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The Interpreter Foundation and an Apostolic Charge

Daniel C. Peterson

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THE INTERPRETER FOUNDATION AND AN APOSTOLIC CHARGE

Daniel C. Peterson

Abstract: *In April 2006, Dallin H. Oaks, in unpublished remarks at the naming of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship (as the successor to FARMS), reminded listeners that “this institute belongs to God.” On November 10, 2018, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland (also in unpublished remarks, titled “The Maxwell Legacy of the 21st Century”) renewed that commitment: the Institute should be “as faithful as eternal truth, and as bright as the light of truth that is in us.” This is, likewise, the vision of The Interpreter Foundation, in contrast to Latter-day Saint “academic ventures” at some universities. It should be “significantly different from the present national pattern,” Elder Holland emphasized. “There are times when our faith will require an explicit defense.” The Interpreter Foundation aspires to be in the fore of any such efforts.*

In unpublished remarks presented on 26 April 2006 at a relatively small dinner celebrating the naming of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Elder Dallin H. Oaks, then of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (and currently first counselor in the Church’s First Presidency), was forthright: “This institute belongs to God,” he said.

It must pursue an unconditional commitment to His cause, without any obsessions or any cultivation of cheering constituencies.

The work of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship must be genuine and pervasive — as broad as the

spiritual interests of the children of God, as faithful as eternal truth, and as bright as the light of truth that is in us.¹

As one of the leaders of the Maxwell Institute (formerly known as the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, or FARMS) at that time, I was present for that memorable dinner, at which President Boyd K. Packer of the Twelve also spoke to us. (I hope that someday the texts of both speeches will be publicly available.) It was a thrilling evening and an inspiring one. Their vision of the work of the Maxwell Institute was also ours, and I hope and believe it is the vision of those of us involved today with The Interpreter Foundation. It was also an emotional evening for us as well as for others, including members of the Maxwell family who were in attendance. Elder Maxwell, who had died nearly two years before, on 21 July 2004, had been a beloved friend and an open, articulate, encouraging supporter of our efforts.

On Saturday evening, 10 November 2018, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Council of the Twelve delivered the 2018 Neal A. Maxwell Lecture on the Provo, Utah, campus of Brigham Young University. His remarkable address, given under the auspices of the University's Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, was entitled "The Maxwell Legacy in the 21st Century."

"I am speaking only to the work of the Maxwell Institute tonight," Elder Holland said, "and not to the whole of BYU's academic effort." Still, he added, "I hope that much I say will apply across the entire campus and beyond" (1).

In my judgment, his remarks indeed apply beyond his immediate audience at the Maxwell Institute, and in what I hope is the spirit of 1 Nephi 19:23, I will make an effort here to begin to apply them to the work of The Interpreter Foundation, with which I have been associated since it was launched shortly after my departure from the Maxwell Institute in 2012: "I did liken all scriptures unto us," wrote Nephi, "that it might be for our profit and learning."

The 2018 Neal A. Maxwell Lecture offers us, along with those at the Maxwell Institute, an opportunity to evaluate what we're doing in the light of the teachings and priorities of those who have been divinely called to lead the Church at this time — and a chance to correct our course, if that should prove necessary. The Swiss Protestant theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968), borrowing a phrase associated with St. Augustine, famously insisted that the

1. Cited in Jeffrey R. Holland, "The Maxwell Legacy in the 21st Century" (unpublished remarks, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, November 10, 2018), 9. The pagination is that of a copy of the text, in my possession, which — including endnotes — runs ten pages. Hereafter, page references to Elder Holland's speech are provided in the main text. I quote from his remarks with his express permission.

Christian church must be *semper reformanda*, “always reforming” or “always reformed.” I like the phrase and the sentiment behind it, and I believe it is true of all of us as individuals and of every organization.

Elder Holland’s speech had much to say about contemporary academia, which, in a sense, is extraneous to The Interpreter Foundation, since the Foundation operates independently, without academic-institutional support and without a campus base because many of those involved with it do not occupy academic positions. Still, many of us *are* professionally or peripherally involved with scholarship, more than a few of us were once deeply involved in the Maxwell Institute, and there is no question — whether the broader scholarly world agrees with us or not — that The Interpreter Foundation is deeply involved in a scholarly enterprise. Elder Holland’s expectation that the Maxwell Institute be “a faithful, rich, rewarding center of faith-promoting gospel scholarship enlivened by remarkable disciple-scholars” (3) is certainly our expectation or hope for ourselves. Scholarship is scarcely limited to college and university campuses; sometimes, in fact, especially when I observe American academic life in general, I worry that scholarship may face some of its most serious threats precisely there, among professors, administrators, and bureaucrats.

