

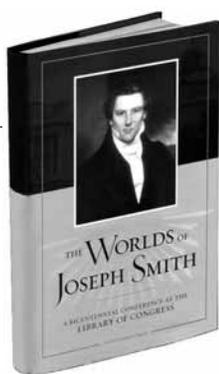
BOOK REVIEW

FAITHFUL SCHOLARSHIP GOES
TO WASHINGTONThe Worlds of Joseph Smith: A Bicentennial
Conference at the Library of Congress

Edited by John W. Welch

Brigham Young University Press, 2006

325 pages, \$24.95



Reviewed by John-Charles Duffy

The Worlds of Joseph Smith is less important as a contribution to Mormon studies than as a window into the agendas and aspirations that leading institutions of LDS scholarship bring to Mormon studies.

IN MAY 2005, the Library of Congress hosted a two-day conference to celebrate the Joseph Smith bicentennial (see SUNSTONE, May 2005, p. 74). *The Worlds of Joseph Smith*, produced by BYU Press, contains the published proceedings of that event, with photos of Smith-related paintings, documents, and artifacts that the Library placed on display for the occasion. Because the book's organization reproduces that of the conference, and because the papers have received only light editing, an assessment of the book cannot help but become an assessment of the conference itself. In the book's introduction, John Welch and other conference organizers suggest that the conference was a landmark in the scholarly study of Joseph Smith; the book's classic-looking binding and dust jacket reinforce the impression that this is a volume of special significance. However, *The Worlds of Joseph Smith* is less important as a contribution to Mormon

studies than as a window into the agendas and aspirations that leading institutions of LDS scholarship bring to Mormon studies. At a time when Mormon studies is being welcomed into the broader academy, *The Worlds of Joseph Smith* should inspire caution among non-LDS academics about working with Latter-day Saints committed to "faithful scholarship."¹

The conference was conceived, organized, and largely funded by Latter-day Saints. Although not credited as a cosponsor (that title went to BYU), LDS Public Affairs provided half of the thirty to forty thousand dollars required to fund the conference, in addition to controlling media access to the event.² Four LDS scholars, all connected to Church institutions, joined James Hutson, director of the Library's Manuscripts Division, to form the planning committee: Richard Bushman, formerly affiliated with BYU's Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for

LDS History; Robert Millet of BYU Religious Education (who conceived the idea of the conference); Richard Turley of the Family and Church History Department; and John Welch, founder of FARMS and editor of *BYU Studies*. The conference was organized as a showcase of faithful LDS scholars in dialogue with friendly non-LDS colleagues. Sixteen hand-picked presenters—eight Mormon, eight non-Mormon—spoke on four panels, each of which was "presided" over by an individual representing an institution committed to faithful scholarship: the Family and Church History Department, FARMS, BYU Religious Education, and the Smith Institute. A fifth session of the conference featured a devotional address by Dallin H. Oaks.

Non-Mormon presenters included familiar Mormon-watchers Jan Shippo and Douglas Davies, in addition to Robert Remini, author of a recent Penguin biography of Joseph Smith; Richard Mouw, president of Fuller Theological Seminary, who a few months earlier had publicly apologized for the poor treatment of Latter-day Saints by evangelical countercultists (see SUNSTONE, December 2004, p. 73); and Margaret Barker, a biblical scholar whose idiosyncratic interpretations of ancient Israelite religion had attracted the interest of FARMS. Of the eight LDS panelists, only two were not from BYU: Richard Bushman and Terryl Givens. No one from the Community of Christ was invited to speak, a slight that Douglas Davies noted during his remarks. The presence of two British participants (Davies and Barker) allowed organizers to bill the conference as "international." Considering, however, that a session of the conference was titled "The Making of a Global Religion," it is striking that participants were mostly American, all Anglophone, and all white. They were also overwhelmingly male: only two of the sixteen panelists were women (Shippo and Barker), both non-LDS.³

