

Article 1

January 2003

Yale Conference on Mormon Perspectives

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Recommended Citation

Roper, Matthew P. (2003) "Yale Conference on Mormon Perspectives," *Insights: The Newsletter of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship*: Vol. 23: No. 3, Article 1.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/insights/vol23/iss3/1>

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Insights

A WINDOW ON THE ANCIENT WORLD VOLUME 23 | 2003

Number 3

<http://farms.byu.edu>

Yale Conference on Mormon Perspectives

Between 250 and 300 people took part on 27–29 March 2003 in a conference in New Haven, Connecticut, devoted to the subject of “God, Humanity, and Revelation: Perspectives from Mormon Philosophy and History.” The conference, hosted by the Divinity School of Yale University, was organized by Kenneth West, a Latter-day Saint graduate student there. The Institute for the Study and Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts was one of the conference sponsors.

Speakers at the meetings, which were held mostly in the Marquand Chapel at Sterling Divinity Quadrangle, included several names familiar to FARMS readers. For example, Richard L. Bushman, Gouverneur Morris Professor of American History emeritus at Columbia University, who is working on a major biography of the Prophet Joseph Smith that is planned for publication in 2005, delivered an opening keynote address on Thursday evening, reflecting on the subject of “Joseph Smith’s Visions.” Professor Bushman argued, among other things, that Latter-day Saints have shown little interest in what other Christian traditions call “systematic theology,” but, instead, have

focused on stories from the past that teach both doctrine and proper conduct. This was a recurrent theme at the conference, most notably, perhaps, in James E. Faulconer’s paper the following morning, which was provocatively entitled “Why a Mormon Won’t Drink Coffee but Might Drink Coke: The Atheological Character of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.” Kathleen Flake, a member of the Church of Jesus Christ who teaches at Vanderbilt University Divinity School, in Nashville, Tennessee, spoke on the related subject of “Joseph Smith’s Narrative Theology.”

Other Latter-day Saint speakers, however, did treat issues that came close, at least, to the territory typically covered by systematic theology. Truman G. Madsen, for instance, discussed “The Eternal Nature of Persons”; David L. Paulsen and Blake T. Ostler outlined and argued for a number of their own personal “articles of faith” regarding “God, Our Father”; and Daniel C. Peterson maintained, in his paper “Mormonism and the Trinity,” that Latter-day Saints, although they reject the “orthodox” theories of the unity of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost that were enshrined in the creeds of the fourth century, are indeed trinitarian Christians, properly understood.

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FARMS Review Probes Cowdery, Chosenness, Chiasmus, and More


Keeping step with its expanding role, *The FARMS Review* sports a new title and cover design. Further departures from tradition are the introduction, written for the first time by someone other than the founding editor; a book notes section; and a study relating to chiasmus that not only gives an update on contemporary works on the subject but also surveys those available in the 1820s.

In the introduction to the *Review*, Louis Midgley ably comments on tiresome “countercult” efforts to marginalize or evangelize the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He notes with approval some

instances of civil discussion with conservative Protestants but decries the false assumptions of evangelicals who imagine that engaging Latter-day Saints in “interfaith dialogue” (too often a euphemism for publishing ranting diatribes against the church) will cause the church to “modify [its] faith to fit evangelical notions of Christian orthodoxy.”

Larry E. Morris reviews three books that probe the character of Oliver Cowdery. Morris notes that the authors rely on many sound secondary sources to the neglect of relevant historical context and critical primary sources. Point for point, Morris reconstructs the historical setting and weighs each author’s conclusions against letters and statements by Cowdery and others.

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the practice of baptizing little children were known in the New World at least as early as the fourth century A.D. 

Notes

1. Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain*, trans. Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble (1969), bk. VI, sec. 32, pp. 175–76.
2. *Ibid.*, 175.

3. *Ibid.*, 202.
4. *The Codex Nuttall: A Picture Manuscript from Ancient Mexico*, ed. Zelia Nuttall (1975), folio 16.
5. See Alfred M. Tozzer, trans., *Landa's Relación de las Cosas de Yucatán* (1941), 102.
6. *Ibid.*, n. 462.
7. Alexander Campbell, for example, made this claim in “Delusions,” *Millennial Harbinger* 2 (7 February 1831): 93.

By Matthew P. Roper

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Terryl L. Givens, author of the notable recent Oxford University Press book *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion*, spoke on “The Book of Mormon and the Future(s) of Mormonism.” He observed that the factual historicity of the Book of Mormon is the peculiar “scandal” of Mormonism, just as the literal, physical resurrection of Jesus is the “scandal” of Christianity in general, and argued that the Book of Mormon finds its full power only among those who accept the supernatural account of its origins offered by the Prophet Joseph Smith and endorsed by the Witnesses to the plates.

