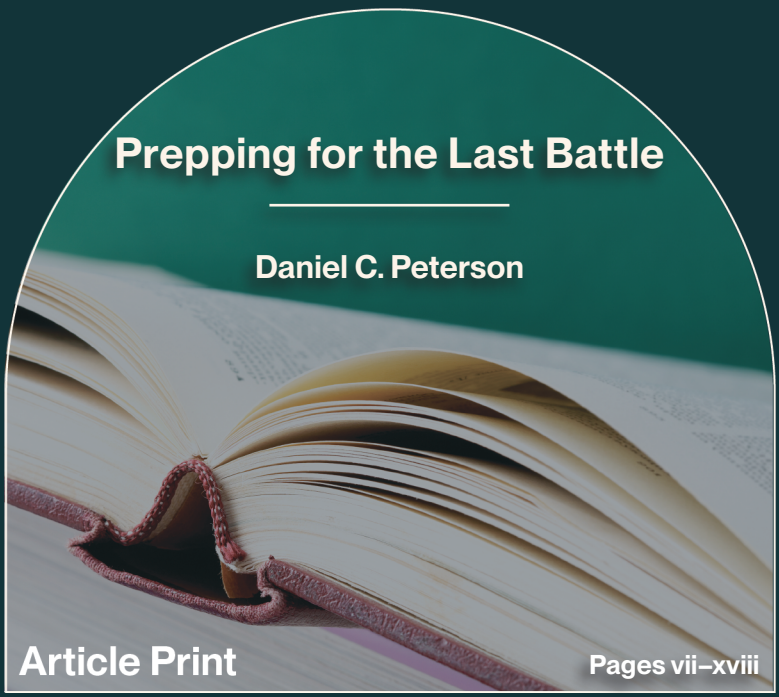
The Interpreter Foundation™

Interpreter

A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship

Prepping for the Last Battle

Daniel C. Peterson



Article Print

Pages vii–xviii

Volume 63 | 2025

ISSN 2372-1227 (print)
ISSN 2372-126X (online)

Mission Statement

Supporting The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints through scholarship.

The Interpreter Foundation supports the Church in the following ways:

- **Promotion:** We provide tools to encourage and facilitate personal learning by study and faith, and disseminate accurate information to the public about the Church.
- **Explanation:** We make the results of relevant scholarship more accessible to non-specialists.
- **Defense:** We respond to misunderstandings and criticisms of Church beliefs, policies, and practices.
- **Faithfulness:** Our leadership, staff, and associates strive to follow Jesus Christ and be true to the teachings of His Church.
- **Scholarship:** Our leadership, staff, and associates incorporate standards of scholarship appropriate to their academic disciplines.

This journal compiles weekly publications. Visit us online at InterpreterFoundation.org

Prepping for the Last Battle

Daniel C. Peterson

Abstract: *Intellectually acute, deeply learned, brilliantly imaginative, yet popular and easily accessible, C. S. Lewis was arguably the greatest Christian apologist of at least the past century. I believe that Latter-day Saints can benefit greatly from reading him and re-reading him and that those who are unfamiliar with his writing have an enviable treat awaiting them. I'm also convinced, by my own experience, that those who return to his work after having read some of it once, long ago, will find his books at least as good as they seemed on first acquaintance. In fact, they may even find, as I did, that they're even better than they had realized. This essay is a shameless plug for a great and greatly admired writer.*

This introduction will be something of an advertisement. But it's not an advertisement for anything of my own, nor even for the increasingly numerous products (e.g., articles, books, conferences, and films) of the Interpreter Foundation. Instead, it will be an unashamedly enthusiastic advertisement for the work of C. S. Lewis, a writer and thinker whose books I would like to be even more widely read (especially among my fellow Latter-day Saints) than they already are.

