Figure 1. Portrait of Joseph Fielding Smith with his father, Joseph F. Smith, May 1914. Courtesy Church History Library.
True and Faithful
Joseph Fielding Smith as Mormon Historian and Theologian

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Each year hundreds of thousands of visitors to Salt Lake City’s Temple Square make their way to the Church History Museum of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. While many of the museum’s exhibits have been rotated over the past three decades, the “Presidents of the Church” gallery, made of individual displays for each previous Church president, is a longstanding exhibit that has generally been refreshed only after a Mormon prophet has died and his artifacts have been added to the chronological display cases. The current museum exhibit commemorating President Joseph Fielding Smith (1876–1972) hangs on the east wall of the second-floor gallery (fig. 2). To the right of his official oil portrait is a text panel that reads: “Joseph Fielding Smith was one of the Church’s most prolific writers. His numerous books and articles helped educate generations of Latter-day Saints about the history and doctrine of the Church.” To the left of his portrait is a large display case showcasing his numerous publications. The largest text panel within this showcase is titled “Church Historian,” and it reads as follows: “Joseph Fielding Smith worked nearly 70 years in the Church historian’s office, 50 years as Church historian. He authored more than twenty volumes on Latter-day Saint history and doctrine.” This exhibit succinctly summarizes Smith’s legacy as both a historian and theologian.

For most Latter-day Saints who grew up in or converted to the Church during Smith’s five-decade tenure as Church Historian, Smith

1. The Museum of Church History and Art, which opened in April 1984, was renamed the “Church History Museum” in November 2008.
was viewed as a trusted expert on LDS doctrine, practice, and history because of his popular and widely available publications. His many book publications, regular periodical articles, and semiannual general conference addresses kept Mormon history in the public eye and mind on an ongoing basis. His status as an authority on Mormon doctrine and history was also bolstered by his familial relationship to his great uncle the Prophet Joseph Smith, grandfather Patriarch Hyrum Smith, and father President Joseph F. Smith, and by his own apostolic calling.

More than four decades have passed since Smith died in 1972. There are now at least two generations of Latter-day Saints who know very little about him as Church Historian, and most are less aware of his historical writings and theological contributions than their Mormon parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents were. Several reasons may exist for why Smith’s theological and historical writings have lost prominence and circulation among some Latter-day Saints and scholars. He was not professionally trained as a historian—he was a defender of the faith tutored in the office of his prophet-father—a fact that became more significant as the field of history established professional standards and methodologies throughout the twentieth century. Smith never acquired a degree from a university. He began working as a self-taught clerk in the Historian’s Office shortly after his mission as a young man. Moreover, his historical and theological conservatism was not appreciated by some academically trained historians in the second half of the twentieth century. They more often celebrated Mormon thinkers and writers like
B. H. Roberts and James E. Talmage, both of whom locked theological horns with Smith over the issue of evolution in the early 1930s. In addition, the revisionist New Mormon History school, which emerged during the late 1950s, eschewed apologetics and embraced scholarly methodology. Finally, some have seemingly viewed Smith more as a homegrown theologian than a serious historian, given his role as an Apostle and his mantle to declare doctrine, not propound history.

Nevertheless, in 1990, nearly two decades after Smith’s passing in 1972, Curt Bench, a dealer in rare Mormon books, published an article describing fifty important Mormon books released between 1830 and 1980. “By important, I generally mean the work has had significant impact on or a major contribution” to the long-term development of Mormon theology, history, or literature, Bench explains. For example, Smith’s *Essentials in Church History* (1922) was not necessarily a model historical work, according to Bench, but it was a Mormon classic. “This book, which has gone through many editions, was used extensively for over fifty years in various Church settings such as Melchizedek priesthood quorums, seminaries, and institutes, and was required reading for all missionaries for many years. One may dispute the book’s value as an accurate Church history text, but one cannot discount the influence it had on Mormon historiography and on several generations of Mormons.”