Other speakers treated such topics as the vital place of the Bible in Mormonism, Book of Mormon teachings on the redemption of fallen humanity, Latter-day Saint Christology, the location of Mor-

mon theology on the American religious landscape, and the future of studies of Latter-day Saint doctrine. One panel discussion concentrated on plural marriage and the Latter-day Saint family.

Most of the respondents to the presentations—including philosophers Stephen Davis and Nicholas Wolterstorff, historian Ann Taves, and British theologian and social scientist Douglas Davies—were not Latter-day Saints. They represented diverse disciplines such as philosophy, theology, American religious history, and biblical studies and were drawn from a variety of institutions. Exchanges between presenters and respondents were uniformly respectful, even friendly, although respect did not necessarily guarantee agreement. Conversations continued, among both participants and members of the audience, during lunches and dinners throughout the course of the program.

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Readers will appreciate the fuller picture of Cowdery's character that emerges in this review essay.


Readers interested in the intersection of Mormon and Jewish thought will enjoy the illuminating background information in Jeffrey R. Chadwick's review of *Covenants and Chosenness in Judaism and Mormonism*, edited by Raphael Jospe, Truman G. Madsen, and Seth Ward; and *Jews and Mormons: Two Houses of Israel*, by Frank J. Johnson and Rabbi William J. Leffler. Chadwick also reviews Harris Lenowitz's *The Jewish Messiahs: From the Galilee to Crown Heights*, a fascinating look at Jews who during their lifetimes were thought to be the promised Messiah, beginning with Jesus and ending with Menachem Mendel Schneerson in New York.

Noel B. Reynolds and John L. Sorenson separately review Terryl L. Givens's *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion*. Reynolds sketches the book's contents and praises Givens's originality of thought and exemplary professional approach that helped it “[break] through the publishing barrier that has prevented other related manuscripts from being brought out by leading academic presses.” Sorenson adds, “The combination of Givens's careful scholarship, felicitous writing, and wide scope combine to make *By the Hand of Mormon* one of a handful of must-read, must-own volumes for serious students of the Book of Mormon.”

John W. Welch reviews the rise of chiasmus in biblical studies in the 1820s, commencing with works [continued on page 4](#)


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Participants in the conference seem universally to have viewed it as a success, and not a few, indeed, expect that it may prove to be something of a breakthrough event. Heretofore, Mormonism's radically and richly unique point of view on central doctrinal issues has generally been overlooked by outside scholarship, with Latter-day Saints figuring in most histories of American religion or of Christianity as little more than a mildly interesting footnote to the westward expansion of the United States in the 19th century. It is reasonable to hope, however, that this might change.

BYU philosophy professor James Faulconer has signaled his intention to work with Kenneth West in gathering up at least some of the presentations and preparing them for publication in book form. —reported by Daniel C. Peterson

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published in London by John Jebb (1820) and Thomas Boys (1824 and 1825). Adding to his previous statements about these books, Welch surveys the reviews that evaluated them in contemporaneous British periodicals. It is also discussed how Thomas Horne's massive critical study of the Bible included a few pages about Jebb in its fourth (1825) edition, rather than in its 1836 edition, as had been previously thought. Moreover, the 1825 edition was published in London and also in Philadelphia. Interestingly, Joseph Smith owned a copy of that 1825 edition, but he obtained it in January 1834. Welch concludes that while some knowledge of chiasmus existed in America in 1829, there is still "a very low probability that Joseph Smith knew anything about chiasmus" when translating the Book of Mormon.

This latest issue of the *Review* (vol. 15, no. 1) also evaluates three books on the Book of Abraham and several other publications. It includes an index (by author, title, and reviewer) to last year's double issue. To obtain a copy of the new *Review*, use the enclosed mail-order form or visit the Bookstore section of the FARMS Web site. 

INSTITUTE NEWS

New Director to Guide Institute

Noel B. Reynolds has been appointed director of the Institute. A professor of political science and a past president of FARMS, he recently completed a five-year term as associate academic vice president for undergraduate studies at BYU. Further coverage on this change in leadership will appear in a future issue of *Insights*.

Insights

A Window on the Ancient World
Volume 23 | Number 3 | 2003

A Publication of the
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and Mormon Studies (FARMS)**

**Institute for the Study and
Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts**
Brigham Young University

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FARMS is part of Brigham Young University's Institute for the Study and Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts. As such, it encourages and supports research on the Book of Mormon, the Book of Abraham, the Bible, other ancient scripture, and related subjects. Under the FARMS imprint, the Institute publishes and distributes titles in these areas for the benefit of scholars and interested Latter-day Saint readers.

Primary research interests at FARMS 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.

FARMS makes interim and final 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. As a service to teachers and students of the scriptures, research results are distributed in both scholarly and popular formats.

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