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Reviewed by J. Howard Rytting

*Expressions of Faith: Testimonies of Latter-day Saint Scholars* is a fascinating compilation of essays written by twenty-four Latter-day Saint scholars. These essays express the testimonies and experiences of several scholars in an interesting and enjoyable fashion, each in the style of the individual author. The essays are organized into three broad categories entitled “Personal Odysseys of Faith,” “Study and Faith,” and “Faith and the Book of Mormon.”

Although these authors have different backgrounds and life experiences, they all express firm testimonies of the Savior, the Prophet Joseph Smith, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. They are all men and women of learning who have engaged in significant academic and scholarly activities. However, their testimonies are founded on personal experiences with the Spirit of the Lord as well as on their observations that the principles of the gospel are consistent with both reason and life’s experiences.

In his preface to the book, Noel B. Reynolds, a political science professor at Brigham Young University, points out that “the overwhelming majority of LDS academics and intellectuals are active, faithful Latter-day Saints, . . . [and] Mormons, perhaps more than any other religious group, seek and respect learning” (p. x). He further suggests that the percentage of well-educated members of the church is disproportionately high compared to that found in the general population. It may seem to be an anomaly, but sociological studies indicate that higher levels of religious commitment and practice are “directly correlated with higher levels of education. . . . It is true of the LDS community that the more educated a person is, the more likely he or she is to be fully
observant and faithful” (p. x). Characteristic of those who become faithful Latter-day Saints and persist in faithful church involvement are a genuine interest in learning and an inquisitiveness about intellectually stimulating ideas. This is in contrast to a common perception outside the church that somehow individuals who join the Latter-day Saint Church are duped or brainwashed into believing the Joseph Smith story and the basic doctrines. In this review I will provide some impressions from each essay without any attempt to be comprehensive or necessarily to identify what the author considered most important.

The first essay in part I, “Personal Odysseys of Faith,” was written by Allen E. Bergin, a professor of psychology at Brigham Young University. Bergin presents a delightful and personal description of his road to conversion and the impact the gospel has had on his life and his professional career and activities. His experiences with colleagues at Columbia remind me of an experience I had with our department chair shortly after I joined the faculty of the University of Kansas. He had been introduced a few years earlier to the gospel and the Book of Mormon by a postdoctoral student who was a recent convert to the church. As we occasionally discussed the gospel, particularly the Book of Mormon, he indicated that he had no explanation for the Book of Mormon other than Joseph Smith’s own account. However, he could not bring himself to accept and embrace it, specifically having difficulty with the ideas of an angel’s interacting with Joseph Smith and bringing the golden plates. I appreciate Bergin’s description of the impact the gospel has had on his research and its directions. I found his five points of advice to young, spiritually oriented social scientists very good and, in fact, suitable for scientists in other disciplines as well.

Susan Easton Black’s short essay on the impact of faith-promoting stories and accounts of faith presented by her grandmother as well as those uncovered in her studies of early church history brought to my remembrance the heritage of faith that my parents, grandparents, and other ancestors provide in my life. The account of their life experiences provided a basis for developing

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faith, together with a conviction of the truthfulness of the gospel, and of a personal Heavenly Father who loves his children and is involved in their lives. Reading of Black’s journey to faith stimulated a desire to more fully appreciate my own. Roger B. Porter presented five principles that guided him in developing his attitudes toward learning and testimony: the gospel embraces all truth (p. 26), truth is revealed incrementally (p. 27), learning truth involves teaching one another (p. 27), learning truth comes by study and by faith (p. 28), and learning a fullness of truth requires dependence on the Lord (p. 28). I appreciated his statement that, “by consistently devoting a set time each day to studying the scriptures, ... [they] were opening to my understanding line upon line, precept upon precept. On many occasions, I concluded those sessions drenched with joy” (p. 30).

Truman G. Madsen’s essay entitled “Man against Darkness” describes his journey toward understanding God and the gospel, starting with a somewhat pessimistic viewpoint and finally reaching the conclusion that the Latter-day Saint religion is the most empirical religion in the world. He indicates that reason can show that the principles of the gospel are consistent and coherent and that the gospel is also pragmatic. He affirms that he “know[s] of no other religion so responsive to the entire range of human awareness” and that “truth as embodied in Christ can alone save us” (p. 43).

Steven D. Bennion provides an illuminating account of his experiences, particularly during his formal educational process, which provided for spiritual understanding in the context of secular learning. He emphasizes the importance of developing spiritually as one develops mentally. He further relates experiences that helped him gain a testimony of the Lord’s direction to church leaders and finds that his service as a missionary played a dominant role in the development of his testimony of the gospel.

