



BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

- Title** Introduction
- Author** Matthew J. Grey and Cory Crawford
- Reference** *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* 8 (2016): 1–11.
- ISSN** 2151-7800 (print), 2168-3166 (online)
- Abstract** Grey and Crawford introduce the forum on faith and biblical scholarship from which the first six essays of this issue arose. These essays examine how different faith communities—Jewish, Catholic, Protestant, and Latter-day Saint—have interacted with modern biblical scholarship.
- DOI** <https://doi.org/10.18809/sba.2016.0101>

# Forum on Faith and Biblical Scholarship

## Introduction

*Matthew J. Grey and Cory Crawford*

IN THE SUMMER OF 2016, the editors of *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* (Brian Hauglid, Matthew Grey, and Cory Crawford) organized a one-day workshop sponsored by the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship to consider the relationship between modern biblical studies and various faith communities who view the Bible as sacred scripture. This workshop, which was held on the campus of Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, included essays presented by six outstanding scholars who approached the topic from Jewish, Catholic, Protestant, and Latter-day Saint perspectives, and we are pleased to publish the revised versions of these essays in this roundtable forum.

The idea for this workshop came as the editors of *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* considered ways in which the journal—and by extension the Latter-day Saint community associated with it—could more deeply engage with critical issues of biblical scholarship, more actively dialogue with (and learn from) leading biblical scholars outside the LDS tradition, and more effectively consider ways to navigate the challenges of integrating modern biblical studies within a context of faith. One way to meet these objectives, we felt, was to organize a series of occasional theme-based workshops in which both LDS and non-LDS scholars of the Bible could come together to discuss pertinent topics, share different

perspectives, and offer constructive suggestions on how best to address these topics within the framework of our respective communities. For this series of workshops, which we hope will be held on an annual or biennial basis, we envision that participating scholars will present essays on a variety of complex subjects relating to biblical authorship, biblical historicity, biblical hermeneutics, and biblical religious authority and that those essays—refined after vigorous discussion with the other participants—will be published in a roundtable format.

As we considered the topics that should ultimately be addressed in this venue, we thought it would be appropriate to begin the series with a discussion of the basic and underlying issue of how, broadly speaking, different faith communities have interacted with modern biblical scholarship. As is well known, the modern discipline of biblical studies has long had a tumultuous relationship with traditional religious beliefs: the development of source criticism has challenged centuries-old assumptions about the Mosaic authorship of the Torah; archaeological discoveries have challenged the historicity of key events in biblical history such as the exodus, the Israelite conquest of Canaan, and the Davidic monarchy; textual criticism has challenged previous views of the development and stability of the biblical text (both Hebrew Bible and New Testament); and historical research has challenged traditional understandings of the life and teachings of Jesus. We anticipate that each of these and other issues will eventually be addressed in their own right, but we felt that exploring the larger relationship between these developments and the religious communities affected by them would be an important place to begin our series of conversations.

In particular, at this inaugural workshop we hoped to hear from a wide range of scholars who could shed light on this topic from the perspective of different faith communities, including Jewish, Catholic, Protestant, and Latter-day Saint circles, all of which have wrestled with these issues to one degree or another, often with mixed (and sometimes painful) results. By gathering scholars to share these different perspectives, we were interested to articulate the ways in which various religious communities have historically responded to, dealt with, and