Because faithful scholars dominated the organizing committee, issues important to these scholars dominated the conference. As one non-Mormon scholar in attendance pointed out to me, the conference's focus slid quickly from Joseph Smith to LDS religious claims more generally. During the first session, panelists responded to a paper by Richard Bushman (pages 3–20 in the published proceedings), who argued that Joseph Smith is diminished by histories which confine him to a nineteenth-century American context and that he ought instead to be compared to figures such as Augustine and Luther. The second session focused on Smith's claims to have reproduced ancient



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texts, with two presenters offering evidence to corroborate the antiquity of the Book of Mormon. The third daytime session advanced the Mormon-evangelical dialogue that has emerged in recent years to clarify Mormonism's continuities with and differences from Protestant orthodoxy, while the fourth session was dedicated to Mormonism's international growth. Although non-Mormon panelists were happy to address these topics, their comments showed that they knew they were speaking to a Mormon audience. Latter-day Saints who are interested in the challenges of writing "faithful history," in evidence for Book of Mormon antiquity, or in dialogue with evangelicals may regard *The Worlds of Joseph Smith* as making important contributions. But those conversations offer little of use to scholars whose interest in Mormonism is connected to broader disciplinary questions, such as religious historians.

The most interesting session of the conference (and therefore of the book) was the panel on Mormonism as a world religion. This was the one session that opened with a paper by a non-Mormon, making it the only session in which someone other than a "faithful" scholar steered the conversation. The speaker was Douglas Davies, who argued that Mormonism is *not* a world religion—at least not yet—and that Church leaders' efforts to maintain uniformity across cultures and curb dissent work against its becoming one. As Davies colorfully clarified during Q&A, Mormonism will not be a world religion until it has the equivalent of Sunnis and Shiites trying to kill each other. (The Q&A is not included in the published proceedings but can be viewed as part of the online broadcast of the conference, archived at lds.org.) Two of Davies's respondents—again, non-Mormons—had additional reasons for skepticism about Mormon claims to world-religion status. Jan Shipps took pains to clarify that her famous description of Mormonism as a "new religious tradition" is not the same as Rodney Stark's thesis that Mormonism is the first new "world religion" since Islam. Stark's thesis was dissected by Gerald McDermott, who observed that Mormons are neither the world's fastest-growing new religion (the Jehovah's Witnesses surpass them) nor the first new major faith since Islam (McDermott's counterexamples included Baha'i and Sufism).

The LDS respondent to Davies's paper, BYU religion professor Roger Keller, gave one of two presentations that would later lead Jan Shipps to remark that the conference had left questions about whether or not LDS scholars "know how to operate in the professional



COULD LDS ORGANIZERS NOT SEE A

difference between an academic conference and a public symposium, between academic discourse and a devotional talk by a Church leader, or between a scholarly forum and Church public relations?

world."⁴ Rejecting Davies's analysis, Keller asserted that Mormonism would grow to "become a world religion . . . like none before it" because of its divine authority and revealed directives. Keller's remarks prompted a protest from Davies (again, not included in the published proceedings) that Keller had pushed the conversation down the road of apologetics. What kind of conference was this, Davies asked—academic or evangelistic? Earlier in the conference, BYU anthropologist John Clark had also taken an apologetic tack, citing mounting archaeological evidence to conclude that the Book of Mormon can only be accounted for as "an ancient text" conveyed to Joseph Smith "through supernatural means." No one challenged Clark publicly, but I am told that even some faithful scholars felt he had crossed a line.

HOW should Davies's question be answered? Was this an academic conference or an evangelistic one? Conference organizers clearly thought it was academic: they conspicuously labeled the event as such in publicity materials. But for faithful scholars, the distinction between the academic and the evangelistic is bound to be unclear because faithful scholarship by its very nature pushes against the boundaries that have come to separate academic and religious discourses in many scholarly settings. Even if some faithful scholars felt that Clark's and Keller's remarks had pushed too far, the conference as a whole still leaves the impression that its LDS organizers did not see a difference between an academic conference and a public symposium, between academic discourse and a devotional talk by a Church leader, or between a scholarly forum and Church public relations. The role of LDS

Public Affairs in funding and coordinating the event at the very least risked the impression that the conference aimed more at raising Mormonism's cultural status than at advancing free academic inquiry. The fact that conference organizers showed no concern for that risk is itself cause for concern.