Significantly, Bench’s list of important Mormon books signaled Smith’s indelible influence on Mormon thought. In the category “History and Biography,” the late Church Historian and Apostle landed one title, *Essentials in Church History*. In the section “Doctrine and Theology,” he

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had four titles: *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (1938), *Man: His Origin and Destiny* (1954), *Doctrines of Salvation* (three volumes, 1954–1956), and *Answers to Gospel Questions* (five volumes, 1957–1966). In other words, Smith produced five of the fifty (one-tenth) of the most significant books (or book series) during the first 150 years of the Church, according to Bench. No other author or editor, including Parley P. Pratt (three books), B. H. Roberts (four books), John A. Widtsoe (three books), or James E. Talmage (two books), had more books on the list than Smith.\(^5\)

The longevity of Smith’s printed works and their broad cultural influence suggest that some academics have perhaps been too dismissive of Smith as a historian and writer. Scholars who attempt to read Smith solely against the New Mormon History risk severing his corpus of writings from its immediate historical context and purpose. Like most serious historians, he endeavored to write a narrative of Mormon history that approached in its use of facts the ever-elusive “truth” on a topic. He commented in the *Improvement Era* in 1906: “In the degree that a writer of history departs from the truth, to that extent his writings become worse than fiction, and are valueless.” In Smith’s opinion, the historian “should not be deprived of his individuality; but if he willfully disregards the truth, no matter what his standing may be, or how greatly he may be respected, he should be avoided. No historian has the right to make his prejudices paramount to the facts he should record.”\(^6\)

In this quest, Smith’s historical approach tells the truth of the intellectual landscape he inhabited and thus holds historical value. The survey that follows is intended as a primer to Smith’s written corpus for a new generation of scholars and Latter-day Saints removed from his intellectual world. Taken collectively, his pamphlets and books provide a glimpse into the historical and theological tensions at work in the twentieth-century Church. More specifically, Smith’s writings place readers inside the mindset of Latter-day Saint leaders who increasingly articulated a conservative theology as the Church, in the words of sociologist Armand Mauss, moved towards a period of “retrenchment.”\(^7\)  

\(^7\) Armand L. Mauss identified “five major expressions” of retrenchment in Mormonism around the mid-twentieth century: the reassertion of the importance of revelation, especially those received by prophets; more emphasis on genealogy and temple work; adjustments to and an expansion of the missionary program; more focus on the family unit; and an expansion of religious
theological conservatism is not easily boundaried or uniform, but in Smith’s case, it manifested itself in the form of a vocal distrust of modern academic scholarship, higher criticism of the Bible, and theories on the origins of humans and the earth. “False conclusions, ideas and theories that were not a part of the gospel in the days of the Son of God,” Smith argued, were causing Latter-day Saints and the world in general to drift “farther away from the principles of the gospel as they are contained in the holy scriptures.”

His response to secular encroachments on Mormon culture was to reassert the importance of modern prophetic authority and advance a literal reading of LDS scripture as well as a simplified form of LDS doctrine and practice. For Smith and others, the “gospel” was a blend of praxis and principles endowed with a standard of performance that marked the boundaries of an orthodox identity and culture. It took a few decades into Smith’s tenure as an Apostle, however, for his conservative perspective to take root in the Church.

Today, Smith’s writings can help historians understand not only early-to-mid-twentieth-century Mormon culture, but also Mormonism of the 1970s, 1980s, and beyond. The comprehensiveness in his writings allowed subsequent Mormon leaders to defer to his perspective on a variety of gospel and historical topics. Citations to Smith’s corpus of writings abounded in LDS general conference talks, seminary and institute manuals, and Sunday School manuals for decades after his death. His perspective guided the collective memory of Latter-day Saints who began to look at their tradition’s sacred past in more systematized ways.

education programs, including “a new mandate for indoctrination rather than intellectual reconciliation.” Mauss also drew parallels between the theological conservatism exhibited in this era and fundamentalist religious thought which in general was “characterized by such beliefs as scriptural inerrancy and literalism; . . . authoritarian leadership; and strict obedience to pastoral injunctions.” Armand L. Mauss, The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 99, 157–58; see also Armand L. Mauss, “Rethinking Retrenchment: Course Corrections in the Ongoing Campaign for Respectability,” Dialogue 44, no. 3 (Winter 2011): 1–42.