A scholar of medieval and Renaissance literature and a longtime teacher at England's illustrious University of Oxford and then at its great rival, the University of Cambridge, C. S. Lewis died on 22 November 1963. Less than an hour later, far off in Texas, President John F. Kennedy was assassinated. Because of that event in Dallas, Lewis's death was scarcely noticed by the news media or the public. Moreover, Aldous Huxley—the English author of, among many other

things, *Brave New World*—also died that day.[1] I can't help but think that, in some ways, Lewis's death represented the greatest loss of the three. He was only sixty-four when he passed away, and he had been in failing health for some time; I lament our loss of the brilliant books that might have been.

I've been a fan of C. S. Lewis, and of his good friend J. R. R. Tolkien, since my high school years. In fact, I consider them two of the greatest writers of the twentieth century. I've even had lunch with my family and dinner with my wife in The Eagle and Child, the Oxford pub where Lewis and Tolkien and Charles Williams and a few others used to meet in an informal group known as "The Inklings." They would gather, in what they called "The Bird and the Boy," in order to discuss literary, philosophical, and religious topics and, sometimes, to read their works-in-progress to each other. I've also had the marvelous opportunity to have spent time—though not nearly enough of it—in the Marion Wade Center at Wheaton College, in Illinois, which houses wonderful collections of materials related to Tolkien, Lewis, and Williams, as well as to Owen Barfield (a lesser known member of "The Inklings"), George MacDonald (a formative influence on Lewis), G. K. Chesterton, and the mystery novelist and translator Dorothy L. Sayers, who was a good friend of both Lewis and Williams. It was exhilarating. (While there, I put my hand into the wardrobe through which Lucy first entered Narnia in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. Unfortunately, though, all I felt on that occasion was the wooden back of the wardrobe closet. No snow.[2])

In this editorial "advertisement" of mine, I will focus on C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*. In order of publication, the seven books of the series are:

1. More than four decades ago, by the way, the stunningly prolific Roman Catholic philosopher Peter Kreeft, of Boston College, published an interesting philosophical "novel" (of sorts) entitled *Between Heaven and Hell: A Dialog Somewhere Beyond Death with John F. Kennedy, C. S. Lewis, and Aldous Huxley* (Lisle, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1982).
2. The wardrobe was hand-made by Richard Lewis, C. S. Lewis's paternal grandfather, sometime in the 1800s. For many years, it remained in the Lewis family home ("Little Lea") in Belfast, northern Ireland. When they were children, C. S. Lewis and his brother, Warren, and various cousins would sometimes climb into it and sit silently while he told stories to the others. Eventually, it was moved to Lewis's adult home ("The Kilns") in Risinghurst, Oxford, England, where he wrote all of *The Chronicles of Narnia* and most if not all of his other books. The Wade Center purchased the wardrobe at an auction in Banbury, England, on 30 October 1973.

- *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (1950)
- *Prince Caspian: The Return to Narnia* (1951)
- *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (1952)
- *The Silver Chair* (1953)
- *The Horse and His Boy* (1954)
- *The Magician's Nephew* (1955)
- *The Last Battle* (1956)

This is the order in which I first read them and in which I typically still read them, and they make perfectly good sense in this sequence. However, their publication order differs from their "historical" order, their overall narrative chronology, and, although many others disagree, some prefer to read them in the following order:

- *The Magician's Nephew*
- *The Horse and His Boy*
- *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*
- *Prince Caspian: The Return to Narnia*
- *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*
- *The Silver Chair*
- *The Last Battle*

Anybody who is interested should feel free to read them in either of these orders; they're comprehensible either way.[3]

As a matter of fact, though, I'll limit myself here to the final installment of the seven books of the *Chronicles*, which is *The Last Battle*. I read the *Chronicles* at least three times before I was married, and then I read each of the seven books individually to each of my children—along with Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and his *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and Lewis's own *Perelandra* trilogy and a number of other books of narrative and poetry, including *Beowulf*. Every day, I looked forward to those nighttime readings. They were a highlight of those years. Sharing such

3. For those who enjoy audiobooks: My wife and I are very fond of a set of recordings of *The Chronicles of Narnia* that features an exceptionally distinguished cast of British readers: *The Magician's Nephew* (Sir Kenneth Branagh), *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (Michael York OBE), *The Horse and His Boy* (Alex Jennings CBE), *Prince Caspian* (Lynn Redgrave OBE), *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (Sir Derek Jacobi), *The Silver Chair* (Jeremy Northam), and *The Last Battle* (Sir Patrick Stewart). See *The Chronicles of Narnia,* Complete Audio Collection, performed by Kenneth Branagh et al., HarperCollins 2005, digital audio MP3, 2025 mins., harpercollins.com/products/the-chronicles-of-narnia-complete-audio-collection-c-s-lewis?variant=40372099350562.

beloved books, such beloved worlds, with my children was, for me, one of the greatest satisfactions of being a father.