Certainly it is exciting to see scholarship on Mormonism move out of our homegrown journals and conferences—Sunstone, *Dialogue*, *BYU Studies*, the Mormon History Association, and so on—into non-Mormon venues such as the Library of Congress, the Yale Divinity School, the Society of Biblical Literature, or Claremont Graduate University. But *The Worlds of Joseph Smith* raises questions about what faithful scholars hope to accomplish by this movement. Because individuals and institutions committed to faithful scholarship have greater access to resources than does the independent Mormon sector, faithful scholars are advantageously positioned to influence the development of Mormon studies outside Mormonism. BYU faculty and officials from LDS Public Affairs have played leading roles in assisting Claremont, for instance, in raising funds for that school's Mormon studies chair. If *The Worlds of Joseph Smith* demonstrates LDS scholars' understandings of what is appropriate discourse for an academic forum, then administrators at Claremont and elsewhere would be wise not to assume that faithful scholars and their supporters "know how to operate in the professional world," to repeat Jan Shipps's words.

The Worlds of Joseph Smith shows that some faithful scholars are more subtle than others about infusing an orthodox perspective into their work. Still, whether subtle or reckless, scholars who pursue faithful scholarship are pointedly resisting secular ground rules for the academic study of religion. Their project is to rewrite the rules, a project they share with conservative religious scholars from other traditions—evangelicals, Catholics, Muslims. Some organizations may be willing to provide a space where faithful scholars can pursue that agenda, especially if Mormons are willing to pay. The Library of Congress was willing, and *The Worlds of Joseph Smith* was the result: a showcase of LDS scholarship funded and orchestrated by Church public relations; a carefully staged display of conversation between Mormon and non-Mormon scholars that does little to address broader disciplinary questions; an occasion for Latter-day Saints to reassure themselves that they are winning the esteem of outsiders in academia and government. Do faithful scholars harbor hopes that the es-

tablishment of a Mormon studies chair at Claremont will afford similar opportunities? How about the Latter-day Saints section at the Society of Biblical Literature recently created under the leadership of John Welch, conference organizer and publisher for *The Worlds of Joseph Smith*? The questions may sound suspicious, but *The Worlds of Joseph Smith* makes suspicion reasonable.

The book's introduction offers a quotation from an anonymous scholar to the effect that the conference was "something very important. . . . We will arrive at some point in the future when we will look back and say, 'This development began at the Library of Congress'" (x). If we're going to traffic in anonymous judgments, I can toss in some that I encountered of a different nature: the non-Mormon scholar who came to see what was happening and decided it wasn't worthwhile to sit through even one session; the journalist who predicted that the Library of Congress would never let itself be used like this again. Like all of us, the faithful scholars who organized *The Worlds of Joseph Smith* prefer to hear praise. But the future credibility of Mormon studies requires taking more seriously the concerns that found voice in Douglas Davies's question: What kind of conference is this?

NOTES

1. "Faithful scholarship" is a preferred self-identifier for what I have elsewhere called "orthodox scholarship." See John-Charles Duffy, "Defending the Kingdom, Rethinking the Faith: How Apologetics Is Reshaping Mormon Orthodoxy," *SUNSTONE*, May 2004, 22-55. Faithful scholarship seeks to bring distinctively LDS perspectives (which in practice means orthodox LDS perspectives) to the study of Mormonism. Institutions that incorporate a commitment to faithful scholarship into their missions are FARMS, *BYU Studies*, and (before its demise) the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History. BYU Religious Education is dedicated to "gospel scholarship," while the Family and Church History Department pursues faithful scholarship by default. I define faithful scholarship at greater length in "'Faithful Scholarship' and the Mainstreaming of Mormon Studies," *Sunstone Symposium*, Salt Lake City, Utah, 11 August 2006 (tape/CD/download #SLO6223).

