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Standing on the Shoulders of Giants

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STANDING ON THE SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

Daniel C. Peterson

Early in the 1980s, my father suffered a serious heart attack. My wife and I were living in Egypt then, and we learned the news via a telegram from my brother.

Egyptian phone service was so inadequate in those days that many companies employed messengers to crisscross the city of Cairo rather than depending upon unreliable telephone connections. It took me more than twenty-four hours to get a telephone call through to California. In the meantime, I didn't know whether my father was alive or dead. My anxiety was intense, but there was little alternative. (As it happened, he recovered fully and lived on for more than two additional decades.)

We take modern means of communication for granted. But we shouldn't. I'm convinced, for example, that the church founded anciently by Christ not only didn't survive intact but *couldn't* have, largely because the contemporary means of communication weren't up to the task.

Within a remarkably short time after Pentecost, the Christian movement had expanded beyond Palestine—to Anatolia and Greece, to Rome and Italy, to Spain, eastward into Armenia and Mesopotamia, across Egypt and North Africa. It had covered vast distances, largely due to the *Pax Romana*, the “Roman peace,” and the impressive system of Roman roads that had been principally designed to facilitate the relatively rapid movement of the Roman legions across the Empire. So secure were the Romans and those who lived under their rule

that what we now call the Mediterranean Sea was, in their terminology, usually called *Mare Nostrum*, “Our Sea.”

But travel and communications were still, by our standards, very, very slow. The “supply lines” of ancient Christianity were extraordinarily long and, moreover, in the first two centuries or so they were quite thin. There simply weren’t very many Christians at the first. Thus, those lines of communication were rather fragile, and were seriously exposed to persecution, corruption, human sin and ambition, misunderstanding, forgetfulness, and a host of other threats.

The problems that this would have caused for the leadership of the fledgling Christian church should be fairly obvious.

I’ll mention a few of them in a moment, but, first, there are some other factors that we need to keep in mind: For at least the first century of Christianity, and probably for much longer, there was no New Testament. It was still being written during the thirty to seventy years following the ascension of Christ, and, even when they were complete, individual gospels and epistles circulated separately; the “New Testament” still hadn’t been gathered together, and the canon hadn’t yet been defined. Even after they had been written and put into circulation, copies of the scriptural texts, expensive and hand-produced, were extremely rare. Ordinary Christians wouldn’t have had their own private copies of scripture, let alone several of them, as many of us do today. (Many of them couldn’t read, anyway.) In fact, most branches of the church, even whole regions, would probably have had little or nothing in the way of scriptural manuscripts. And those privileged church congregations that possessed, say, part of a gospel or one of Paul’s epistles might have had nothing else.

Thus, local leaders, who might have joined the church after only the briefest of missionary instruction—commonly at the hands of preachers who, themselves, had received no more than a cursory oral introduction to the basic Christian story

and a few fundamental doctrines—would have had no scriptures to consult, let alone anything like a “general handbook of instructions,” when difficult questions arose. And teachers and class members were unable to simply flip through their personal copies of the Bible in order to learn Christian doctrine and practice.

It’s a miracle that Christianity survived as well as it did. And I mean that literally; I attribute it to the work of the Holy Spirit.

But what did leaders do when a crisis or a question or a dilemma arose? While the apostles were alive, inquiries or requests for help could perhaps be sent to *them*. But, at any given time, it might be almost impossible to know where the apostles were. In Rome? In Athens? In prison? Dead? Unlike the emperor of Rome and the decreasingly relevant Roman Senate, the leadership of the church had no permanent fixed headquarters, and the apostles were, as they had been called to be, everywhere, preaching Christ and Him crucified. (The imperial court would soon become rather nomadic itself, but that’s another story.) And how long would it take to get a response from one of them?

A local problem might brew for weeks, or months, or perhaps even years before local leadership sought advice from the apostles. (Let’s leave out of consideration cases in which the local leadership, or perhaps an entire branch or region, might have *been* the problem. There were, we know, many of these.) Then, even when the apostle’s location was known, it might require several weeks or months to get an inquiry to him. He would, of course, need time prayerfully to consider the matter, and then several weeks or months would be needed for his response to reach those who had inquired. Turnaround time for counsel from an apostle, in other words, likely would have run into months, and perhaps into many of them. That allows plenty of opportunity for problems to become insuperable.