So, now that my children are off on their own and my grandchildren aren't conveniently available for nightly readings, I want to share these things with others. And I want to disabuse anybody out there who suffers from the misconception that *The Chronicles of Narnia* are merely children's books.[4] They are not. Although they can surely be shared with children, who will almost certainly enjoy them, they offer a rich, imaginative, and thoughtful presentation of much of the central message of Christianity. And it is, I think, a Christianity that usually resonates with readers who are committed members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Moreover, those who think themselves sufficiently acquainted with Narnia because they've seen the three film adaptations that have been made from them—*The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (2005), *Prince Caspian* (2008), and *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (2010)—should understand that, entertaining though the films are, they don't begin to convey the cleverness, the wit, the sheer brilliance, and the subtle lessons of the original books.

In this essay, I will draw three illustrative examples from *The Last Battle* in the hope of making my point. Before I share them, though, I offer a brief general background note that will help in understanding at least the first two specimens.

The background for much of the overall story of the "Chronicles" is the longstanding conflict between the kingdom of Narnia and, across the desert to the southeast, the much larger Empire of Calormen. In the better parts of its history, at least, Narnia is a good place that follows Aslan, the talking lion who is described as the King of Beasts, the King above all of the Narnian High Kings, and the son of the Emperor-Over-the-Sea. The Emperor never directly appears in the stories, but Aslan is an obvious representation of Christ.

On the other hand, Calormen is not a good place. Whereas

4. It scarcely required Michael Ward, *Planet Narnia: The Seven Heavens in the Imagination of C. S. Lewis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) for me to recognize the religious depth of the *Chronicles*, but Ward's demonstration that medieval cosmology, a subject that fascinated Lewis throughout his life, provides the imaginative key to the seven novels surely establishes the point. Ward argues that the Narnia stories were designed to express the characteristics of the seven medieval "planets": Jupiter, Mars, Sol (or the Sun), Luna (or the Moon), Mercury, Venus, and Saturn. In each book of the *Chronicles*, the plot, the ornamental details, and especially the portrayal of Aslan, the Christ-figure, all reflect the personality of the relevant governing "planet."

Narnia is plainly an idealized version of medieval Christian England, Calormen is redolent of the pre-modern Islamic world, the longstanding military rival of medieval and early modern Europe. (Recall that C. S. Lewis was an authority on medieval and Renaissance literature. The name *Calormen* may even derive from the Latin *calor*, or "heat.")[5] The Calormenes wear flowing robes, orange-colored turbans, and wooden shoes with upturned toes, and their favored weapon is the scimitar. Their unit of currency is the "crescent." They are an ancient people with dark skin and long beards, and they are known for their wisdom, which is often expressed in moralizing maxims and sententious poetry, their wealth and minarets and ornate palace architecture, their courtesy, and their cruelty. Every reference to their autocratic ruler, the "Tisroc," is followed by the Arabic-sounding formula "may he live forever." In stark distinction to Lewis's otherwise plainly Islamic model, though, the Calormene god, Tash, is portrayed as many-armed, vulture-headed, and, appropriately for Calormene culture, fiercely cruel.[6]

In the final, culminating battle in the history of Narnia — precipitated by a Calormene invasion that ultimately ushers in that world's apocalyptic end — a group of cynical dwarves refuse to commit themselves either to the good cause of Aslan and the Narnians or to the evil forces of Tash and the Calormenes, and their cynicism prevents them from seeing reality as it is:

