

INTERPRETER

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A JOURNAL OF MORMON SCRIPTURE

Volume 24 · 2017 · Pages vii-xii

Looking Back, Almost Five Years On

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Offprint Series

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ISSN 2372-1227 (print)

ISSN 2372-126X (online)

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LOOKING BACK, ALMOST FIVE YEARS ON

Daniel C. Peterson

Abstract: As the axiom states, hindsight is 20/20. As Volume 24 of Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture nears the press, it seems relevant to look back to a tumultuous time nearly five years ago when the Interpreter Foundation was visualized and launched. If history has any value at all (particularly recent history), it provides a context for understanding the course on which we find ourselves. For the Interpreter Foundation, that course continues to be full of surprises and promise.

I was in Jerusalem on 14 June 2012. That night, winding down in my hotel room after a long day of guiding a large family group around to significant sites in the city, I received an email from the director of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship. He informed me that my nearly quarter-century-long tenure as the founding editor of the *FARMS Review* was finished.

Immediately prior to my departure for the Middle East, toward the end of May 2012, he and I had met at his request. At that meeting, which lasted at least three hours, he told me of his desire that the Maxwell Institute begin doing “Mormon studies.” I responded that if he intended by that to abandon the Institute’s long-standing commitment to commending and defending the faith, to turn away from its goal of serving a non-specialist Latter-day Saint audience as well as scholars, I would be unable to support him in that change. However, I continued, if he wanted to add a non-confessional, academic Mormon studies component to what the Institute was already doing and to focus some of our publications primarily on a scholarly audience beyond the Latter-day Saint community, I would be pleased to endorse the addition. Furthermore, I said I would be happy, in my capacity as the Institute’s

Director of Outreach, to seek funding to support it. I had long thought that Mormon voices needed to be more prominent in the wider world of academic religious studies and that the Maxwell Institute could play a useful role in encouraging such a change.

I was confident, when the meeting ended, that we had reached a consensus.

The 14 June email, however, made it starkly obvious to me that the change he sought was no mere add-on and that he was determined to fundamentally alter the purpose of the Institute. Its peremptory tone was also a dramatic departure from the collegial and collective decision-making that had always been characteristic of the organization's leadership. He spoke in his email of a "change in direction" and a "new course" for both the *Review* and the Institute as a whole. I realized then that my belief that we had reached a consensus or an agreement had been grievously mistaken.

I received his email as a flat repudiation not only of me but, much more importantly, of the kind of Latter-day Saint scholarship that FARMS and its successor, the Maxwell Institute, had been established to foster, to publish, and to distribute. Moreover, since the very substantial endowment undergirding the Institute by that time had overwhelmingly, if not entirely, been given by people who wanted to support its apologetic work, I felt the "new course" betrayed them. I did not believe I would be able to raise money to support the "new course" — not only because I did not think that donors would rally around what I saw as a rather anodyne and elitist project of little relevance to ordinary members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints but because I thought there were innumerable other causes, frankly more worthwhile than the research interests of the small community of "religious studies" academics interested in Mormonism, to which donors could contribute. And, since I myself felt little enthusiasm for it, I could not imagine myself being able to generate much enthusiasm in any potential donors. So, responding to the 14 June email, I immediately resigned not only as editor of the *FARMS Review* (which, by this time, the director had renamed the *Mormon Studies Review*) but as the Institute's Director of Outreach.¹

1. Years earlier, I had conceived and founded the Islamic Translation Series, which had eventually become the more comprehensive Middle Eastern Texts Initiative. Comfortable within FARMS and seeking some sort of institutional home for it, I eventually brought it into the Foundation. When I resigned as editor of the *FARMS Review* and as Director of Development, I indicated my intention to

My stay overseas continued, as long planned, for another month. It wasn't a very pleasant time, as my thoughts were dominated by what I regarded (and continue to regard) as effectively the destruction — certainly the hijacking — of an organization to which I and others had given a great deal of our time and effort, at considerable cost to our own personal academic interests and careers.