Himself a former dean and then, from 1980 to 1989, the ninth president of Brigham Young University as well as the former commissioner of the Church Educational System (1976–1980), Elder Holland (PhD, Yale University) left no doubt about the authority with which he spoke. “With the humility incumbent upon anyone making such an assertion,” he told his audience, “I come tonight in my true identity as an Apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ” (1).

Although I accept sole responsibility for all inadequacies, limitations, errors, and missed opportunities in this message, I am here with not only the blessing but also the rather explicit expectation of the officers of the university’s board of trustees, whose executive committee I currently chair. In that sense, I speak for all of your governing advisers — not just for myself. (1)

“I can think of few other entities on this campus,” he continued, that have received the attention from the General Officers of the Church that the Maxwell Institute has — at least lately. I offer my non-campuswide, non-Marriott Center appearance in this modest venue as evidence of that tonight. The Lord’s Prophet, who chairs your board, and his fellow Apostles, who sit with

him, sent me to you. We hope it is affirming to you to have their strong, active interest in you at a time when the direction and priorities of the Church are being discussed as almost never before. We hope you welcome such focused attention, as you are measured for your role in these developments. (3)

Elder Holland even quoted from an email sent to him by Russell M. Nelson, the president of the Church, on 25 October 2018, roughly two weeks before his lecture at BYU. “Part of the Maxwell Institute problem is its identity,” President Nelson wrote. He said Church leaders need to help Maxwell Institute leaders “know who they are and why they exist” (4).²

Within the first few minutes of his speech, Elder Holland referred to Joseph Smith’s First Vision, the reality of continuing revelation, the advent of the true King, and the significance of the “end times,” observing that at least some in his audience “must be thinking this opening a bit melodramatic for the purposes of this particular gathering.” However, he continued, “I prefer to see it as apostolic. These are the topics that absorb 15 of us who toss and turn when we would like to sleep and slumber” (3).

Elder Holland noted that “Mormon studies programs on other campuses are designed to be primarily academic ventures, not spiritual ones, which is perfectly understandable” (5). He cited three examples. The first is located at Utah State University, where it proclaims that it “does not promote or reject any particular religion.”³ The second, Claremont Mormon Studies in California, says it promotes understanding of the Church “without necessarily advancing (or disputing) the veracity of its faith claims.”⁴ The University of Virginia’s Mormon studies program

2. There is some small amount of ambiguity in the actual quote used by Elder Holland. He relayed this portion of the email from President Nelson in this manner, as quoted material: “[We] need to [help them] know who they are and why they exist.” The bracketed phrases are in Elder Holland’s remarks. In context, the predicate of “them” is clear — it is the Maxwell Institute. The ambiguity is in the predicate of “we.” It may apply to Church leaders “writ large” (i.e., the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve) or it may specifically apply to President Nelson and Elder Holland. Either way, it is evident that President Nelson sees it as a leadership responsibility to help the Maxwell Institute in fundamental, mission-specific ways.

3. “Religious Studies,” Utah State University, accessed December 4, 2018, <https://religiousstudies.usu.edu>.

4. “About Claremont Mormon Studies,” Claremont Graduate University, accessed December 4, 2018, <https://mormonstudies.cgu.edu>.

describes its work principally as engaging “Mormonism both as a significant cultural fact and as a research subject.”⁵

Remarked Elder Holland,

These programs are, for the most part, a way for other people to look at us, making no particular call upon one’s belief and having no particular covenantal consequence after the course is over or the essay is written or the seminar has ended. (5)

And, as he says, he is fine with that — for such non-Latter-day Saint campuses. However, he declares,

I would be the first to oppose such an effort on *this* campus if *all* it meant was a thoughtful exploration of our religion’s “richness” or its “intellectual substance” or its “historic resilience.” ... Certainly your trustees would find it troubling. (5, emphasis in original)

In the spirit of full disclosure, you should know that initially I was against any proposal to do at BYU what was called *Mormon studies* elsewhere because I knew what Mormon studies elsewhere usually meant. However, over time I have come to see merit in a Latter-day Saint studies effort at BYU *if you are willing to make it significantly different from the present national pattern*. If you are willing to be truly unique, I can certainly endorse the idea that BYU *should* have a hand on any academic tiller dealing with the Church, becoming a place to which other such programs and chairs and lectureships might look for leadership. (5, emphasis in original)

In other words, to the extent that “Mormon studies” (or whatever we eventually come to call it) is to be practiced at Brigham Young University, it can never be merely identical to what is done elsewhere. And faithful Latter-day Saint scholarship will always tend to be different: “Of necessity, we will often be ‘a peculiar people’ in the academy as well as other arenas of life” (5).