been affected by modern biblical criticism. We were interested to know about the current climate within these communities regarding this issue and how those respective climates may compare with the communities' past experiences. We were interested to learn about the unique limitations, challenges, and potentials of these communities in dealing with the issues presented by biblical scholarship and, ultimately, we hoped to compare constructive suggestions of how scholars and interested lay members of these communities might go forward in interacting with biblical studies in a context of belief. Each of these goals was met and expanded upon by the essays of the six scholars who graciously agreed to participate in the workshop.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, efforts to work through the complicated relationship between faith and scholarship from different religious perspectives are not new; the last decade, for example, has seen a significant increase in conferences and publications—many of which were organized and produced by some of the participants in this workshop—which present Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant viewpoints on this very topic. Prominent examples include James Kugel's *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture Then and Now* (Free Press, 2007), which is a comparative introduction to both ancient and modern approaches to the biblical text; the recent conference at the University of Pennsylvania and subsequent publication of dialogic essays by Marc Brettler (an observant Jewish scholar), the late Daniel Harrington (an ordained Catholic priest), and Peter Enns (a practicing Protestant scholar) called *The Bible and the Believer: How to Read the Bible Critically and Religiously* (Oxford University Press, 2012); a recent collection of essays entitled *Evangelical Faith and the Challenge of Historical Criticism* (Baker Academic, 2013); and the highly accessible and thoughtful book by Peter Enns, *The Bible Tells Me So: Why Defending Scripture Has Made Us Unable to Read*

---

1. In addition to the essays published in this forum, see the series of podcast interviews conducted by Blair Hodges of the Maxwell Institute with the first three of our presenters—James Kugel, Peter Enns, and Candida Moss (with Joel Baden)—on topics of direct relevance to the issues discussed here. Those are available at <http://mi.byu.edu/category/podcast/> (nos. 52, 53, 54).

*It* (HarperOne, 2014). Each of these efforts has made valuable strides toward constructively addressing the sometimes-volatile relationship between modern scholarship and religious tradition.

The thought behind organizing in this workshop yet another gathering of scholars to consider the topic is grounded in the need to integrate such thinking within a Latter-day Saint context and to consider the implications of such efforts for Latter-day Saint scholars of the Bible who find themselves trying to address similar challenges. In recent years, the Mormon community—faced with its own encounters with the modern secular information age—has made significant advances in coming to terms with its complex past through an unprecedented institutional move toward academic openness in regard to nineteenth-century LDS Church history and the challenging issues that history presents in the twenty-first century, such as early Mormon polygamy, approaches to race and gender, Joseph Smith’s supernatural translation activities, and some of Smith’s more distinct theological teachings. Scholars of LDS Church history seem to be succeeding in normalizing conversation about these issues within the Mormon community, as reflected by a recent series of church-sponsored essays, publications, and statements that address the issues with much greater rigor and nuance than the official treatments of the past and that are slowly reframing aspects of the traditional Mormon narrative.<sup>2</sup>

In all of this, however, the issues presented by biblical scholarship are still not well known among the larger LDS community, outside of a growing number of Mormon scholars with advanced training in biblical and cognate studies. Among these scholars there is a sense that,

---

2. In addition to producing official materials such as the historically contextualized Gospel Topics Essays and Joseph Smith Papers resources, this development is also reflected in a recent landmark address given to LDS Church educators by Elder M. Russell Ballard—a senior member of the Church’s Quorum of the Twelve Apostles—who advocated a higher level of institutional engagement with the best and most current scholarship on matters related to challenging issues of Church history and doctrine; see Elder M. Russell Ballard, “The Opportunities and Responsibilities of CES Teachers in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” (Address to CES Religious Educators; February 26, 2016) and idem., “By Study and Faith,” *Ensign* (December 2016).

now that the church is coming to terms with its unique past, a sobering encounter between Latter-day Saints and modern biblical scholarship does not loom far on the horizon. The long and complicated history of Mormon interaction with biblical studies has been well documented by another of our presenters, Philip Barlow, in his *Mormons and the Bible* (Oxford University Press, 1991, revised 2013). Barlow's work charts the origins of Mormon biblical interpretation in the remarkably creative teachings and translation activity of Joseph Smith, the various points of contact between church leaders and the forms of higher biblical criticism that emerged in the late nineteenth century, and the eventual shift toward a fundamentalist approach to scripture that came to dominate LDS culture through most of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup>

The recent increase in active Latter-day Saints with biblical training seems to be marking a new phase in the story of Mormons and the Bible that will more widely expose the LDS community to modern biblical studies, as well as better equip Latter-day Saints to address the attendant issues with the same nuance and complexity that they are currently applying to Mormon history. It is hoped that conversations such as the one hosted in this workshop, and now published to reach a wider audience, can provide a helpful resource in that transition. In short, we are confident that there is much that Latter-day Saints can learn about these dynamics from the Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant experience and from engaging these issues along with their academic peers.