Soon, though, I began to receive emails from people who had been closely associated with FARMS and who believed the torch FARMS had carried since its founding in California in 1979 needed to be picked up, now that it had been dropped, by a new organization.

Accordingly, within just a few days of my return to the United States in late July 2012, several of us — David Bokovoy, Bill Hamblin, Bryce Haymond, Louis Midgley, George Mitton, Mark Wright, Stephen Ricks, and I — met over lunch at The Olive Garden restaurant in Provo, Utah, to discuss whether we should launch such an organization, and if so, what it should be called and what, exactly, it should do. We had no funding and no institutional backing from anybody; it was just us.

We decided to proceed under the name of The Interpreter Foundation. We also decided, since we had no office, no office staff, no space for warehousing an inventory, and no mailroom, that we would publish an online journal rather than a printed one. This had the strong advantage, too, of making us a fully twenty-first century operation — working primarily online and electronically — with print media as a secondary focus rather than a primary one. Someone had once insightfully observed that FARMS had been an internet organization *avant la lettre*; The Interpreter Foundation began its life attuned to the internet and social media.

We decided that, in order to establish a presence rapidly, to make a splash, to make ourselves known, we should take advantage of the fact that I was slated to be the concluding speaker at the annual FAIR

remain editor-in-chief of METI. But, in the aftermath of the 14 June 2012 email, I was frozen out of the project to the point that, in the latter half of 2013, seeing no practical alternative, I resigned as its editor-in-chief and have been unaffiliated with it ever since. I posted a blog entry about my resignation on 7 September 2013, under the title “The Middle Eastern Texts Initiative: Farewell and a Retrospective.” For reasons unknown to me, that entry seems to have disappeared. Fortunately, I copied it into a subsequent entry on 3 August 2016, and it can be read there: <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/danpeterson/2016/08/a-gracious-note-from-the-new-director-of-the-maxwell-institute.html>.

Conference.² If we could get our act together, I would announce Interpreter's launch there, on the late afternoon of Friday, 3 August 2012. (That was only nine days away.) We also decided that, if possible, we would publish an article that day and follow it up with an article every week, ideally for several weeks in a row.

David Bokovoy kindly offered us a paper that he had written to be our first publication.³ Mark Wright offered a paper written by himself and Brant Gardner, "The Cultural Context of Nephite Apostasy," for our second week.⁴ For our third week, George Mitton provided a review of Jeffrey M. Bradshaw's *Temple Themes in the Book of Moses*, and, for our fourth, Bill Hamblin came through with "'I Have Revealed Your Name': The Hidden Temple in John 17."⁵ Bryce Haymond undertook the urgent task of creating a website and preparing the articles for publication.

We were on our way. As I indicated in my editor's introduction to the first volume of *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*, our initial burst of productivity was facilitated by the fact that several of the articles in that initial issue came from the ill-fated, never-published last volume of my tenure at the *FARMS Review*. That volume was jettisoned under the Maxwell Institute's "new course," but the articles planned for it had already been edited and prepared for publication and, knowing

2. Since that time in 2012, FAIR (the Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research) has changed its official organizational name to FairMormon. Thus, the organization's conferences are currently known as "FairMormon Conferences," though at the time they were known as "FAIR Conferences."

3. David E. Bokovoy, "'Thou Knowest That I Believe': Invoking The Spirit of the Lord as Council Witness in 1 Nephi 11," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*, 1 (2012): 1–23, <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/thou-knowest-that-i-believe/>.

4. Brant A. Gardner and Mark Alan Wright, "The Cultural Context of Nephite Apostasy," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*, 1 (2012): 25–55, <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/the-cultural-context-of-nephite-apostasy/>.