But even if an apostle visited an area, how were local people to know that he really was who and what he claimed to be? There were no two-page General Authority photo charts in any ancient equivalent of the *Ensign* or the *Liahona*, and Paul, for example, repeatedly laments the damage caused by “false apostles.” (See, for instance, 2 Corinthians 11:13–15.) Apostolic faces weren’t familiar to people who had never met them before.

For these and other reasons, as I say, it’s difficult for me to imagine how the ancient church could ever have survived without serious deformation and distortion. And we know by divine revelation that, in fact, it didn’t. That is why the Restoration was necessary.

Especially in America, Latter-day Saints often affirm that the freedoms afforded by the United States were established in order to enable the restoration of the Gospel and the Church, which presumably could not have survived under the state churches and oppressive governments of earlier European centuries. There is truth in this, I think. But we should not neglect the preparation of the path for the Restoration via new means of transportation and communication. These have, in their own way, made possible the rise of a unified global church. They are indispensable if “the stone . . . cut out of the mountain without hands” is really to fill “the whole earth.” (Daniel 2:45, 35.)

Movable type and printing had already made books relatively inexpensive long before Joseph Smith’s birth, and, by that means, had rendered literacy something worthwhile for common people. “I defy the Pope and all his laws,” the great English Bible translator William Tyndale (d. AD 1536) had said. “If God spared [my] life, ere many years [I will] cause a boy that driveth the plough to know more of the Scripture, than he did.”¹

1. John Foxe, *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs: An Edition for the People* (New York: Eaton and Mains, 1911, repr. Greenville, NC: Ambassador International, 2005), 139.

Thus, by the time of the founding of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on 6 April 1830, each potential Latter-day Saint convert could own and read the scriptures for herself, and each could easily receive instructions via church periodicals. Very shortly thereafter, railroad travel began to be commonly established. And steamships. And the telegraph. Then came aviation, and ever more rapid travel around the world. Today's Church leaders can watch over the kingdom, and intervene where necessary, via telephone, faxes, and the Internet. Indeed, a modern apostle can be virtually anywhere on the planet, if need be, within a day. The apostle Paul couldn't have conceived of such easy movement:

Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one.

Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice
I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in
the deep;

In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of
robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils
by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the
wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false
brethren;

In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. (2 Corinthians 11:24–27)

Which brings me to this journal, and to The Interpreter Foundation. A few months ago, someone observed to me that the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) had, conceptually at least, been an Internet organization *avant la lettre*—that is, before there actually was an Internet. The initial, limited goal of the organization was to bring together a network of scholars who had been working, often in isolation, on the Book of Mormon and related mat-

ters, and to facilitate their sharing of their work, both with each other and with a small interested public.

But, given the means of communication of the day, we were basically limited to print, conferences, and the occasional fireside. And the people centrally involved in FARMS, which would later be called the Institute for the Study and Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts, and, ultimately, the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, had to be in reasonably close geographical proximity to Brigham Young University and to each other.

Now, though, The Interpreter Foundation can carry on the vision of those who founded, nurtured, and led FARMS in a way that very few could have imagined even several years ago, let alone back in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Our Executive Board includes members from various points in Utah, but also from Alberta, Florida, Missouri, New Mexico, Pennsylvania, and Washington DC, and we're in constant and easy communication with one another, including by videoconference. Our overall board of editors is even more far flung (including people in Hawaii, Ireland, and Italy), and a videoconference for the whole board is planned. The Foundation posts weekly "scripture roundtables" during which, thus far, discussants based in California, Michigan, New Mexico, Utah, and Ireland have carried on conversations with one another, in real time, about scriptural texts.

I find such things truly stunning, and I'm grateful for all those who have made it possible. The remarkable spirit of volunteerism and dedication that created and built FARMS lives on in The Interpreter Foundation, and is visibly apparent in the pages of this journal. The Foundation is more agile, more nimble, than the old FARMS ever was. I thank those who have donated time and effort to the cause, as well as those who have begun, very generously, to give of their money and means. In particular, I'm grateful right now to the authors of the pieces

in this issue of *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*, to the proof readers and peer reviewers who work the articles over during our editorial process, and to Alison V. P. Coutts, Tanya Spackman, and Bryce M. Haymond, who prepare these pieces for actual publication.

Interpreter's achievements to this point are remarkable. Amazing. And they're going to get even better still. This effort is in its infancy.

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