One way to maintain balance at the Maxwell Institute, Elder Holland suggested to his audience in November, would be to remember that, while the Maxwell Institute may *include* a Mormon studies component, “albeit one determinedly unique in its nature,” it cannot reduce itself to that alone.

5. “Mormon Studies,” University of Virginia, accessed December 4, 2018, <https://mormonstudies.as.virginia.edu>.

No, as disciple-scholars who invite others to study us even as we study ourselves and who speak to the faithful every bit as much as to the detached, you will have to be comfortable being true oddballs, in that you are going to speak to *both* groups. It will usually not be in the same documents, probably not with the same vocabulary, and seldom, I would guess, in the same venue — but both the believers and the merely curious need to be able to see you as a source for some of the answers to their questions, however different that source material may be.

By speaking to two audiences, I'm not suggesting you be two-faced. This is not a call to hypocrisy but precisely the opposite. When you're writing for the household of faith, you should never write anything that would give your doctoral advisor just cause to accuse you of dishonesty. Likewise, when you are writing for an academic journal, you should never write anything that would give your ministering companion just cause to accuse you of disloyalty. Your soul must be one — integrated, intact, and whole — even as your voice may speak in different languages to different audiences. (7, emphasis in original)

This was my own long-standing aspiration for the Maxwell Institute. In a sense, the position of The Interpreter Foundation — and, accordingly, the challenge that it faces — is somewhat different from that of the Maxwell Institute and somewhat simplified. Being academically unaffiliated, the Foundation is under no obligation ever even to *affect* neutrality on the subjects to which it devotes its attention. We are committed Latter-day Saints, and we don't pretend otherwise. That said, however, we are committed to the standards of sound scholarship, to rigorous canons of evidence and analysis. In the long term, testimonies will not be sustained or successfully defended by the abuse of evidence or by shoddy reasoning. Moreover, we aspire to create a body of work that, at least eventually, nobody will be able to ignore who is interested in the subjects that we treat and on which we publish.

As part of the background for his remarks which, he quipped, were very much like “quickly step[ping] from one land mine to another” (4), Elder Holland cited an unpublished December 2014 review of the

Maxwell Institute written by Terryl Givens,⁶ David Holland,⁷ and Reid Neilson.⁸ “The current culture at MI,” says their review, “may have lost some of the institute’s founding vision and original purpose” (4).⁹ The possibility of such drift had been a specific worry of Elder Maxwell himself, voiced (for example) to a 1991 gathering of what would, after his death, come to be known as the Maxwell Institute.¹⁰

Over the course of his public ministry, Neal A. Maxwell spoke often and eloquently about his ideal of “the disciple-scholar,” and Elder Holland, recalling that ideal, commented on “that hyphenated noun Elder Maxwell left us as part of his marvelous linguistic legacy.” “Not all truths are of equal importance,” observed Elder Holland, saying that, for Elder Maxwell, “the spiritual half of that union was always the more important.” (3) “Though I have spoken of the disciple-scholar,” Elder Maxwell himself wrote, “in the end all the hyphenated words come off. We are finally disciples — men and women of Christ” (3)¹¹

“But the wonderful thing with Neal (and the thing I want for us),” Elder Holland added,

is that it didn’t have to come down to a choice between intellect and spirit. In a consecrated soul — consecration being one of his favorite doctrinal concepts — they would be aligned beautifully, a perfect fit, a precise overlay. But *if it did* come down to a choice, it would be faith — the yearning, burning commitment of the soul — that would always matter most in the end. (3, emphasis in original)

To both Elder Maxwell and Elder Holland, apologetics — the word is somewhat foreign to ordinary Latter-day Saint usage, but in the context of

6. Professor of Literature and Religion and James A. Bostwick Professor of English at the University of Richmond.

7. Elder Holland’s son and John A. Bartlett Professor of New England Church History at Harvard Divinity School.

8. Managing Director of the Church History Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

9. Citing Terryl Givens, David Holland, and Reid Neilson, External Review of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship (December 2014), 7.