For some who lamented the changes, the charismatic spirituality of nineteenth-century Mormonism, with its theological diversity, was now checked by consolidated and simplified doctrine and practice. To avoid equivocation on LDS truth claims, especially as secular society seemingly encroached, Smith inoculated believers with the foundational doctrines and behaviors of the kingdom, at the expense of any exploration beyond Church curriculum and prophetic writings. One finds in Smith’s writings a metanarrative that ordered Latter-day Saint doctrine and practice by its importance and significance to Mormon salvation. He emphasized elements of the Church’s past that spoke to the spirit and essence of the gospel for a Latter-day Saint audience. Smith’s providential narrative, a mixture of theology and history, expanded into an orthodox system in the latter half of the twentieth century as his perspective remained influential on Mormon leaders and on Church curriculum. The timing was right as his push to draw orthodox boundaries around the faith matched (and in some ways fueled) a larger agenda among Church leaders, beginning in the 1950s, to correlate Mormon doctrine, history, and institutional structure.

For the man who eventually became the tenth President of the Church, writing history was an act of faith and a pursuit of truth. Future scholarly treatments of Smith’s work should “judge the participants [of history] by their own standards,” not simply by whether the narrative presented resonates with current scholarly best practices. And by the standards of more recent historiographical trends, scholars should seek to understand the Mormon “past in its landscapes: religious, social, intellectual, and material.” This essay seeks to excavate Smith’s historical project and thinking as the longtime Church Historian reacted to, borrowed from, and in some ways wrote against the encroaching intellectual, social, and political climate around him.

We have divided Smith’s published books into three parts: historical works, theological works, and compiled works. (See the list of published books by Smith in chronological order in the appendix.) We realize that Smith’s writings could fit under multiple labels, but we made our assignments based on the scope and overarching purpose of each volume.

Understanding the themes of Smith’s written works first requires a brief sketch of his life and of the institutional developments in the twentieth-century Church. This study does not claim to be a reception history on the writings of Joseph Fielding Smith, and for this essay we did not probe his vast corpus of personal writings, including his extensive collection of incoming and outgoing correspondence. While we do make some judgements on Smith’s legacy as a historian and theologian, future studies may wish to engage his private writings to draw more definitive conclusions on Smith’s influence on Mormon culture, doctrine, and practice.

**Joseph Fielding Smith and the Church in the Twentieth Century**

Joseph Fielding Smith was born on July 19, 1876, just three blocks north-west of Temple Square in Salt Lake City to the eventual sixth President of the Church, Joseph F. Smith, and his wife Julina Lambson. Foreshadowing Smith’s own affiliation with the Church Historian’s Office on South Temple Street, his parents met there and were married in the Endowment House in 1866. Smith’s grandfather was the Prophet Joseph Smith’s brother, Hyrum Smith. With his familial roots firmly entrenched in the Church, the future prophet studied the history and doctrine of the Church from an early age.