The final chapter in part I was written by Gerald N. Lund. He describes three profound influences that helped shape his personal testimony of the Savior and the gospel: being raised in a home of faith where inquiry and reason were emphasized, his experiences in studying and teaching the scriptures and the gospel in the Church Educational System, and the opportunity to study the Bible under the direction of excellent scholars and teachers.
Part 2 of the book consists of twelve essays under the general theme of "Study and Faith." Although each essay is highly personal and reflects the experiences of the author, each expresses the importance both of faith coupled with personal inspiration and of diligent and effective scholarly study. These essays emphasize the importance of faith and revelation in obtaining a testimony, but also powerfully express the fact that the principles of the gospel are amenable to scholarly study and verification. One elegant feature of the gospel is that its principles are rational and satisfying to the inquiring mind.

Richard L. Bushman's essay, "The Social Dimensions of Rationality," examines the interactions and influences of rational scientific or scholarly inquiry and the cultural or social background of the individual. Recognizing that any form of scholarly inquiry is influenced to some extent by society and individual experiences, Bushman suggests that although no one can totally avoid some subjectivity, rational scholarly approaches to the study of principles of the gospel are possible and adopted by many contemporary LDS scholars. He emphasizes that one of the weaknesses of traditional scholarship is that it does not recognize good, whereas one of the strengths of Mormonism is that it does emphasize good and living a life consonant with that good.

In his essay entitled "Diligence and Grace," Bruce C. Hafen explores the relationship between divine inspiration and careful, diligent scholarly study. He uses Brigham Young University as an example of an institution where both aspects can work synergistically to provide greater results than either approach alone. He points out that if we study with due diligence and further sanctify ourselves, grace will provide us with increased understanding.

Following the admonition of his wife that he should pray about his research, James W. Cannon found that his experiences taught him not only a lot about his research problem but also about prayer. He emphasized that in the long run, "goodness is more important than knowledge and knowledge is more important than power" (p. 89).

Robert L. Millet points out that "all truths are not of equal worth" (p. 93). Whereas it is valuable to have secular knowledge, it is vital to know of the Savior and the saving principles of the gospel, such as repentance. Although the principles of the gospel
can be successfully subjected to rigorous study and analysis, one needs to avoid holding one’s faith “hostage” to current or past academic or scholarly interpretation or understanding (p. 94). It is not necessary to give up one’s intellectual abilities to be a faithful Latter-day Saint. Millet further suggests that learning by faith requires an expenditure of energy of at least the same intensity as scholarly study. When one senses apparent conflicts between revealed truth and our secular understanding, it is likely that our secular understanding is not complete. I agree. My own research has been augmented and enhanced over the years by improved and more sensitive instrumentation as well as new approaches. Some phenomena that we could not measure at all thirty years ago are readily observed today. The future will continue to bring refinements in methodology and new approaches as well as instrumentation not even imagined now. Such advances will bring significant improvement in our abilities to observe and measure important phenomena and verify gospel truths not yet amenable to scientific validation. Millet quotes Joseph F. Smith as saying that “the Lord requires humility, not ignorance.”

Paul Alan Cox describes his life as a scientist, scholar, and Latter-day Saint to demonstrate that no essential contradictions between scientific and religious truth exist. Cox indicates some reluctance to contribute to this volume because of a concern that his views on science or conservation might be offensive. However, I found this essay particularly compatible with my own perspectives. He asserts that, “as scientists we must be humble about our conclusions, because new information can radically change our understanding of the world. And as Latter-day Saints we should be modest about our personal interpretations of the scriptures because new revelation can profoundly change our understanding of the gospel” (p. 104). He quotes Elder Henry Eyring as saying that “the Church only requires you to believe what is true” (p. 104) and President Harold B. Lee as warning us “never to accept any single-scripture theology” (p. 105).

Daniel H. Ludlow focuses his essay on testimony. He lists seven major characteristics of a testimony and quotes Elder Bruce

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R. McConkie on how to obtain a testimony. He also lists several qualities of our spirits that enhance our understanding of the blessings of testimony. Ludlow describes an interesting activity that he and his wife have used on occasion in which a group would list their blessings and then prioritize them. As they would indicate which blessings they would give up, the material blessings would go first, followed by various spiritual blessings. Invariably, the last blessing the group would retain would be “having a testimony of the gospel” (p. 118).

