The Past and Future Boundaries of Mormon Studies

Quincy D. Newell and Eric F. Mason, eds. *New Perspectives in Mormon Studies: Creating and Crossing Boundaries*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013. xii + 320 pp. Paper: $24.95. ISBN: 978–0806143132.

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This is a book about boundaries: boundaries of belief, boundaries of discipline, and boundaries of methodology are all explored in various ways. How did Mormons challenge, create, and transgress boundaries of religion and culture? How do scholars of Mormonism encounter, perpetuate, and tear down boundaries of confession and discipline? The field of Mormon studies is rife with these artificial separations: believers from non-believers, historians from theologians, and hagiographers from revisionists. These frameworks and arguments are shaped by circumstances and environments, and must be revisited from time to time. That, indeed, is one of the purposes of this volume.

The multifaceted and multivocal academic movement loosely contained under the eclectic umbrella of "Mormon studies" has been reinterpreting itself even as it has reemerged as a credible academic field. The coalescing of various religious, academic, and institutional factors can be seen in the 2005 seminar on Joseph Smith that resulted in these essays: There needed to be recognized and established scholars who held enough academic credibility to put the seminar together (Richard Bushman and Grant Underwood), a national organization that understood the importance of such a seminar enough to provide funding (the National Endowment for the Humanities), a Mormon institution willing to host a critical and sophisticated look at the religion's founding (Brigham Young University), and a host of non-Mormon scholars willing to engage the topic (the contributors to this volume). Such a convergence would not have been possible in the recent past and is indicative of the new period in which we live and in which Mormon studies can finally flourish.

Richard Bushman's essay, "The Commencement of Mormon Studies," rightly notes that the seminar and this resulting collection of essays is both "an outgrowth of the New Mormon History" as well as a gesture "toward a still-undefined future" (210). It is important, then, to examine what is indeed "new" with this collection. First, the names associated with these essays, save a few, are probably new to most readers. This is good. Both editors, and nearly all of the contributors, are not members of any Mormon faith, and their previous work has not dealt with Mormonism as a topic. The future of the field, indeed, depends on the involvement beyond the constrained circles of historians who have dominated the arena in the past; fresh perspectives are necessary. Second, the disciplines and methodologies employed in this volume demonstrate the new questions and approaches needed to transcend the previously circular and limited ceiling against which Mormon history often collides. As Jan Shipps wrote in the preface, the "key" to the field's future is not archival "access" or perpetuating dated debates, but "a willingness to study the methods of more than a single discipline" (xii). And finally, these essays point to Mormon studies being used to answer broader questions, to address larger issues, and to become relevant to scholars in other fields.

Quincy Newell offers an introductory essay that is as much a manifesto for the field as it is an overview of the volume. Developing the field from "an academic 'ghetto' of sorts," where the primary audience was Mormons or those only interested in Mormons, requires us to "erode the boundaries that divide scholars from one another religiously and disciplinarily." This includes entering into "conversations broader than Mormon studies," better incorporating "Mormon history in its wider historical context," and the introduction of more "theoretical sophistication" (6–7). Just as Mormons themselves have been notorious for both crossing and fortifying boundaries, scholars of Mormonism must also be both cognizant of and critical toward the boundaries that have previously hindered academic progress.

Newell's own article is a sophisticated project that breaks down several barriers. She rightly notes that most scholarship on blacks in the LDS church has been "policy oriented," and her

work breaches this historiographical wall by instead looking at a woman's lived and written experience. She also works across disciplinary barriers, by utilizing intricate tools from literary theory in her historical analysis. In "'Is There No Blessing for Me?': Jane James's Construction of Space in Latter-day Saint History and Practice," Newell gives James's dictated autobiography a close reading in order to see how she, a black woman restricted from LDS temple ordinances, created a niche for her own righteousness within the larger church.

Just as the Utah Saints were "in the process of ritualizing [their pioneer] history," Newell explains how James inserted herself within that narrative by emphasizing her experiences in a specific way (48). Whether it was emphasizing her own suffering caused by gathering, or her position as a "quasi-child" (rather than servant) of Joseph Smith, or her handling of the Urim and Thummim (albeit wrapped in a sheet), James used her memoir as a means to establish a past in which she was a full member despite her race. "Coming as it did toward the end of James's campaign to receive her endowments and be sealed in the temple," Newell explains, "James's autobiography was perhaps the fullest expression of her idea that proximity to the first Mormon prophet and conformity to the Mormon gospel should be the measure of one's worthiness" (58). James herself was prone to trespassing boundaries, and Newell skillfully shows that, in order to capture the larger story, the historian must similarly be willing to be an academic iconoclast.

This scholarly iconoclasm often means taking on one's own disciplinary field. Take, for instance, David Charles Gore's excellent article, "Profits of a Prophet: Toward Joseph Smith's Political Economy." Gore, a professor of rhetoric and an expert in the intersections of religion, rhetoric, and economics, moves beyond the past, and limited, boundaries of studies of Joseph Smith's economic dealings—which have usually focused on early Mormonism's failed communalistic and bank endeavors—and raises some provocative issues: Even if his consecration experiment failed, there is still much to analyze in Smith's "prophetic rhetoric regarding matter and social and class distinction," which in turn "illuminates his political economy by way of his political theology"

(19). Gore provides deft analysis of things ranging from Smith's presidential platform's statements on economics, his elastic understanding of the term "economy," and the notions of "rich" and "poor" in his revealed scripture. The main lesson, and one that has evaded past economic analysis, is the extent to which Smith domesticated the economic world: "Smith's emphasis is on *household* rather than *management*, which is why it looks like he is not giving us much by way of political economy" (34).