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As a young man, Smith took a job at the Church’s department store, Zion’s Cooperative Mercantile Institution (ZCMI), and prepared to serve a proselyting mission. He began dating and became engaged to Louie Shurtliff, who was staying with the Smith family as she attended the University of Utah. The couple married on April 26, 1898, in the Salt Lake Temple. The following year, at age twenty-three, he received an official call to the British Mission and served there for two years (1899–1901). In search of immediate employment following his mission, Smith took a position at the Historian’s Office, which launched his career as a Mormon chronicler. In 1906, only five years into his professional career, he was appointed as an Assistant Church Historian. He would continue to work daily in the Historian’s Office even after his call as an Apostle in April 1910. For nearly fifty years beginning in 1921, he served as Church Historian in addition to his other Church roles, which included President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and a counselor in the First Presidency. Following the death of President David O. McKay in 1970, Smith became the tenth President of the Church. He served for two years and five months and died in 1972 at the age of ninety-five.\footnote{16}

Smith entered the historical field at a time when professional standards at American universities were still developing. Some of the most popular and well-regarded histories were holdovers from the nineteenth century and written by historians outside of the professional academy for a general audience.\footnote{17} Nonetheless, the field had made strides in instituting professional techniques and a standard of objectivity.\footnote{18} Smith also took cues from the works of his academically trained General Authority


\footnote{18} Following World War I, some professional historians, such as Charles Beard, James Harvey Robinson, and Carl Becker, rejected the notion of historical objectivity as fully achievable. Many historians now see history as an interpretive field and consider no historian objectively removed from or an impartial writer on his or her historical subject. Peter Novick, \textit{That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession} (Cambridge:
colleagues as he developed his own voice. However, he remained outside of the academic guild and nurtured a persistent distrust of modern theories being churned out of the universities.¹⁹

Smith's theological conservatism partially developed from an intellectual tussle with modernizing trends that espoused higher criticism of the Bible. Since the late nineteenth century, Protestantism had been fending off challenges to the Bible's premier status in American society. Conservative theologians protested the claims of higher critics by asserting biblical inerrancy and doubling down on their literalist interpretations.²⁰ Smith felt modern hermeneutical trends were more aptly titled “destructive criticism” because they were perpetrated by scholars who intended to “tear asunder and destroy the authenticity of the holy scriptures.”²¹

There was a counterbalance to Smith's more conservative reading of LDS scripture and doctrine in General Authorities B. H. Roberts, James E. Talmage, and John A. Widtsoe, among others. Both Talmage and Widtsoe were members of the Quorum of the Twelve and held PhDs in the field of science, while Roberts, a member of the Quorum of the Seventy, was a gifted intellectual and historian.²² All three emphasized the harmony between modern science and Mormon doctrine. Though Roberts nurtured significant reservations about the conclusions of biblical criticism, he felt scripture could stand up against empirical and


¹⁹. As early as 1917, Smith railed against “the theories of evolution, of higher criticism, the ideas that prevail in the schools throughout our land that are dangerous” and were “striking at the fundamentals of the gospel of Jesus Christ, trying to destroy the faith in the minds of the students who attend the schools.” Eighty-Seventh Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1917), 64.


textual analyses. In the estimation of Roberts, as well as Talmage and Widtsoe, a rational approach to religion could reaffirm faith, rather than erode it. Their theological expressions bore a resemblance to the changing contours of Christianity in Progressive-Era America—faith and reason were compatible and could be used to uncover the laws of the natural universe.

The swing toward naturalism and higher criticism in America required a more liberal theology that could square with new science and the theory of evolution. A deep divide developed in Protestantism as a surge in fundamentalism countered the liberal theology that hewed closely to the methods and conclusions of the natural sciences. Mormonism was not immune to such fractures, and Smith, as a youthful Apostle, led the charge against his pro-science colleagues. Though this philosophical divide did not parse neatly along fundamentalist/liberal lines, Smith preferred a literal interpretation of scripture and championed the ultimate authority of the LDS canon in a way that resounded with Protestant fundamentalists of his day. His opposition to the intellectual work of Roberts, Talmage, and Widtsoe eventually spilled over into the meetings of the Quorum of the Twelve as Smith took opposition to Roberts’s ambitious manuscript *The Truth, the Way, the Life*. Roberts’s unpublished work in part adjusted the traditional creation narrative to square with modern science, and the conclusions were divisive enough among Church leaders that Smith and Roberts were ordered to drop the discussion.