5. See, respectively, George L. Mitton, "Book Review: *Temple Themes in the Book of Moses* by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 1 (2012): 55–59, <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/book-review-temple-themes-in-the-book-of-moses-by-jeffrey-m-bradshaw/> and William J. Hamblin, "'I Have Revealed Your Name': The Hidden Temple in John 17," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*, 1 (2012): 61–89, <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/i-have-revealed-your-name-the-hidden-temple-in-john-17/>. Dr. Jeffrey Bradshaw — a computer scientist and polymath who, as I write, is serving a mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo with his wife — is now one of the vice presidents of The Interpreter Foundation. He has been absolutely indispensable to the consistency and productivity of the Foundation.

the Maxwell Institute's new regime had cast them off, their authors gave *Interpreter* permission to publish them.⁶

On 3 August 2012, less than a week and a half after we had decided to launch *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* and to establish The Interpreter Foundation, we had a new website up; David Bokovoy's article had been edited, typeset, and published; and I announced the new organization at the conclusion of the fourteenth annual FAIR Conference.⁷ We hadn't requested donations — we hadn't even applied for tax-exempt status yet or established a bank account — but donations began to come in immediately after I had finished speaking. People handed me checks while I was still standing at the speaker's rostrum.⁸

We were and continue to be deeply grateful for such expressions of support, even moved. And we have tried our best to be worthy of the confidence placed in us and to use the funds contributed to us efficiently and wisely. When this introduction of mine appears, we will

6. See Daniel C. Peterson, "Charity in Defending the Kingdom," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*, 1 (2012): i–ix, <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/charity-in-defending-the-kingdom/>. There was some bitter irony in the Maxwell Institute director's 14 June email to me, in which he referred to "how far behind it is" and "our breach of expectations with its subscribers." It was ready to go to final editing and onward to publication and had been for many weeks, but he himself had directed members of the editorial staff to devote their attention to other projects. He had also ordered us to drop a lengthy article that formed part of the next issue, although he had not read it. (That article was Gregory L. Smith's review of John Dehlin's "Mormon Stories," which was eventually posted on the Interpreter Foundation's website at <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/gregory-l-smiths-review-of-mormon-stories/>.) We had complied immediately and had very quickly substituted another very long piece for it. (That substitute piece ultimately appeared in *Interpreter* 6 [2013] as Gregory L. Smith, "Endless Forms Most Beautiful: The Uses and Abuses of Evolutionary Biology in Six Works," <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/endless-forms-most-beautiful-the-uses-and-abuses-of-evolutionary-biology-in-six-works/>.) But we were still denied editorial services. Although, so far as I am aware, the director had read none of the articles in the volume, he indicated in his 14 June email that "I'm unwilling to publish 23:2 as it stands" — an unwillingness that had become quite obvious to us by that point.

7. A transcript of my remarks (and of my announcement of the Interpreter Foundation) is online as "Of Mormon Studies and Apologetics" at <http://www.fairmormon.org/fair-conferences/2012-fair-conference/2012-of-mormon-studies-and-apologetics>.

8. This was both gratifying and surprising. Fortunately, the leadership of FairMormon very kindly allowed us to use their bank account and their tax-exempt status for the receipt of donations until we were ready to receive them directly, ourselves.

have published at least one article every Friday — sometimes, we’ve published two or even three — not merely for an opening splash but, now, for roughly 250 consecutive weeks. The Interpreter Foundation has published multiple books, posted over 200 recorded scripture roundtables, hosted a blog, sponsored several conferences, put up a number of podcasts, and is now dipping its toe into film production.

As history reminds us, life is definitely full of surprises, some painful and others refreshingly pleasant. Personally, I feel continually thankful for the authors, editors, technical experts, speakers, and donors who have made the Interpreter Foundation possible. And I hope it’s not too tacky to say, candidly, that we’ve just begun. There are very, very good things on the horizon, and people who want to join in the cause will be warmly welcomed.

Daniel C. Peterson (*PhD, University of California at Los Angeles*) is a professor of Islamic studies and Arabic at Brigham Young University and is the founder of the University’s Middle Eastern Texts Initiative, for which he served as editor-in-chief until mid-August 2013. He has published and spoken extensively on both Islamic and Mormon subjects. Formerly chairman of the board of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) and an officer, editor, and author for its successor organization, the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, his professional work as an Arabist focuses on the Qur’an and on Islamic philosophical theology. He is the author, among other things, of a biography entitled *Muhammad: Prophet of God* (Eerdmans, 2007).