10. For Elder Maxwell’s full remarks, see Daniel C. Peterson, “Elder Neal A. Maxwell on Consecration, Scholarship, and the Defense of the Kingdom,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 7 (2013): vii–xix.

11. Quoting Neal A. Maxwell, “The Disciple-Scholar,” in Henry B. Eyring, ed., *On Becoming a Disciple-Scholar: Lectures Presented at the Brigham Young University Honors Program Discipline and Discipleship Lecture Series* (Salt Lake City, Bookcraft: 1995), 21.

the Restoration it refers, simply, to advocacy and defense of the claims of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints — describes, as appropriate, an important and even essential part of such disciple-scholarship:

Regarding that faith-filled scholarship of which Elder Maxwell speaks, may I note plainly one thing we expect you to do because it is central to your *raison d'être*. It is to undergird and inform the pledge Elder Maxwell made when he said of uncontested criticism, “No more slam dunks.” We ask you as part of a larger game plan to always keep a scholarly hand fully in the face of those who oppose us. As a ne’er-do-well athlete of yesteryear, I was always told you played offense for the crowd, but you played defense for the coach. Your coaches will be very happy to have you play both superbly well. (3–4)¹²

The mission of the Maxwell Institute, Elder Holland declared, extends well beyond a small, narrow, academic elite.¹³ Referring to the 2014 review compiled by Drs. Givens, Holland, and Neilson, Elder Holland commented that

Whatever else they had in mind, I thought it a marvelous understatement for them to have said, “There will be times

12. Elder Holland cites Neal A. Maxwell, “Blending Research and Revelation,” Brigham Young University President’s Leadership Council address (19 March 2004), 2. See also Neal A. Maxwell, in Bruce C. Hafen, *A Disciple’s Life: The Biography of Neal A. Maxwell* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 509. I was present at that March 2004 address, one of his last public speeches. In it, among other things, he praised the work then being done by what would eventually become the Maxwell Institute, which The Interpreter Foundation now seeks to carry forward. On the idea of “no more slam dunks,” see Daniel Peterson, “Why Latter-day Saints Need to Defend Our Beliefs, Even as We Avoid Contention,” *Latter-day Saint Living* (1 November 2018), <http://www.ldsiving.com/Why-Latter-day-Saints-Need-to-Defend-Our-Beliefs-Even-as-We-Avoid-Contention/s/89635>. Elder Holland’s own deep personal interest in the scholarly advocacy and defense of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was demonstrated earlier in the year by his appearance and unpublished comments at a March 14, 2018, Salt Lake City dinner on behalf of the newly formed (and soon to be renamed) organization *Mormon Voices*, a confederation formed by Book of Mormon Central, FairMormon, and The Interpreter Foundation in order to coordinate joint projects and fundraising.

13. My longtime friend and former FARMS and Maxwell Institute colleague John W. Welch has told me that, in the early days of FARMS, Elder Boyd K. Packer exhorted him to “never forget the Relief Society sister in Parowan” — by which he meant (with no offense to anybody living in Parowan) ordinary, mainstream, non-academic Latter-day Saints.

when our faith will require an explicit defense.” We want the Maxwell Institute and many others to contribute to that defense — with solid, reputable scholarship intended as much for everyday, garden-variety Latter-day Saints who want their faith bolstered, at least as much as it might be intended for disinterested academic colleagues across the country whose stated purpose will never be to “prove or disprove the truth claims of the Church.” (4)¹⁴

Ranking high among Elder Maxwell’s most beloved writers was the great English scholar and Christian apologist C. S. Lewis. And, in his turn, Lewis was vocal throughout the years after his adult conversion to Christianity about his admiration for, and his debt to, the Scottish clergyman and writer George MacDonald. It was entirely appropriate, therefore, that Elder Holland, too, quoted MacDonald in the context of his insistence on the vital need for apologetics.

“Is every Christian expected to bear witness?” asked MacDonald. And then he answered his own question:

A man content to bear no witness to the truth is not of the kingdom of heaven. One who believes must bear witness. One who sees the truth, must live witnessing to it. Is our life, then, a witnessing to the truth? Do we carry ourselves in [the] bank, on [the] farm, in [the] house or shop, in [the] study or chamber or workshop, as the Lord would, or as the Lord would not?