Of course, we are cognizant that each community has had (and continues to have) its own distinct challenges when it comes to the constraints, limitations, and potential of engaging with modern scholarship. Unique hermeneutical frameworks provided to the Jewish community by traditional rabbinic commentary, to the Catholic Church by ancient Patristic interpretations and ecclesiastical encyclicals, and to the Protestant

---

3. Another volume worth mentioning in the broader context of LDS engagement with the academy is Thomas Simpson's recent *American Universities and the Birth of Modern Mormonism, 1867–1940* (University of North Carolina Press, 2016), which surveys the sometimes tumultuous history of LDS interactions with higher education, including biblical studies.

community with both its liberal and its fundamentalist readings of the Bible do not allow for a monolithic approach to such an engagement; the Latter-day Saint tradition, with its expanded scriptural canon and living tradition of prophetic hierarchy, makes solutions seem even less uniform. Nevertheless, we believe that the essays presented here will be greatly beneficial to everyone involved as they discuss the successes, failures, and ongoing efforts of the various communities to find balance between and meaning in both modern research and religious tradition.

The first three essays published in this roundtable represent the perspectives and experiences of non-LDS traditions as seen through the lenses of prominent biblical scholars who respectively affiliate with the Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant communities. In the first essay James L. Kugel, retired professor of Bible at Bar Ilan University in Israel and former Starr Professor of Hebrew Literature at Harvard University, begins by asking about the nature of ancient perceptions of scripture and how they might differ from those in our own time; he responds by distilling out four fundamental assumptions ancient interpreters brought to their reading of the text. He then zeroes in on the composition and authorship of the Pentateuch and the problems posed by the conclusions of historical critical biblical studies for what he calls the “modern Orthodox” Jewish community.

Kugel gives a helpful survey of modern Orthodox approaches, including the recent treatments of well-known Jewish scholars Marc Brettler and Benjamin Sommer. He then offers his own response centered on the notion that Judaism is concerned above all with how to serve God, the *‘avodat ha-Shem*, a service defined through response to the Torah. He offers his own thoughts about Judaism as fundamentally concerned with the *service* of God and describes the Jewish endeavor to discover biblical meaning as having traditionally been wrapped up in meanings that go beyond the literal words of the text. Kugel thus calls the Torah “volume 1 of a multivolume work called *How to Serve God*,” and he concludes by raising the possibility that the approach of the biblical scholar—whose task is to learn *about* the text—and the faithful adherent—whose task is to learn *from* the text—are fundamentally irreconcilable positions. He envisions these positions in spatial terms:

the faithful learn at the feet of the text, as it were, while the scholar dominates and examines it from above, looking down.

In the second essay Candida Moss, professor of New Testament at the University of Notre Dame, engages the history of Catholic approaches to the New Testament. As her paper's title implies, she excavates the origins of a strained relationship between Catholicism and historical critical biblical studies, which the institution has repeatedly sought to constrain, though not to do away with entirely. In surveying the history of Catholic engagement with historical criticism of the Bible, Moss discusses those thinkers that sought to neutralize the effects of historical criticism by recourse to earlier ("native") ecclesiastical ideas that could be seen to anticipate the conclusions of the academy. For example, she notes the absorption into the modern catechism of the teachings of the once-anathema Origen and his notion of multivalent scriptural meanings—that the biblical text has a literal (historical?), a spiritual, and an allegorical sense that should all inform the reading of scripture within the church. But she also indicates points of ongoing tensions in the church with historical criticism, such as the place of varieties of Christianity outside the proto-orthodox stream like Gnosticism. The study of Gnosticism is met with deep suspicion in contemporary Catholicism, attracting (sometimes empirically justifiable) labels of anti-Catholic agendas at play. In the end, one finds in Moss's essay a need similar to that articulated for Judaism by Kugel: to grapple with the centuries of authoritative tradition that is often in uneasy tension with biblical scholarship.