If Smith’s more conservative and literal reading of scripture seemed to be gaining traction in the 1930s, the deaths of Roberts and Talmage in 1933 tipped the scales. Vacancies in the Quorum of the Twelve were filled increasingly with men from the fields of business and law so that

by midcentury the stance of the Quorum had shifted somewhat away from modern science and secular scholarly training. More progressive General Authorities such as David O. McKay, Joseph F. Merrill, and John A. Widtsoe remained, but a new conservative majority in the Quorum put the Church on a path toward retrenchment, aided by structural and bureaucratic changes that took root midcentury.

A program of correlation to centralize the organizational structure of the Church under the authority of the priesthood quorums increased in importance in the 1960s. The movement was an institutional response to accelerating membership growth and the complexities inherent to a globalizing faith. Churchwide initiatives included the standardization and synchronization of curriculum. By the time correlation officially commenced under the leadership of Elder Harold B. Lee in the 1960s, Smith, as the senior member of the Quorum of the Twelve, had outpaced his fellow quorum members in publishing works on Church history and doctrine. The internal logic of the correlation program to coordinate, simplify, and reduce fit some of the aims of his corpus of works. Smith’s writing matured in the 1930s and 1940s, when auxiliaries and

30. At the April 1963 general conference, where Elder Harold B. Lee announced details of the Churchwide priesthood correlation program at a general priesthood meeting, the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles consisted of Joseph Fielding Smith, Harold B. Lee, Spencer W. Kimball, Ezra Taft Benson, Mark E. Petersen, Delbert L. Stapley, Marion G. Romney, LeGrand Richards, Richard L. Evans, Howard W. Hunter, Gordon B. Hinckley, and N. Eldon Tanner. One Hundred Thirty-Third Annual Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1963), 1, 79–89.
31. By 1973, all Church curriculum was supervised by a general Curriculum Department whose aim was to produce curriculum that could be “used anywhere in the world, under any cultural or political circumstance, so that the only culture we’re bound by is the culture of the gospel.” Church News, December 29, 1990, 6, 10, quoted in Mauss, Angel and the Beehive, 164.
programs within the Church still produced their own curriculum.\textsuperscript{32} He authored over a half dozen manuals that ordered and systematized Mormon doctrine for readers and often included canonical references and lesson outlines for instructors. His writings, generally saturated with scripture, benefitted from the esteemed status the standard works held in Mormon culture. Prior to the significant institutional overhaul of the 1960s, Mormon leaders had made multiple attempts to correlate Church curriculum with no substantial results.\textsuperscript{33} Smith proved especially adept at authoring popular, accessible manuals that were received as authoritative on issues of doctrine and practice.

Smith’s writings included setting forth a precedent for how to structure and communicate Mormon doctrine in Churchwide curricula. His works suggested that doctrinal coherence across the auxiliary and priesthood organizations of the Church was best achieved in a simplified form. He had been systematizing Mormon theology for decades, allowing scripture and modern revelation to rule on the most important components of Latter-day Saint doctrine and practice. The result was a conservative current of institutional thought and practice easily distributable across an expanding Church. Smith demonstrated to a generation of Latter-day Saints that definitive answers could be provided to gospel questions, that the doctrines of salvation could be arranged in an understandable form, and that Church history and modern revelation could work in tandem to promote faith by offering only the essentials.

**Part I: Historical Works**

Joseph Fielding Smith’s introduction to the historian’s craft came at the Smith home, where his parents, Joseph F. and Julina, were both former workers at the Historian’s Office. In October 1901, as Smith was settling into his new clerkship there, his father and namesake was sustained as the sixth President of the Church (fig. 1). Smith felt keenly the weight of his father’s call and sensed that he was expected to bear the family name well.\textsuperscript{34} He was a Smith as much as he was a Latter-day Saint—


of presidential and prophetic lineage as a member of one of the first families of Mormonism. In addition, it was Smith's firm belief in the importance of genealogy and temple work that drew him to the historical trade. His first independent historical project, “Asahel Smith of Topsfield, with Some Account of the Smith Family” (1902), reflects these early impulses.

