Editor's Introduction: Q&A

Daniel C. Peterson
Title: Editor’s Introduction: QnA

Author(s): Daniel C. Peterson


ISSN: 1099-9450 (print), 2168-3123 (online)

Abstract: Introduction to the current issue, including editor’s picks. Peterson poses and answers fourteen “questions not asked” for readers of the FARMS Review of Books. Louis Midgley and George L. Mitton have been appointed as associate editors for the FARMS Review.
Editor’s Introduction

QnA

In recent years, Web sites and other publications have commonly come to include a section called “FAQ,” in which the initials stand for “Frequently Asked Questions.” It seems that the time has come for me, as editor of the FARMS Review of Books, to answer some “Questions Not Asked”—let’s call them “QnA”—the supposed “answers” to which seem to be agitating a few souls in certain circles.\(^1\) As is typically done with “FAQs,” I’ll do so in the form of questions and answers.

1. Does the FARMS Review of Books represent the position of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies?

Yes and no. Clearly, the FARMS Review represents FARMS in the trivial sense that it is published by the Foundation. But it is only one of many FARMS publications, and its editor is only one among a number of FARMS editors. FARMS—now a function of Brigham Young University’s Institute for the Study and Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts—is a relatively large and complex organization. As such, apart from a basic commitment to the historical authenticity and divine inspiration of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its scriptures, doctrines, and practices, FARMS \textit{qua} FARMS

\(^1\) Actually talking to us would spare certain critics from embarrassing errors of fact. For example, one vocal detractor of the Review relates that FARMS was obliged to alter an essay in \textit{Review of Books on the Book of Mormon} 6/1 (1994) when confronted by a threatened lawsuit. The tale is false.
holds very few, if any, “official” positions. The people who direct FARMS, those who work for it, and those on the outside who write for it and work with it represent, by and large, an intelligent and diverse group of varied backgrounds, distinct personalities, and multifarious opinions.

From its inception in 1989, the FARMS Review—known until 1996 as the Review of Books on the Book of Mormon—has always explicitly denied that the opinions expressed within its covers represent any position but that of those expressing them. In the introduction to that very first issue, I explained that

No effort has been made by the editor or by anyone else connected with this Review to harmonize the viewpoints expressed here, or to guide the reviewers. The editorial hand has been relatively light. The opinions expressed in these reviews are solely those of the authors, and do not necessarily represent those of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or the respective institutions with which the authors are affiliated.²

In my view, strictly speaking, such a caution should go without saying. But, in fact, it has never gone unsaid. More recently, a standard statement reading as follows has been included in the front matter of each issue:

The opinions expressed in these reviews are those of the reviewers. They do not necessarily represent the opinions of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, its editors, Brigham Young University, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or the reviewers’ employers.³

And here is something else that should probably go without saying: This statement means what it says. It is no mere legal escape hatch.

3. See, for example, page vi of the current issue.
2. Does a perceived defect in the FARMS Review of Books discredit all the publications of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies?

Clearly, no. Not in view of the answer to question 1, above. At least, it should not do so in the mind of any reasonable observer.

3. Does the FARMS Review of Books represent a unified approach, in either tone or substance, to the books that it treats?

Again, the answer has to be yes and no. For the most part, the reviewers who have published in its pages accept the divine authenticity of the Book of Mormon and the truth of the claims of the Church of Jesus Christ. (Notable exceptions to this are the evangelical writers Paul Owen and Carl Mosser, whose critical response to Latter-day Saint beliefs appeared in a volume dedicated to the book by Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson, How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation. And there have been one or two others.)

However, what I stated in the very first issue remains true to this day: “No effort has been made by the editor or by anyone else connected with this Review to harmonize the viewpoints expressed here, or to guide the reviewers. The editorial hand has been relatively light.” In actual fact, it has been exceedingly light.

There is no single, unified brain expressing itself through all of the reviewers. I’m flattered that some seem to think that I have such power, but, alas, it’s not true. I have neither the time nor the energy to have written the nearly 330 reviews and review essays that have appeared in the Review over the years. But conclusions, tone, and approach are no more hatched in the conspiratorial conclaves of some sort of reviewer cabal than they are controlled by a single hyperactive editor-dictator. There are no meetings of FARMS reviewers, no secret e-mail lists, no covert recognition signs for the cognoscenti, no guidelines other than the most simple and minimal style sheet.