In the third essay Peter Enns, professor of biblical studies at Eastern University, condenses for us his extensive work to bring Protestant theological views of the Bible together with critical biblical studies. In doing so, just as Kugel did for modern Orthodox Judaism, Enns narrows the focus of his discussion to a group he calls "middle Protestants" (as opposed to fundamentalists on the one hand or liberal/mainline Protestants on the other). He summarizes the cultural challenges for middle Protestants and attempts to articulate a way—or possibly even a mandate—for these adherents to accept the methods of historical

criticism as providing insights into the historical character of scripture while still affirming its divinity, in the same way that Christians accept Jesus as simultaneously fully human and fully divine. He goes on to show how a believer might learn from the conclusions of historical criticism about, for example, Deuteronomy's existence as a late reformulation of earlier traditions. By doing this he provides what might be considered a Protestant answer to Kugel's question of whether it is possible to learn *from* the text while learning *about* it. Kugel's spatial metaphor of the biblical scholar standing above the text might thus be recast as a scientist learning *from* the Bible by standing above it, peering through a microscope in the way a biologist might learn from the natural world otherwise invisible without scientific lenses. These lenses lead to a new kind of interpretation, but one that may be seen as constructive, if revolutionary. Reframing middle Protestantism as an endeavor that takes its cues from the multiplicity of voices would still be a "biblically centered" faith, a conversation about the divine that begins from—but does not end with—the Bible.<sup>4</sup>

The final three essays consider aspects of modern biblical studies within a Latter-day context. First, David Seely, professor of ancient scripture at Brigham Young University, unpacks traditional LDS approaches to the Bible and surveys the brief history of Latter-day Saint engagement with biblical studies via the eighth Article of Faith. He discusses separately the clauses "we believe the Bible to be the word of God," followed by the qualification "as far as it is translated correctly," and finally the unqualified statement "we also believe the Book of Mormon to be the word of God." Although some of these points will already be familiar to readers within the Latter-day Saint community, in laying out the issues Seely also points to "native" LDS traditions with which one might build bridges between faith and scholarship, such as in Joseph Smith's study of Hebrew, Brigham Young's statement that scriptural translation is contingent upon

---

4. For a similar attempt within the context of Mormonism, see Cory Crawford, "Competing Histories in the Bible and Latter-day Saint Traditions," in *Standing Apart: Mormon Historical Consciousness and the Concept of Apostasy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 129–46.

contemporary context, and the injunction in Doctrine and Covenants 93 to seek learning by study and faith. He also discusses unique LDS challenges to the study of the Bible, such as the Book of Mormon's direct quotation of large swaths of biblical text, including several chapters of Isaiah that historical critics have argued only came into existence long after their apparent use by earlier Book of Mormon writers.

Seely then gives an overview of the tentative LDS engagement with biblical scholarship since the mid-twentieth century, beginning with the prominent (if somewhat idiosyncratic) Brigham Young University scholar Hugh Nibley. Although Nibley avoided direct use of historical-critical methods, Seely shows that his influence was subsequently felt in the number of his students that left BYU to pursue graduate training in biblical studies. This dynamic ultimately resulted in a wide variety of scholarly methods and conclusions being applied to Mormon scripture and theology, such as the unique fascination by some LDS writers with the work of Margaret Barker. He concludes with a nod to David Bokovoy's recent volume *Authoring the Old Testament* (which is also reviewed in this issue of *Studies* by Alex Douglas) as perhaps representing a turning point in the conversation between the LDS tradition and biblical studies, a turn that might also be felt at Brigham Young University and elsewhere as an increasing number of Latter-day Saint scholars deal directly with critical biblical studies.

