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BYU Studies in the 1970s

Charles D. Tate, Jr.

In my editorial in the first issue of *BYU Studies* that I edited,¹ I noted that from its inception the journal was to be a “Voice for the Community of LDS Scholars.” Since there are enough other scholarly journals that will publish secular scholarly studies by LDS authors, *BYU Studies* was distinctively to be the journal in which faithful Latter-day Saint scholars could publish articles that explored the correlation of their secular studies and their religious convictions. As most of the rest of the world does not believe in modern revelation as a viable medium of scholarly information, none of the “regular” academic journals would take the kinds of articles *BYU Studies* was interested in publishing.

I also noted that critical synthesis was more important than critical analysis and that articles should strive to build the right thing in *BYU Studies*, not just tear down the wrong thing. Professor Charles Mâlik, a world-renowned diplomat and former president of the United Nations General Assembly, said essentially the same thing in a forum address given on October 12, 1967, at BYU: “Nothing is more unworthy than simply to analyze and stop there. The pure analysts who analyze and stop are the plague of this age.”²

Editing *BYU Studies* for sixteen years was an interesting road to travel. It was lined with interesting challenges and decisions. One of the very first decisions that had to be made was when does good taste take precedence over scholarship? When does deciding for good taste border on or even become censorship? The specific situation was whether to leave a widely-known profane quote about God in an article or to replace it with a statement that the person shook his fist at heaven and profaned against God. Although it seems so simple and clear cut to me today, it was a difficult decision to make in 1967, when most of the scholars were certain that *BYU Studies* was totally controlled by the Church and could not publish anything not approved by the Brethren. Actually, the Brethren never did exercise any control over *BYU Studies* while I was the editor.

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I can only assume it was the same with those editors before and after me. The question was less one of censorship; it was more a question of good taste. The decision was made that to print profane references about anybody was in bad taste, even though such references may be in widely-known quotes that had been published elsewhere, and we changed the reference. That decision made a huge difference through the years that followed.

In the fall of 1967, we were just getting ready to send our second issue (Winter 1968) to press when the Church announced it had been given several pieces of papyri associated with Joseph Smith. The most famous fragment was what is left of the source for Facsimile #2 in the book of Abraham in the Pearl of Great Price (the controversial parts showing the head of the angel having been lost). We held back printing that issue until the Church released pictures of those fragments for scholarly publication. *BYU Studies* was able to print articles by Hugh Nibley and James R. Clark about the papyri with excellent black-and-white pictures of those fragments.

The issue that was most instrumental in establishing *BYU Studies* as a valuable scholarly historical journal was the Spring 1969 issue on the origins of the Church in New York. The articles in that issue showed that when scholars do their homework they find that Joseph Smith was telling the truth about what was happening around him historically. No scholarship can prove or disprove the truth of the First Vision; it remains the domain of the Spirit to reveal that truth; but scholarship can study the historical setting and test the accuracy of the Prophet's recorded statements about other things that were happening to him such as the religious revival and the presence of the Methodist minister (identified as George Lane by Oliver Cowdery in his 1834 history of the Church). Articles in that landmark issue showed that, contrary to what people had assumed and enemies of the Church had demanded that we show, the revival Joseph Smith attended did not happen in the early spring of 1820. It had taken place earlier in the summer of 1819, and after thinking about what he had heard there, the Prophet decided to go pray in the early spring of 1820, which is exactly what the Prophet said happened. Another article showed that the Reverend George Lane indeed was at the revival in 1819 and in all logical likelihood passed through Palmyra on his way to Canada early in the summer of 1820, so he could have seen Joseph, heard of his vision, and told him it was not of God, as Joseph said happened. In subsequent years we dedicated one issue in each annual volume to research about the history of the Church—two years each in New York, Ohio, and Missouri, four years for Nauvoo, then on to the plains and into Salt Lake City.

Another significant contribution *BYU Studies* made to scholarship in the Church during my tenure as editor was the publishing of the articles by Robert J. Matthews on the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible (JST). Building on critical synthesis, Professor Matthews showed that the RLDS 1944 printed version of the JST was truer to the original manuscripts than the 1867 edition had been.³ These articles in *BYU Studies* and Professor Matthews's publication of his fuller study, "*A Plainer Translation*": *Joseph Smith's Translation of the Bible, A History and Commentary*⁴ did much to make including short references from the JST in the footnotes and reprinting larger selections in the Appendix of the 1979 LDS edition of the King James Version of the Bible possible.

One thing we learned about the readers of *BYU Studies*, however, is that they like variety in the articles in each issue. We had thought they wanted us to research a topic thoroughly and make all the articles pertain to that single topic. Bringing special issues together takes a lot of work to get the articles from different scholars, and coordinating that effort is a real struggle. One time when the editorial staff had been working especially hard to pull together an issue on ancient studies, we finally had to give up on getting enough articles in and ready for printing. Since we were almost past the deadline for having the issue printed and in the mail, we pulled together all the other articles we had ready for publication and published a potpourri issue. Our reader response was so favorable that we decided to print fewer special issues, with the major exception being our annual issues exploring the history of the Church in different times and places.

In the 1970s, *BYU Studies* moved typesetting from hot-metal Linotype to cold-copy computer composition. Even though the move made production more efficient, it eliminated the many trips to the BYU Press building to take copy to be typeset, to proofread, and to approve page makeup. I personally missed the interaction with the people at the Press because they were as interested in getting our journal out as we were and they wanted it to look good as much as we did. They are professionals in their work. I thank them for helping *BYU Studies* become what it became while I was the editor.

One of the frustrations of editing *BYU Studies* came from trying and failing to get the number of subscriptions over five thousand. We tried every which way to advertise the journal only to go out to talk about it and have people say they had not heard of it before. I hope Jack can apply his special touch to this challenge and show us how to get the Church members aware of what the journal does and get thousands more subscribers. He seems to have a kind of Midas touch in such things, and I wish him and *BYU Studies* well under his editorship.

NOTES

¹ Charles D. Tate, Jr., "Brigham Young University Studies: Its Purpose, Its Freedom, Its Scope," *BYU Studies* 8 (Autumn 1967): 1.

² Charles Mâlik, "The Struggle for Peace," *BYU Studies* 8 (Summer 1968): 396.

³ Robert J. Matthews, "A Study of the Text of Joseph Smith's Inspired Version of the Bible," *BYU Studies* 9 (Autumn 1968): 3-16; and Robert J. Matthews, "Some Significant Texts of Joseph Smith's Inspired Version of the Bible," *BYU Studies* 9 (Winter 1969): 155.

⁴ Robert J. Matthews, "A Plainer Translation": *Joseph Smith's Translation of the Bible, A History and Commentary* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1975).