Including this current issue, roughly 180 distinct, individual authors have written for the FARMS Review of Books, and they represent a considerable diversity of viewpoints. Few knowledgeable observers of the Latter-day Saint intellectual scene are likely to confuse Richard Lloyd Anderson with Todd Compton, nor Louis C. Midgley with Eugene England, nor Klaus Hansen with John W. Welch, nor Lavina Fielding Anderson with Robert Millet, nor John L. Sorenson with David P. Wright. Yet I can truthfully say, on the basis of personal knowledge that, I think, none of the reviewers would contradict, that the editor of the FARMS Review of Books—yours truly—has never prescribed in advance what a reviewer should write. In fact, to be candid, the Review has published several items with which I partially or even profoundly disagreed.5

4. Does a perceived defect in an individual review, or even in several reviews, published in the FARMS Review of Books discredit all of the other reviewers and reviews that have appeared and will yet appear in its pages?

Clearly, no. Not in view of the answer to question 3, above. At least, it should not do so in the mind of any reasonable observer.

5. Is it true that the FARMS Review of Books accepts only invited contributions and refuses unsolicited submissions?

No, it is not. It is true that, like other academically oriented book reviews or book review sections in scholarly journals, we solicit reviews, and it is indeed the case that the overwhelming majority of the essays we publish have been solicited. My approach from the beginning has been to invite people to contribute who, I thought, would have something interesting to say regarding the book or other item in question, and then, effectively, to let them say what they felt they

5. A recent example of disagreement between editor and reviewers can be found in FARMS Review of Books 13/1 (2001): 73–89, where a plant geneticist, a nuclear chemist, and a statistician offer somewhat negative evaluations of Arvin S. Gibson’s Fingerprints of God. My own verdict is considerably more positive, based largely on the much greater evidentiary value that I assign to accounts of near-death experiences. (I intend to outline the reasons for my acceptance of such experiences in a forthcoming book.)
needed to say. However, on several occasions we have accepted unsolicited reviews.

6. *Does the FARMS Review of Books publish responses from authors who have been reviewed?*

We have never done so. In fact, until quite recently the question of doing so has rarely arisen. For various reasons, we have now decided not to publish responses.

7. *Is it the goal of FARMS, as embodied in the FARMS Review of Books, to make Mormonism's past appear “normal,” to minimize its differences from mainstream faiths and culture, or, by attacking books that do honest history, to sweep difficult or complex aspects of that past under the rug?*

Absolutely not. Such a goal has never been entertained by the Foundation in general, by me as the editor of the Review, nor, so far as I am aware, by any of those who have written for the Review. It is a notion, I can testify from personal knowledge, that has never entered my mind and for which I have no sympathy whatever. Anyone who knows me well can testify that I have not the slightest interest in seeing my religious beliefs assimilated into the mainstream.

8. *Is it the goal of the FARMS Review of Books to discourage its readers from reading for themselves the books it examines?*

No.

9. *Is FARMS interested in keeping its readers informed?*

Yes. That is perhaps the primary reason for the very existence of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies. And that is a fundamental reason for the existence of the FARMS Review of Books.

10. *Is it the case that the FARMS Review of Books—or, indeed, FARMS in general—is interested only in attacking other works and tearing them down?*

Obviously not, as even a casual look at the Review and at the overall work of the Foundation easily demonstrates. Many of the essays in
the Review are quite positive. And, as noted above, the Review is in any case not coextensive with FARMS.

11. Is it true that many leading historians of Mormonism have not contributed to the FARMS Review of Books?

Yes, and there's a very good reason for that fact. Since most of them work in fields relatively unrelated to our mission, they have not been invited to do so. The history of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, while an absorbing subject that interests many of us personally, is not a primary focus of either the FARMS Review of Books in particular or the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies in general. Moreover, there are many other venues available to those who wish to publish on the subject, including not only the Journal of Mormon History, BYU Studies, and the Journal of the John Whitmer Historical Association, but numerous periodicals devoted to Western and American history generally. Much contemporary research into Latter-day Saint history focuses on such matters as the economic history of the Great Basin, the life of leading nineteenth-century Mormons, the emergence of the “ward” organization in Nauvoo, and what might be termed the historiography of “forts, camps, and trails.” None of these topics falls within the scope of the FARMS mission. Hence, on the whole, we don't review materials on these topics, and we don't solicit reviews from specialists in these subjects as such. In its twenty-one issues, inclusive of the present number, the Review has featured something on the order of twenty-six reviews—covering twenty-one books or other items—that focus in some primary way on Latter-day Saint history. Of those twenty-six reviews, at least a dozen are closely connected with either the Book of Mormon or with the visions, character, and biography of Joseph Smith. Twenty-six reviews represent considerably less than 10 percent—closer to 8 percent, in fact—of the nearly 330 reviews that have thus far appeared. Manifestly, Latter-day Saint history is not a principal concern of this periodical.

