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Settling the Valley, Proclaiming the Gospel: The General Epistles of the Mormon First Presidency

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Reid L. Neilson and Nathan N. Waite, eds., *Settling the Valley, Proclaiming the Gospel: The General Epistles of the Mormon First Presidency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017)

LDS Church leaders were faced with a difficult task in the early years of settling in the Rocky Mountains. The Saints were troubled by the harsh climate, unpredictable relations with the native tribes, and the shadow of fear cast by the U.S. government. In their poverty, the bedraggled immigrants and refugees were not only admonished to continue missionary efforts and begin colonizing strategic locations but also called to build sacred temples in the wilderness. In an effort to simultaneously demonstrate internal solidarity and external economic stability and productivity, Brigham Young and his counselors published a series of fourteen “general epistles” from 1849 to 1856 (xiii).

Reid L. Neilson and Nathan N. Waite have compiled these fourteen documents, most of which were originally published in the *Deseret News*, into one volume. Neilson is Assistant Church Historian for the LDS Church, and Waite is an associate editorial manager for the Joseph Smith Papers Project. Neilson and Waite succinctly state the purpose of their work: “to make these General Epistles more accessible to our twenty-first century audience” (xiv).

To “make the past more accessible and friendly” (xviii), the editors begin *Settling the Valley, Proclaiming the Gospel* with sixty pages of historical background on the epistles themselves, including notes on the provenance, text, and context of each epistle. In the first chapter of the book, Neilson and Waite review the various pressures the Saints and their leaders experienced during this critical time and how the epistles addressed those issues. The next 216 pages are devoted to transcripts of

the epistles themselves. The editors enrich the proclamations with hundreds of footnotes, elaborating on the cultural and political nuances of the period and expanding on scriptural and biographical references.

The appendices begin with the December 1847 epistle from the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, which the editors felt was fitting to include because “it was written within months of the settlement of the Great Salt Lake Valley and sets the pattern for the General Epistles that would follow once the First Presidency was reorganized that same month” (xiii–xiv). The second appendix is a biographical register containing sixty pages of biographical information on individuals mentioned in the epistles, listed alphabetically by surname. Similarly, the editors offer a geographical register as the third appendix for readers to learn more about locations the First Presidency discusses in these proclamations. The final fifty pages are devoted to an extensive bibliography and index, bringing the total page count to 430.

Settling the Valley, Proclaiming the Gospel will be helpful for anyone studying Brigham Young, mid-nineteenth-century Church leadership, and pioneer life in antebellum Utah Territory. Though the epistles can be found separately in archives and some are available online, having them all in one place, footnoted and indexed, will be a welcome resource to any researcher of the era.

—Gerrit van Dyk

Patrick Q. Mason and John G. Turner, eds., *Out of Obscurity: Mormonism since 1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016)

Generally speaking, Latter-day Saint knowledge of Church history after 1847 is spotty at best. The reason for this