2. My information about the funding of the conference comes from a conversation with Helen Dalrymple, senior public affairs specialist at the Library of Congress, 9 May 2005, while I was reporting on the conference for *SUNSTONE*; and from a panel discussion with the conference organizers held at Brigham Young University, 23 March 2006.

3. Jill Derr, then head of the Smith Institute, presided over the final session, making her the only LDS woman whose name appeared in the conference program.

4. Carrie A. Moore, "Scholars Moving to S.L.," *Deseret Morning News*, 21 June 2005.

BOOK  NOTE

The Mormon Tabernacle Enquirer

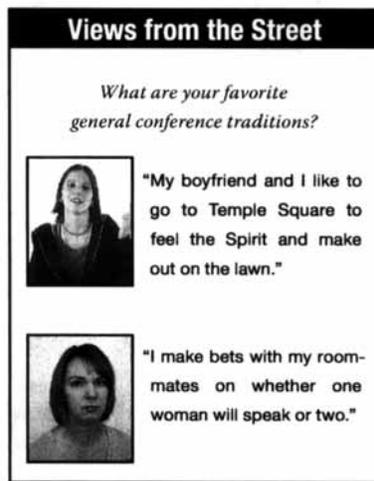
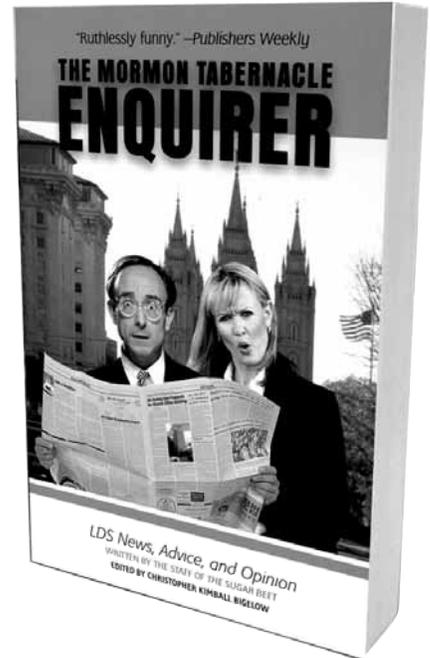
Edited by Christopher Kimball Bigelow

Pince-Nez Press, 2007

165 pages, \$14.95

Reviewed by Ann M. Johnson

THIS COLLECTION OF BEST pieces from *The Sugar Beet* is the kind of book I like to leave on my coffee table to sort out my guests by their reactions. Do visitors find it hilarious to read about the wife of a persistent adulterer being counseled by her bishop to hold family home evening and get a boob job to save her marriage? Or are they the kind who are offended by a spoof on a financial clerk paying tithing on the money he embezzles from the ward? Or worst of all, do they just not get it when they read that *Deseret Book* is selling a life-sized "Pedestal Wife" to glorify womanhood but which is not designed to "talk, cook, or form relationships"?



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The humor in these selections is never mean-spirited. Although some of the offerings are a bit risqué, most could be shared in church meetings with members who have a sense of humor. They poke fun at our LDS difficulty of trying to live "in the world" without being "of the world." There's the missionary hoping it's true that

dedicated tracting is rewarded with a sexy future wife; the wealthy sister explaining how her \$80,000 platinum/diamond CTR ring increases her spirituality, the confused sister obediently fashioning a quilt from aluminum cans when the ward Relief Society announces a "cans to quilts" slogan; and the Riverton stakes that developed a one-to six numbering system to streamline standard answers in Sunday School classes (prayer, fasting, reading the scriptures, paying tithing, obeying the Word of Wisdom, personal experience).

This is definitely "in-humor." A person who has never attended Primary Sharing Time and watched wide-eyed, three-year-olds being taught the steps of repentance just wouldn't get the humor about a regional meeting for nursery-age children counseling them to wear more modest clothing.