> "Aslan," said Lucy through her tears, "could you — will you — do something for these poor Dwarfs?"
>
> "Dearest," said Aslan, "I will show you both what I can, and what I cannot, do." He came close to the Dwarfs and

5. In J. R. R. Tolkien's Middle Earth, the people of the East also seem distinctly Middle Eastern—right down to their boats with lateen sails, very like the feluccas that still sail the River Nile—and probably for similar reasons: Tolkien, too, was a scholar of medieval Western literature, and the two friends read each other's manuscripts as they were writing them.
6. Although I've done no research to prove it, I think it very likely that Lewis derived the names Aslan and Tash from some mention, somewhere, of archaeological work at the site of ancient Hadātu. Located about nineteen miles (thirty kilometers) east of the Euphrates River in northern Syria, Hadātu had been the center of an Aramaean kingdom in the Iron Age. The first excavations there were conducted in 1928 by François Thureau-Dangin for the Musée du Louvre in Paris, and Lewis, based at that time in Oxford, might have been aware of them. If so, he would have noticed the modern Turkish name of the place, which is Arslan Tash (*Arslan Taş*, "Lion Stone"). The occurrence of the two names *Aslan* and *Tash* in the "Chronicles" seems unlikely to be coincidental.

> gave a low growl: low, but it set all the air shaking. But the Dwarfs said to one another, "Hear that? That's the gang at the other end of the stable. Trying to frighten us. They do it with a machine of some kind. Don't take any notice. They won't take *us* in again!"
>
> Aslan raised his head and shook his mane. Instantly a glorious feast appeared on the Dwarfs' knees: pies and tongues and pigeons and trifles and ices, and each Dwarf had a goblet of good wine in his right hand. But it wasn't much use. They began eating and drinking greedily enough, but it was clear that they couldn't taste it properly. They thought they were eating and drinking only the sort of things you might find in a stable. One said he was trying to eat hay and another said he had got a bit of an old turnip and a third said he'd found a raw cabbage leaf. And they raised golden goblets of rich red wine to their lips and said "Ugh! Fancy drinking dirty water out of a trough that a donkey's been at! Never thought we'd come to this." But very soon every Dwarf began suspecting that every other Dwarf had found something nicer than he had, and they started grabbing and snatching, and went on to quarrelling, till in a few minutes there was a free fight and all the good food was smeared on their faces and clothes or trodden under foot. But when at last they sat down to nurse their black eyes and their bleeding noses, they all said:
>
> "Well, at any rate there's no Humbug here. We haven't let anyone take us in. The Dwarfs are for the Dwarfs."
>
> "You see," said Aslan. "They will not let us help them. They have chosen cunning instead of belief. Their prison is only in their own minds, yet they are in that prison; and so afraid of being taken in that they can not be taken out."[7]

This is, to me, a powerful representation of the state of people who have forsaken the Spirit and who can no longer properly discern the Good or the things of God. The prophet Isaiah wrote about such individuals in his day, saying,

> Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter! Woe unto them that are wise

7. C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (New York: HarperTrophy, 1994), 167–69.

> in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight! (Isaiah 5:20–21)

I'm reminded in this context, too, of my favorite single line from among the many volumes that were published in Brigham Young University's Middle Eastern Texts Initiative (METI). I was the founder of METI and, for years, its editor-in-chief. The project produced bilingual editions of books (mostly Islamic, but also sometimes Eastern Christian and Jewish) from the classical Islamic world; the volumes were printed at Brigham Young University Press and distributed by the University of Chicago Press. A few years after my enforced departure from METI, the series was given by the new leadership of BYU's Maxwell Institute to E. J. Brill Publishing in the Netherlands — a move on which I will make absolutely no public comment.