Robert J. Matthews emphasizes the unity of scripture by describing an experience of studying the subject of prayer using the Topical Guide that appears in the Latter-day Saint edition of the Bible. He describes how such study made him want to pray more fervently and describes further the increased clarity he found with latter-day scriptures compared to the biblical text.

Daniel C. Peterson provides a description of many experiences that provided him insight into the gospel and the Book of Mormon as he studied mathematics, classical Greek, and Islamic philosophy. He provides a compelling defense of the authenticity of the Book of Mormon and describes a number of gospel doctrines that were taught anciently but were not generally accepted at the time of Joseph Smith. He points out that apparent weaknesses of the Book of Mormon often turn out to be strengths as one obtains increased information and understanding. In a well-documented complementary essay, Hugh W. Nibley emphasizes the strength of Joseph Smith’s prophetic calling and the authenticity of the Book of Mormon. He points out that most theologians avoid the big question of death and the hereafter, but that Joseph Smith deals with it directly.

Richard Lloyd Anderson provides an excellent analysis of many of the weaknesses of historical accounts that are critical of the Prophet Joseph Smith and his prophetic calling. He emphasizes the value of going to primary or firsthand sources rather than relying on secondary accounts. He further points out that it is important to view statements and information in the context in which they are found or given.

Stephen D. Ricks’s essay provides a comparison of several teachings of mainstream Christianity with those of the restored gospel and the ancient church. These include the belief in the
Trinity, concepts of anthropomorphism, theopoiesis, creation, and prophets. He illustrates clearly that the teachings of the Latter-day Saint Church are much closer to those of the ancient church than to those of modern traditional Christianity.

Richard Neitzel Holzapfel suggests that academic training primarily provides scholarly tools that allow a fuller understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Although academic inquiry is insufficient to gain a testimony, it can be very strengthening. Holzapfel uses both Joseph Smith’s dedication to serious study and his reliance on inspiration as an example for us. He indicates that occasionally we need to put questions that we do not understand aside temporarily and come back to them from a different perspective at a later time. He further recommends that although we need to be careful about relying on external evidences of gospel principles, they can be valuable in our further understanding of the gospel and the Savior.

The final part of the book is entitled “Faith and the Book of Mormon” and consists of five essays that emphasize the power and beauty of the Book of Mormon. Marilyn Arnold and Richard Dilworth Rust, both English professors, emphasize the literary aspects of the Book of Mormon. Arnold points out that her training in literature augmented her study of the Book of Mormon and enhanced her testimony of its divine origin. She makes an interesting comparison between Nephi and Jacob with an excellent portrayal of Jacob and his life as seen from his writing. Rust indicates that, “as my scholarship contributes to my faith, so my faith contributes to my teaching and scholarship” (p. 228). He relates an experience in which the Book of Mormon answered challenging questions presented by several seminarians.

C. Wilfred Griggs begins and ends his essay by claiming that “acceptance of the Book of Mormon is a spiritual, not an academic, matter” (pp. 201, 208). He then points out some of the limitations of academic inquiry and indicates that even in this context the Book of Mormon fares well. Donald W. Parry shares his insights into the complexity and internal consistency of the Book of Mormon. He discusses three examples of internal consistency in the Book of Mormon: first, the consistency and unity found in the names and personalities; second, the historical harmony and consistency, particularly with respect to its accounts of
wars that took place; and third, the internal consistency of references made to Christ.

In the concluding essay of this book, John W. Welch describes his feelings about the Book of Mormon as a true classic of literature, with an emphasis on its truth and goodness. As a law professor, he indicates that he is particularly interested in the legal details of the Book of Mormon and in the congruence he has found between the examples of law shown in the Book of Mormon with the ancient laws of the Near East. He includes his feelings of comfort brought by the Book of Mormon and effectively concludes his essay and the book with his testimony.

I found the essays interesting and faith promoting. They are presented by Latter-day Saint scholars with varied experiences and perspectives. The authors include those with a background in the humanities and social sciences, as well as religion or ancient history and scriptures. One author is a botanist and one a mathematician, and two are law professors. I would have been pleased to see a greater representation from the physical and biological sciences, since the somewhat different perspectives of the physical sciences may have provided some additional interesting viewpoints. Nevertheless, the book provides a well-organized compilation of testimony and insight into the faith of a number of men and women who have distinguished themselves in scholarly endeavors as well as in faithful involvement in the gospel of Jesus Christ and his church. I highly recommend it.