Nonetheless, the FARMS Review of Books has published essays and reviews by such respected specialists on the history of the Church of Jesus Christ as Richard Lloyd Anderson, Danel Bachman, Davis Bitton, Richard L. Bushman, Scott Faulring, Klaus Hansen, and Larry R.
PORTER. In fact, two of the FARMS reviews that have recently been the objects of complaints from certain critics—both examining Todd Compton's book *In Sacred Loneliness*—were written by Richard Anderson and Scott Faulring, and by Danel Bachman. Yet it is difficult to imagine reviewers better suited than these three to examine a volume on Mormon polygamy. Richard Anderson is one of the deans of Latter-day Saint historiography and an acknowledged expert on Joseph Smith. Scott Faulring's published collection of Joseph Smith's writings remains a useful resource for students of the subject, and his ongoing work with Professor Anderson on Oliver Cowdery, the other witnesses to the Book of Mormon, and related subjects promises to be a landmark of Mormon scholarship. And, finally, Danel Bachman's path-breaking Purdue master's thesis on the origins of plural marriage among the Latter-day Saints continues to be read by those seeking to understand the subject.

It seems that, in the minds of some critics, if specialists in Mormon history don't appear in our pages, we're to be condemned, and if they do appear in our pages, we're to be condemned. But it remains the case that only a particular kind of church history fits into our mission. Like it or not, FARMS has become a place to which many people turn when questions are raised concerning the fundamental claims of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Such questions rarely concern Samuel Brannan, the Mormon Trail, the function of the bishop's storehouse in nineteenth-century Sanpete, beet sugar, or even the role of the Mormon Battalion in the California gold rush, but they are very frequently entwined with the character of Joseph Smith, the testimony of the witnesses to the Book of Mormon, and the nature of early Mormon religious experience. When works on nineteenth-century or even twentieth-century history impinge on these issues, we feel free—even obliged—to address them.

12. Have unqualified nonhistorians been assigned by the Review to evaluate works of history?

No. We have been careful to invite qualified people to review not only historical works but other kinds of writing. For example, John Gee's review of the second edition of D. Michael Quinn's *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* concentrates not so much on
nineteenth-century American history as on Quinn’s seriously problematic (non)definition of the term and concept of magic. This is a task for which Professor Gee is well equipped, not only by virtue of the five magic-related graduate courses that he took while a doctoral student in Egyptology at Yale University, but as demonstrated by his own ongoing scholarly work on the subject. He has delivered papers at academic conferences focused on or partially dedicated to the topic of “magic,” including:

- “The Structure of Lamp Divination,” Seventh International Conference of Egyptologists, Giza, Egypt, 24 August 1999; forthcoming in the publication of the conference proceedings from the Carsten Niebuhr Institute in Copenhagen.
- “Ba-Sending and Its Implications,” Eighth International Congress of Egyptologists, Giza, Egypt, 31 March 2000; forthcoming in the publication of the conference proceedings from the American University of Cairo Press in Egypt.


Professor Gee’s forthcoming articles also include:

- “Towards an Interpretation of Hypocephali,” in a Festschrift for Edith Varga (Budapest).

Plainly, Professor Gee is exceptionally well qualified to comment on D. Michael Quinn’s notion of “magic” and “the occult.” He brings a historical and linguistic depth to the subject that scholars and general readers should welcome.

Likewise, Professor William Hamblin—who has published in the pages of the *Review* notable critiques of attempts to tie early Latter-day Saint doctrine and practice to prior hermetic, magical, and occultic traditions—while not a specialist in nineteenth-century American history, is a trained historian who has published on both ancient and medieval subjects as well as on the particular subject of “magic.” Additionally, he regularly teaches courses on historical method.\(^8\) While it is obvious that an American historian without the necessary linguistic tools would be taking a huge risk to intrude on Professor Hamblin’s area of expertise, it is not entirely clear why a trained historian like Professor Hamblin, whose native language is English, should be barred from commenting on issues related to his own published scholarship simply because they arise out of American history.

Finally, on questions of historical method and the philosophy of history, philosophers and other nonhistorians are very likely to have important things to say, just as philosophers of science and historians

---

and sociologists of science offer important perspectives on metascientific issues.  