One of the METI volumes includes an essay by al-Ghazālī (d. AD 1111), who ranks among the most important figures in the history of Islamic thought. He was a legendarily brilliant philosophical theologian and legal scholar who spent most of his life in Iran and Iraq but who also sojourned for a significant period in Jerusalem. In the essay to which I refer, he is talking about poorly performing students, and, in that context, he attributes the following remark to Jesus:

> Even though I managed to raise the dead, I have never been able to cure an idiot![8]

Now, I'll admit that my first inclination when I came across that passage was to say that it couldn't possibly be authentic. And that's probably correct. But al-Ghazālī was entirely serious, and he plainly regarded the statement as genuine. Furthermore, his citation of it takes us back fully a thousand years or more — or, in other words, halfway to the time of Jesus. So, maybe! I have to confess that I rather like the idea that the Savior might have said such a thing. It humanizes him a bit. Surely, with all those long walks from Nazareth to Capernaum, and from Capernaum to Jericho, and from Jericho to Jerusalem, and from Jerusalem back up to Capernaum or Nazareth, it can't all have been immortal sermons and solemn earnestness. (Can it? Maybe I'm just not fit for heaven.) There must have been some small talk. And the image of Jesus trudging along with the disciples down those dusty

8. Al-Ghazālī, "O Son!," in *Classical Foundations of Islamic Educational Thought*, ed. Bradley J. Cook, trans. David C. Reisman (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2010), 103.

paths and confiding, at the end of a tough day, "You know what, Peter? I can raise the dead, but I just can't cure idiots" is very appealing to me.

My second example from *The Last Battle* involves a valiant young Calormene warrior named Emeth who had faithfully sought to serve the god Tash according to his best understanding. In the end, though, Emeth comes face to face with Aslan — and, to his astonishment, Aslan welcomes him. Emeth relates the story himself:

> Then I fell at his feet and thought, Surely this is the hour of death, for the Lion (who is worthy of all honor) will know that I have served Tash all my days and not him. Nevertheless, it is better to see the Lion and die than to be Tisroc of the world and live and not to have seen him. But the Glorious One bent down his golden head and touched my forehead with his tongue and said, *Son, thou art welcome*.[9]

Emeth — whose name is suspiciously similar to the Hebrew word *'emeth* (אמת), which can be translated as "truth," "firmness," "faithfulness," or "veracity" — responds to Aslan in surprise:

> But I said, Alas, Lord, I am no son of Thine but the servant of Tash. He answered, Child, all the service thou hast done to Tash, I account as service done to me. Then by reason of my great desire for wisdom and understanding, I overcame my fear and questioned the Glorious One and said, Lord, is it then true, as the Ape said, that thou and Tash are one? The Lion growled so that the earth shook (but his wrath was not against me) and said, It is false.[10]

It is, in other words, not true that Aslan and Tash are one and the same. It is not true that Molech and Yahweh are identical, or that all religions really teach the same thing, that all ways lead to God, or that we are all ascending the same mountain (albeit by different paths). Aslan explains:

> Not because he and I are one, but because we are opposites, I take to me the services which thou hast done to him. For I and he are of such different kinds that no service which is vile can be done to me, and none which is not vile can be done to him.[11]

9. Lewis, *Last Battle*, 188.
10. Lewis, *Last Battle*, 188–89.
11. Lewis, *Last Battle*, 189.

Wicked people and hypocrites who do evil, who behave wickedly in the name of God or who attempt to justify vile behavior by appealing to God, are serving and worshiping a false god.

> They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service. And these things will they do unto you, because they have not known the Father, nor me. (John 16:2–3)

But those who genuinely seek to do good are, whether they know it or not, following the whisperings of the Spirit and worshiping the true God. As the Lion puts it to Emeth:

> Therefore if any man swear by Tash and keep his oath for the oath's sake, it is by me that he has truly sworn, though he know it not, and it is I who reward him. And if any man do a cruelty in my name, then, though he says the name Aslan, it is Tash whom he serves and by Tash his deed is accepted. Dost thou understand, Child? I said, Lord, thou knowest how much I understand. But I said also (for the truth constrained me), Yet I have been seeking Tash all my days. Beloved, said the Glorious One, unless thy desire had been for me thou wouldst not have sought so long and so truly. For all find what they truly seek.
>
> Then he breathed upon me and took away the trembling from my limbs and caused me to stand upon my feet. And after that, he said not much but that we should meet again, and I must go further up and further in. Then he turned him about in a storm and flurry of gold and was gone suddenly.[12]

