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Book Review of New Perspectives in Mormon Studies: Creating and Crossing Boundaries

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New Perspectives in Mormon Studies: Creating and Crossing Boundaries. Ed. by Quincy D. Newell and Eric F. Mason. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013. xiv, 230 pp. Paper, \$24.95.)

Since the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City called public attention to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints there have been a series of “Mormon moments”: periods of public interest in America’s most successful homegrown faith (Walter Kirn, “The Mormon Moment,” *Newsweek*, June 5, 2011). Most dramatically in 2008 and 2012, Mitt Romney, a practicing Mormon, ran for president, attracting intense media scrutiny. This popular interest in Mormonism has corresponded with increasing scholarly attention. The year 2005, for example, was the bicentennial of the birth of Mormonism’s founding prophet Joseph Smith Jr.—an event marked

by several scholarly conferences and the publication of Richard Bushman's huge biography, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (2005).

New Perspectives in Mormon Studies arose out of such bicentennial interest. The book collects essays produced by a diverse group of scholars who participated in a National Endowment for the Humanities summer seminar on Smith held at Brigham Young University. While many of the scholars writing in the field of Mormon studies are Latter-day Saints or have some other connection to Mormonism, with a few exceptions most of the contributors to this volume are non-Mormons. Furthermore, most of them have not previously written on Mormonism, but rather were asked to apply their backgrounds in fields as diverse as the history of Pentecostalism (D. William Faupel) and New Testament history (Stevan Davies) to the study of Mormonism. The boundaries and crossings in the title are thus denominational and disciplinary.

Like any collection of essays, this one struggles to find a coherent structure. The editors divided the contributions into three sections: internal boundaries within Mormonism, boundaries between Mormonism and other religions, and boundary crossing within the academy. Some of the essays adopt a standard historical methodology. Examples include Quincy D. Newell's fine essay on the nineteenth-century black Mormon Jane James (p. 41) or John Matzko's study of the role of Presbyterianism in Smith's early religious experience (p. 69). Others adopt less standard methodological approaches. David Charles Gore, a scholar of rhetoric, examines the political economy in Smith's early revelations, showing how they weave narratives of material and spiritual egalitarianism (p. 19). Perhaps the most interesting essay methodologically is Stevan Davies's (p. 145). Davies, a non-Mormon, describes himself as a New Testament scholar "who [is] not [a] believing Christian" (p. 146). In his essay, however, he offers a theological reading of one of Smith's visions that seeks to "make use of the interpretive stance of the Latter-day Saints insofar as I understand it" (p. 147). His essay is less a historical reconstruction of Smith's thought than an attempt to read his writings synthetically to

construct a systematic theology for Latter-day Saints.

Other essays examine the influence of Mormonism on early Pentecostalism, the idea of prophets in Mormonism and Islam, the construction of a post-Mormon identity among Latter-day Saint converts to Evangelicalism, the role of Latter-day Saint scholars in the study of the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the current state of Mormon studies. *New Perspectives in Mormon Studies* moves in too many directions simultaneously to be seen as offering any particular approach to the field. The individual essays, however, are lively and will reward readers interested in the history of religion and the place of the Latter-day Saints in that history.

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