Smith would defend his family name throughout his life, but his historical projects grew more expansive as his career progressed. His credentials were unadorned by academic titles, but his historical bona fides were authenticated and preserved by his ability to credibly defend the Church through the institution's historical record. He preferred a usable past, relevant, inspiring, and teachable for the modern Mormon life, but he should not be singled out as Mormonism’s only twentieth-century historian/apologist. The longtime Assistant Church Historian, despite some interpersonal disagreements at the Historian's Office, wrote like most of his contemporaries at Church headquarters. Tutored under Talmage and Roberts, Smith borrowed from the same providential narrative, but he did so unabashedly and more in lockstep with the increasingly conservative Church leadership.

Contrary to some scholarly assessments that Smith produced only a single historical work, Essentials in Church History, the list below tallies a half dozen works of his original authorship based on primary source research and containing historical themes. What follows is an analysis of Smith’s evolution from family historian to Church Historian as seen through the works that profoundly influenced the historical attitudes of a generation of Latter-day Saints.

“Asahel Smith of Topsfield, with Some Account of the Smith Family” (1902)

Smith’s inaugural published article demonstrated his ability to write history that relied on the documentary record. His prophet-father sent him east in early July 1902 to Essex County, Massachusetts, to gather information and records related to their family heritage. He found an ally in George Francis Dow, secretary of the Essex County Historical

35. See Gregory A. Prince, Leonard Arrington and the Writing of Mormon History (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2016), 154–55, 163.
Society, who provided him with a number of Smith family documents. Dow, who had a mutual interest in preserving early Essex County history, invited Smith to prepare a brief article on his family history.

Many of Smith’s writings reflect the importance he, as a member of the Genealogical Society of Utah, placed on family history work and vicarious ordinances for the dead. His fourteen-page family history traced his paternal family line from the arrival of Robert Smith on the American continent in 1638 to the family of Joseph Smith Jr.’s grandparents, Asael (rendered Asahel in the title) and Mary Smith. Although lacking professional training, Smith demonstrated impressive attention to detail. He organized facts like Rankean traditionalists before him who acknowledged the role of a beneficent providence in the unfolding of history but privileged historical facts and objective inquiry over theory and conjecture. Smith accounted for the influence of the “inspiration of the Lord” on the first settlers of the American continent. These first colonists were “men, such as the Lord would choose to cope with the many problems” of settling a “new country or in the framing of a new nation” (87).

According to Smith, his great-grandfather Asael was a “man of very liberal views” who, like his prophet-grandson decades later, attracted the “prejudices of his neighbors.” Asael nurtured Universalist sentiments and apparently cared little for how his views played among the local community (89–90). He elected to remain “aloof from all denominations” because “he could not reconcile their teachings with the Scriptures and his reason” (90). Smith drew a striking parallel between the account of Asael’s quest for truth and the autobiographical account of Joseph Smith, the Church’s founding prophet, captured in his manuscript history. During the revivalist ferment of the Second Great Awakening, Joseph Smith wrote that “during this time of great excitement . . .

37. Smith and Stewart, Life of Joseph Fielding Smith, 140.
I kept myself aloof from all these parties though I attended their several meetings.” Disheartened by the cacophony of religious opinions, Joseph Smith wondered, “Who of all these parties are right? Or are they all wrong together?”39 Both were committed seekers of religious truth.

Smith’s biographical sketch of his great-grandfather Asael helped promote a worthy prophetic inheritance for Smith’s father, who was a year into his tenure as President of the Church, by demonstrating to twentieth-century Mormon readers a spiritual lineage for Joseph Smith’s theology and the development of the Church. Read in this way, Joseph Smith’s exceptional talents and path-breaking theology could be partially placed in the context of his family origins. Though only loosely sketched in Smith’s first historical work, a believing reader would conclude that the Smith family was prepared by the Lord for the reception of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ.