Are we careful to be true? ... When contempt is cast on the truth, do we smile? Wronged in our presence, do we make no sign that we hold by it? I do not say we are called upon to dispute, and defend with logic and argument, but we are called upon to show that we are on the other side. ...

The soul that loves the truth and tries to be true, will know when to speak and when to be silent; but the true man [or woman] will never look as if he [or she] did not care. We are not bound to say all we think, but we are bound not even to look [like] what we do not think. (8)¹⁵

14. Citing Givens, Holland, and Neilson, *External Review*, 7.

15. Citing George MacDonald, *Creation in Christ: Unspoken Sermons*, ed. Rolland Hein (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 1976), 142. Bracketed insertions and ellipses in quotation provided by Elder Holland.

"I echo MacDonald's insistence," commented Elder Holland, "that while we are not obligated to declare everything we believe at any given time or in any one setting, we are also not even to look like what we do *not* believe" (8, emphasis in original).

In other words, although not every situation calls for testimony-bearing or explicit defense, faithful Latter-day Saint thinkers and scholars must never seem or pretend to be neutral with regard to the truth-claims of the Restoration and the Church.

We know you can't be credible in every circle if you are seen as lacking scholarly substance and categorically defensive all the time. But neither can you afford ever to be perceived as failing to serve the larger, faith-oriented purposes of the Church. (7)

Any scholarly endeavor at BYU — and certainly anything coming under the rubric of the Maxwell Institute — must never be *principally* characterized by stowing one's faith in a locker while we have a great exchange with those not of our faith. Neal Maxwell phrased it this way: "A few hold back a portion of themselves merely to please a particular gallery of peers. ... Some hold back by not appearing overly committed to the Kingdom, lest they incur the disapproval of particular peers who might disdain such consecration." And some just hold back. Period. (5-6)¹⁶

Elder Holland even suggested some topics on which the Maxwell Institute and other Latter-day Saint scholars might have something unique to contribute to the broader scholarly world:

What about the current interest in "sacred space" generally? Might we have something to say to our colleagues that would let us elaborate on the significance of holy space in our history and thought?

And we have only begun to mine the wonders of the Joseph Smith Papers. How do we get those gems out to those not of our faith and get them out without compromising their unique Latter-day Saint characteristics? (7)

16. Elder Holland is citing Neal A. Maxwell, "Discipleship and Scholarship," *BYU Studies* 32/3 (1992): 8, emphasis and ellipses in portion quoted by Elder Holland. See also Daniel Peterson, "William Law's 'serious call' to holiness," *Deseret News* (9 November 2018), <https://www.deseretnews.com/article/900041210/william-hamblin-and-daniel-peterson-william-laws-serious-call-to-holiness.html>.

I like to think that The Interpreter Foundation is well positioned to contribute to such discussions. We have, for example, convened several conferences devoted to study of the temple — most recently, the Temple on Mount Zion conference held at Brigham Young University on 10 November 2018, the very day of Elder Holland's evening remarks to the Maxwell Institute — and published three books on the topic.¹⁷ And, as resources permit, we intend to expand and deepen our commitment to temple studies.

With regard to Elder Holland's mention of the Joseph Smith Papers project, I hereby publicly confess that one of my dreams for The Interpreter Foundation is for it to organize and host a conference devoted to what that ongoing research, editing, and publishing effort is disclosing to us about the personality and moral character of the founding Prophet of the Restoration.

There remains much to be done, and much excitement to be had. Part of that excitement will come in doing whatever we can to fulfill the expectations and hopes shared, on behalf of his fellow living Apostles and prophets, by Elder Jeffrey R. Holland. I'm grateful for The Interpreter Foundation, and for all those who have made it possible. It is a genuinely marvelous vehicle — not, obviously, the only one, but a good one — for contributing to the Kingdom.

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).

17. Matthew B. Brown, Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, Stephen D. Ricks, and John S. Thompson, eds., *Ancient Temple Worship* (Salt Lake City and Orem, UT: Eborn Books and The Interpreter Foundation, 2014); William J. Hamblin and David R. Seely, eds., *Temple Insights* (Salt Lake City and Orem, UT: Eborn Books and The Interpreter Foundation, 2014); and Stephen D. Ricks and Donald W. Parry, eds., *The Temple: Ancient & Restored* (Salt Lake City and Orem, UT: Eborn Books and The Interpreter Foundation, 2016). See <https://interpreterfoundation.org/books/> for these and other books published by The Interpreter Foundation.