I think, in this context, of the Book of Mormon teaching that there are, in a certain important sense, only two "churches:"

> And he said unto me: Behold there are save two churches only; the one is the church of the Lamb of God, and the other is the church of the devil; wherefore, whoso belongeth not to the church of the Lamb of God belongeth to that great church, which is the mother of abominations. (1 Nephi 14:10)

Sadly, there are undoubtedly those whose names are on the rolls of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who will be found in the end, by virtue of how they have actually lived and who or what they

12. Lewis, *Last Battle,* 189.

have actually served, to be communicant members of the church of the devil. Gloriously, however, there are certainly also people around the world who, although not yet members of the restored Church and very possibly not even Christian, have striven to be faithful members of the Church of the Lamb of God to the extent of their understanding — and it will be counted unto them for righteousness, even if they still "must go further up and further in."

C. S. Lewis's "children's book" *The Last Battle* offers a helpful way for us to understand the situation of hundreds and hundreds of millions of our brothers and sisters, our Father's children, who have not heard or accepted the fulness of the Gospel in this life.

The final chapter of *The Last Battle* is entitled "Farewell to Shadowlands." To understand what happens on its final page, a reader must know that the four Pevensie children — Peter, Edmund, Susan, and Lucy — are central to the *Chronicles of Narnia*. Although originally from our own world, they have also spent a great deal of time in Narnia and have played vital roles in its history. Now their story concludes. Aslan speaks:

> "You do not yet look so happy as I mean you to be."
>
> Lucy said, "We're so afraid of being sent away, Aslan. And you have sent us back into our own world so often."
>
> "No fear of that," said Aslan. "Have you not guessed?"
>
> Their hearts leaped and a wild hope rose within them.
>
> "There *was* a real railway accident," said Aslan softly. "Your father and mother and all of you are — as you used to call it in the Shadow-Lands — dead. The term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning."
>
> And as He spoke He no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes

> on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.[13]

"The dream is ended: this is the morning." Those words had a powerful impact on me when I read them for the first time, and they still do.

If there are any out there who haven't yet really made the acquaintance of C. S. Lewis, I have to say that I envy you. Genuinely. Good things are ahead for you. And I commend him enthusiastically to your attention. He is a great pleasure to read, but also deeply insightful and wonderfully imaginative. I wish that *I* could discover him for the first time all over again. That said, though, my re-readings have been extremely enjoyable, and I'm seeing treasures in his books that I had never noticed before. If you've already read Lewis, read him again. If you've only read a little, read more.

But reading this newest volume of *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship*—its sixty-third—will also afford you a host of insights and, I'm confident, considerable pleasure. As I always do at this point, I want to thank all of the authors, reviewers, source checkers, editors, and donors who have made it possible. In particular, I thank Allen Wyatt, Jeff Lindsay, and Godfrey Ellis for their dedicated editorial work evident in this volume's articles. Additionally, I thank Brant S. Gardner and Rebecca Reynolds Lambert for their equally dedicated editorial work, already underway, that will become evident in the next volume of *Interpreter*. The Interpreter Foundation as a whole and this journal in particular have been created and are largely sustained by the devoted contributions of volunteers. I am deeply, deeply grateful to them.

Daniel C. Peterson *(PhD, University of California at Los Angeles) is a professor emeritus of Islamic studies and Arabic at Brigham Young University, where he founded the University's Middle Eastern Texts Initiative. He has published and spoken extensively on both Islamic and Latter-day Saint 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*

13. Lewis, *Last Battle*, 210–11.

work as an Arabist focuses on the Qur'ān and on Islamic philosophical theology. He is the author, among other things, of a biography entitled Muhammad: Prophet of God *(Eerdmans, 2007). With his wife, he is executive producer of the films* Witnesses *(2021),* Undaunted: Witnesses of the Book of Mormon *(2022), and* Six Days in August *(2024).*

Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship is a peer-reviewed academic journal published by The Interpreter Foundation. Our mission is simple: Supporting The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints through scholarship.

The Interpreter Foundation