13. Why are some FARMS reviews so long?

Writers for the Review are granted broad latitude to take as much time and space as they feel they need in order to treat their subjects adequately. The saying that "the devil is in the details" certainly holds true for historical writing, and it often requires a focus on seeming minutiae both to demonstrate that a given historian's proffered "broader picture" is incorrect and to illustrate why it is incorrect. If, rather than writing long and detailed essays, FARMS reviewers tended, instead, merely to declare dogmatically that various books were "misleading" and "incompetently done," their critics would, no doubt, fault them for failing to document and support their negative judgments. Indeed, one critic of the Review, within the brief compass of a single remarkably inconsistent unpublished essay, manages to criticize FARMS both for publishing overly lengthy responses and for failing to deal with a book by D. Michael Quinn at adequate length.

It is obviously the case that many other book reviews (for example, those appearing in the Journal of Mormon History and BYU Studies) are typically shorter. That is, of course, perfectly fine. There is room in the world of scholarship for both short reviews and review essays. (The Times Literary Supplement and the New York Review of Books, for example, commonly serve up essays that are worth reading whether or not one ever lays eyes on the books that occasioned them.) Review notes, longer reviews, and review essays serve somewhat different purposes and often complement each other. From the very first issue of the Review, some of its essays have, I would contend, been more

9. That writers on history are not necessarily sophisticated thinkers is unmistakably demonstrated in the difficulty that one subject of a pair of FARMS reviews has had, along with his would-be defenders, in understanding the use by one of the reviewers of the concepts of naturalism and naturalistic explanation. He appears to believe that FARMS has accused him of atheism. For the record, I wish to say that this is not true. I am well acquainted with him—indeed, have considered him to be a friend since our days in graduate school—and know him not to be an atheist. I would never have let such a charge by had I seen it. But I did not see such a charge and still do not.
important than the books to which they were responding. That was by deliberate design: The FARMS Review of Books was never intended to be merely an ephemeral buyer’s guide to the ever-changing Mormon book market. In fact, I’m rather proud of the fact that the Review has frequently served as a kind of hatchery for intrinsically important articles, for new ideas and cutting-edge arguments.

14. Why does the FARMS Review of Books devote so much attention to books of little or no merit, such as Decker’s Complete Handbook on Mormonism?

The answer to this question lies partly in my quirky predilections as the Review’s founder and editor. The hostile mendacity of much anti-Mormon literature fascinates me, in an odd sort of way. And dealing with such writing is, simply, good clean fun. (As I tell my wife, it’s an odd hobby, but there are worse ones: it might have been cocaine.) The principal part of the answer, however, lies in what I have already noted above: Whether or not we chose the role, it is nonetheless the fact that FARMS has become an important resource to which many turn when questions arise concerning the fundamental claims of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Anti-Mormon propaganda, while in a very real sense truly beneath the notice of serious students of the restored gospel, nonetheless represents a genuine challenge to some of those considering the claims of the church. And not merely in the hinterlands. We regularly receive questions about this or that specimen of anti-Mormon literature—I myself have fielded inquiries in the recent past from such places as Australia, France, Germany, and, yes, Utah Valley—and we know that some of our responses have been of value to investigators, to missionaries, and to troubled members of the Church of Jesus Christ.¹⁰

An Announcement

For those who, despite the foregoing comments, remain committed to the Unitary Mind Theory of the Review, their demonology is about to become considerably more complex. (Or more deep and rich, if one’s inclinations run in that particular ideological direction.) For the editorship is now, one might say, revealing itself to be socially trinitarian. (The most committed acolytes of the Theory may wish to press on toward a full-bodied ontologically trinitarian view of FARMS editorship, or even some form of modalism, but I frankly doubt that they’ll persuade more than a few of their cobelievers to take that step.) Two new associate editors have been appointed to assist with the production of the FARMS Review of Books: Louis C. Midgley and George L. Mitton.

Louis Midgley, a figure familiar to readers of the Review from the numerous essays he has published in it, received a Ph.D. from Brown University’s Department of Political Science. His graduate work and subsequent research focused on philosophical theology and its implications for doctrines of natural law and the moral underpinnings of government, on the relationship between divine and human things. Along with the standard readings in political philosophy—Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Marsilius of Padua, and William of Ockham—and the great Reformers, he concentrated on the twentieth-century Protestant theologians Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, Rudolf Bultmann, C. S. Lewis, and Reinhold Niebuhr, and he studied with Paul Tillich at Harvard.11

Joining the faculty at Brigham Young University, Midgley regularly taught courses on jurisprudence, Alexis de Tocqueville’s Democracy in America, The Federalist Papers, and David Hume’s Essays (including Hume’s religious opinions) and pursued his interests in

intellectual history, or what might be termed the history of political philosophy, broadly understood. While not a Straussian, Midgley was influenced by that prominent political philosopher, and he reports that discerning readers will recognize such influence in some of his work for the *Review.*

Now retired from Brigham Young University, Midgley and his wife returned to the States in 2000 after spending two years directing the Lorne Street Institute of Religion in Auckland, New Zealand. He willingly admits what a friend and colleague describes as “an irrational sentimentality for anything Maori.” For fifteen years, he claims, he regularly caught between three hundred and six hundred wild trout (not hatchlings or planters) annually. He is, moreover, a published expert on fig cultivation.