This fresh perspective could have ended there, but Gore, like the newest generation of Mormon studies practitioners, goes further by broadening his analytical sights. This is not just a useful project to understand Smith and early Mormonism, he notes, but also a case study in demonstrating how economic analysis can be more fruitfully applied when encompassing theological claims. "The secular science of economics does too little to address the interrelations between the human necessities of belief, creation, and material provision," he tells us, chiding his own profession. "It acts obliviously to the fact that spirituality has always constituted a significant element of human economies" (35). Smith's history reminds economists and economic historians that the merging of religion and the economy work in more subtle, complex, and dynamic ways.

Sara M. Patterson's "The Ex Factor: Constructing a Religious Mission in the Ex-Mormons for Jesus/Saints Alive in Jesus, 1975–1990" provides another important example of this approach. Though its primary thesis is to explore the evolution of one dissenting organization—from a decentralized post-Mormon community to an Ed Decker-centric organization that "defends 'orthodox Christianity' from all other religious perspectives" (135)—Patterson's apt article also makes an important methodological point for religious studies: The implications and assumptions behind terms like "career apostates," she explains, "fail to allow for a spectrum of responses from those who leave religious traditions and actively choose to maintain an identity in response to those traditions" (132). Moving beyond central figures like Decker and the never-Mormon Evangelicals who fund Decker's activities, Patterson shows that once-Mormons associated with the dissenting group display a hybrid identity that embodies both continui-

ties and ruptures from their past religious affiliation. Such a lesson not only enhances the broad umbrella of Mormon studies, but also religious studies in general.

But religious studies is more than close examination of case examples to prove a broader point: The discipline largely centers on the method of comparison. Grant Underwood, in his "The Prophetic Legacy in Islam and Mormonism: Some Comparative Observations," makes the persuasive argument that what the Mormon studies field needs "is a sustained and systematic engagement with comparative religious studies." Yet such engagement should be both "aggressively interdisciplinary" as well as "international in orientation" in order to escape the previously parochial boundaries of past generations (115). In doing so, however, there must be several "methodological convictions" kept in mind: first, "similarity is not identity"; second, "parallels do not prove provenance"; and finally, "uniqueness does not prove divine origin" (102–03). Underwood skillfully shows how, when these boundaries are established, fruitful results will follow. In this instance, his article compares the Hadith literature to Lucy Mack Smith's *Biographical Sketches* and B. H. Roberts's *History of the Church* and demonstrates how followers of Mohammad and Joseph Smith inherited, adapted, and sacralized their legacies.

Of course, comparative studies don't have to be studied in a theoretical vacuum, as John Matzko ("The Young Joseph Smith and Presbyterianism") and D. William Faupel ("What Has Pentecostalism to Do with Mormonism?: The Case of John Alexander Dowie") demonstrate. In Matzko's case, Presbyterianism had a negative impact on Joseph Smith and provided a "fully developed [Calvinist] theological system against which Smith could react" (77). In Faupel's article, a reversal of influence takes place: Dowie, who came to become a prominent figure in laying the foundation for global Pentecostalism, was directly influenced in many ways by LDS doctrines in his quest to establish a new Zion through communalistic and temple experiences. The porous relationship between Mormonism and other religions is clearly apparent, and the lessons tell much not only of the LDS faith and those who influenced or were influenced by it, but also of religious development and experience in America as a whole.

Fruitful models for disciplinary crossing are found in the final two essays. In "But I Say unto You, Who Is Elias?" Stevan Davies, an agnostic who studies the New Testament, performs a work of Mormon theology as if he believed its truth claims. In examining the angel Joseph Smith named Elias, whom Smith encountered in Kirtland, Davies approaches Joseph Smith's corpus of scriptures and teachings as if they were "true, systematic, and profound." A provocative example of and contribution to the methodology of phenemological hermeneutics, his results, while interesting and enlightening, take a back seat to the importance of the *process* he invokes. And finally, in "The Saints and the Scrolls: LDS Engagement with Mainstream Dead Sea Scrolls Scholarship and Its Implications," Eric Mason tells the fascinating story of how BYU became a prominent location for a major international academic project during the 1990s. This was mostly because, Mason tells us, "BYU scholars on the international scrolls translation team consistently *downplay* the role of apologetics in their work. Instead, their cited motivations for scrolls work tend to be much more academic and intellectual than apologetic" (186). By bracketing truth claims, then, Mormon academics were able to enter the big stage and make substantive contributions to an important project.

Like most compilations, the volume is, at times, uneven. Some of the essays may receive, and perhaps deserve, little attention due to tepid conclusions and a limited range of analysis when compared to others in the book. But the whole is much larger than the sum of its parts. Most especially, this volume embodies the multidisciplinary nature the field must take in order to gain credibility and a lasting presence at the academic table. Richard Bushman closes the volume by gesturing toward the future of Mormon studies—a future that is no longer dominated solely by history. "In the future," he writes, "Mormon studies will be understood as the product of many disciplines and will include many expressive forms. Work on Mormonism will come from all the humanities, the social sciences, and the arts. Together they will constitute a new wave of Mormon studies" (210).