In the following essay D. Jill Kirby, a Latter-day Saint scholar of the New Testament who was trained at Catholic University and who is now assistant professor of religious studies at Edgewood College (a Catholic college in the Dominican tradition), takes the pulse of current LDS biblical scholarship by means of a comparison with major figures in modern Catholic biblical interpretation. She begins by noting the apparent opposition between Joseph Smith's attempt to mend a fractured canon and historical criticism's proclivity for dismantling texts in search of discovery, and she goes on to discuss the challenges of doing academic biblical scholarship within the official educational institutions of the LDS Church. She delves into specific textual examples from her area of expertise—the book of Revelation—to show the potential friction

between traditional Latter-day Saint readings of the New Testament and historical-critical (or even “plain-sense”) readings. She also points to a few exemplary (but problematic) efforts that were meant to bridge the gap between biblical scholarship and LDS readings of the text, as seen in James E. Talmage’s *Jesus the Christ*, which sought to expose readers to scholarship on the world of the New Testament but relied on the long outdated Victorian biographies of Jesus to do so.

Kirby then surveys the development of Catholic biblical studies in a way that complements nicely Moss’s essay. Kirby argues that Latter-day Saints can learn much from the Catholic history of engagement with the academy and provides both a cautionary tale and an example of successful integration of scholarship and tradition. These examples show a Catholic hierarchy that was hostile to biblical scholarship but that eventually gave way to a papal mandate for Catholic interpreters to take part in the historical-critical enterprise (within limits). Kirby opines that such examples could provide models of how other hierarchical church communities might forge an alliance between ecclesiastical leaders and biblical scholars who can help provide “contextual access to a suite of meanings associated with the Bible’s inspired creation and earliest audiences.” This might best be effected and integrated by a “theological meditation” that looks unflinchingly at both a community’s religious tradition and historical critical studies and that does not reject out of hand the one in favor of the other.

The final essay in this workshop is that of Philip Barlow, Arrington Professor of Mormon History and Culture at Utah State University, who begins by framing LDS approaches to the Bible within a broader spectrum of approaches to sacred scripture, including those of Islam and varieties of Christianity and Judaism. He notes that while early Mormonism generally avoided a strong divide between fundamentalist and modernist camps, Latter-day Saints of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries were largely unprepared to deal with basic challenges arising from an academic study of the Bible and that official church materials have largely avoided the fundamental work done in historical criticism and archaeology.

Barlow continues by encouraging the rising generation of LDS biblical scholars to work both within the tradition as well as with the tools of historical criticism (tools that are not, however, themselves beyond critique). He indicates points of correlation between the claims of Mormon scripture and the conclusions of biblical scholarship, such as the self-aware redaction of the Book of Mormon and the documentary theory explaining how the Pentateuch was edited, or LDS interpretations of the Eden narrative that might provide a framework for facing ambiguity in the pursuit of knowledge. Barlow argues for nuance and cautions against fundamentalist overdetermination of concepts of restoration and scriptural harmony, and he reiterates some practical suggestions for a Bible commentary format that would take into account the different approaches he calls for.

Together, these six essays provide fertile ground for mutual learning and for reflection on constructive approaches to modern biblical scholarship in the context of religious communities. Each essay highlights distinct developments that have arisen from the complex interactions between these communities and biblical studies, and read in tandem they can help those within the various faith traditions to more thoughtfully consider a wide array of significant issues, such as the precise definition and contours of scripture (both in its literal/historical sense and its spiritual/moral applications); the rich diversity of voices and viewpoints represented within a single scriptural canon; the ways in which “native” concepts inherent to each community might be used more effectively to achieve the ideal balance between religious tradition, hierarchical authority, and academic scholarship; and the ways in which the cultures or institutions of each community might forge a more collaborative and mutually beneficial relationship between its leaders, practitioners, and trained scholars. In short, we believe that this collection of essays can provide a useful framework to help a broad range of interested readers and communities think through these and related issues and to help the relatively young Latter-day Saint tradition in particular learn from the deeper experiences of its Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant counterparts as they have sought to navigate the challenging but rewarding intersection of biblical faith and scholarship.