George Mitton, a longtime FARMS volunteer, earned a master’s degree in political science from Utah State University and followed that up with further graduate studies in political science, public law, and public administration at the University of Utah and then, for three years, at Columbia University in New York City. While at Columbia, he served as a teaching fellow in the political science department of the City College of New York.

After a two-year stint as an economic analyst in the airline industry, working at the interface between the public and private sectors, Mitton accepted a position in the Oregon state government, where he worked for roughly twenty-five years. First, he served in the governor’s budget office. Thereafter, for the majority of his time in Oregon, he was assistant director of the Education Coordinating Commission, a government agency involved in planning and coordination


for the colleges and universities in the state, both public and private. His duties involved not only preparing and editing government reports and documents but working with state legislators, college and university presidents, and the governor’s staff. He and his wife returned to Utah in 1988.

Mitton has long been intensely interested in the study of Latter-day Saint history and doctrine. He has coauthored two substantial essays in this periodical, reviewing John L. Brooke’s *The Refiner’s Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644–1844* and D. Michael Quinn’s *Same-Sex Dynamics among Nineteenth-Century Americans: A Mormon Example*. He has garnered extensive experience in church service as a bishop, a member of three high councils and three other bishoprics, and a teacher.

It is a pleasure to welcome these two friends and colleagues to formal involvement with the *FARMS Review of Books*. They will help in the identification of books and items for review and in the recruiting of suitable reviewers, as well as in editing, evaluating, and offering suggestions to improve submitted essays.

**Editor’s Picks**

In accordance with venerable precedent, I shall now list certain texts or items treated in the present issue of the *Review* and offer my own (unavoidably subjective) ratings of them. In some cases, my evaluations derive from personal and direct acquaintance with the materials in question. In every case, I have determined the ranking after reading the relevant review in this issue and after further conversations either with the writer of the review or with those who assist in the production of this *Review*, including the two new associate editors. The final judgments, however, and the final responsibility for

making them, are mine. As in previous issues, this is the scale that I use in the rating system:

**** Outstanding, a seminal work of the kind that appears only rarely.
**** Enthusiastically recommended.
** Warmly recommended.
* Recommended.

As I say, these rankings are inescapably subjective. Whether a given publication should receive two or three stars, or one or two, is not a matter that can be subjected to rigorous, objective tests. It isn't a matter on which all of us will likely agree. Even I will change my mind from day to day. Probably the most important thing here is simply the fact that we recommend something, as opposed to—well, not recommending it. In any event, here follow my ratings for the items treated in the present issue of the FARMS Review of Books that I feel we can commend to our readers:

*** John Gee, A Guide to the Joseph Smith Papyri
*** Donald W. Parry and Stephen D. Ricks, The Temple in Time and Eternity
*** John A. Tvedtnes, The Book of Mormon and Other Hidden Books
*** John W. Welch and J. Gregory Welch, Charting the Book of Mormon
** Matthew B. Brown, The Gate of Heaven: Insights on the Doctrines and Symbols of the Temple
** Charles W. Hedrick and Paul A. Mirecki, Gospel of the Savior: A New Ancient Gospel
** John L. Sorenson, Nephite Culture and Society: Selected Papers
* Patrick Madrid, Pope Fiction: Answers to 30 Myths and Misconceptions about the Papacy
* Richard N. Ostling and Joan K. Ostling, Mormon America: The Power and the Promise
I express my appreciation to those who have made this number of the Review possible. Above all, I thank the writers, volunteers all, for their uncompensated work. Louis Midgley and George Mitton were already on board for this issue, and, accordingly, are welcome to share both the credit and the blame for its contents. As with every number, I am grateful to Shirley Ricks for her indispensable efforts. She was ably assisted in various tasks of preparation by Angela D. Clyde-Barrionuevo, Carmen Cole, Alison V. P. Coutts, Julie Dozier, Tessa Hauglid, Paula W. Hicken, Sunny Larson, Ellen Lund, David Pendleton, Linda Sheffield, and Elizabeth W. Watkins. The opinions and interpretations expressed here—have I said this before?—are those of the authors. They are not necessarily those of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies; they are not necessarily mine nor those of the other editors. But I hope and trust that readers will find them interesting, thought-provoking, and helpful.