*Blood Atonement and the Origin of Plural Marriage: A Discussion (1905)*40 and *The “Reorganized” Church vs. Salvation for the Dead (1905)*41

As Smith continued his work in the Historian’s Office, he became increasingly frustrated by the verbal and written attacks hurled against the Church by leaders of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS), a competitor to the Utah-based LDS Church led by Joseph Smith’s son, Joseph Smith III. The slim volume *Blood Atonement and the Origin of Plural Marriage* inspired an informal series of publications from Smith addressing differences between the two Mormon traditions. At some point in 1905, Smith completed a book on the RLDS Church and ordinances for the dead (*The “Reorganized” Church vs. Salvation for the Dead*). The works collectively addressed three main differences between Utah Mormonism and the RLDS Church: namely, priesthood authority, temple ordinances, and plural marriage. Especially following Wilford Woodruff’s 1890 manifesto (Official Declaration 1) on plural marriage, the RLDS Church redoubled their missionary efforts in


Utah in hopes of attracting members of the LDS Church disillusioned by the tumultuous decade surrounding the end of plural marriage.42

Content for Blood Atonement and the Origin of Plural Marriage was generated from a series of correspondence between Smith and a member of the RLDS First Presidency, Richard C. Evans. In January 1905, the Daily Star of Toronto, Ontario, Canada, printed an interview in which Evans described “the radical difference between the two denominations” (7).43 Evans briefly attacked polygamy in Utah and the doctrine of blood atonement as Brigham Young taught it. Using scripture, statements from LDS Church leaders, and the RLDS periodical, the Saints’ Herald, Smith crafted a response that was also published in the Daily Star.

Smith felt the exchange between the two ecclesiastical leaders deserved a lengthier treatment in order to properly correct “the wilful misrepresentation of the doctrines of the Latter-day Saints and the unwarranted abuse of the authorities of the [RLDS] Church” (3). Further incensed by some selective editing on the part of Evans when he published their correspondence in the RLDS Zion’s Ensign, Smith wished to refute the “falsehood, vilification and abuse” allegedly perpetrated by the RLDS Church (5). He was especially writing to persuade “those who are not acquainted with the facts” who might be easily deceived by the use of “garbled and isolated extracts” of the “sermons and . . . writings” of LDS Church leaders (6).

A portion of the debate centered on the integrity of the teachings of Joseph Smith. Not willing to attribute the development of plural marriage to the founding Mormon prophet, Evans instead sought to prove that plural marriage (as well as blood atonement) were among “the abominations of Brighamism” (20). To do so, Evans leaned heavily on the writings of Young and statements made by other Utah Church leaders. Smith’s concerns, as presented in his rebuttal, centered on Evans’s selection and presentation of facts, not the details themselves. For Smith, Evans placed his own “desired interpretation” on the remarks of Church leaders, “taking care to give the darkest interpretation possible from which the public may gather false conclusions” (37). On the issue of blood atonement specifically, Smith marshaled evidence in the Book of Mormon in support of the doctrine and hoped to correct


Evans’s portrayal of the LDS Church as a violent sect which murderously opposed apostates. Smith attested that not a single apostate was executed at the command of Mormon leaders, but that the doctrine instead applied to those who committed certain “unpardonable sins” that fell outside the protection of the atoning blood of Jesus Christ (14). Offenders could voluntarily submit their own life as atonement for their sins. Such teachings were not the creation of “Brighamism,” Smith countered, but were “the doctrine of Christ our Redeemer, who died for us. This is the doctrine of Joseph Smith” (47).

Smith’s treatment of plural marriage in Blood Atonement similarly attributed its origins to Joseph Smith—but his defense was tempered with caution. He hoped to avoid igniting further debate about the “virtues” and “arguments in opposition to that principle as a principle of our faith” (16). Controversy over the practice still swirled despite the Church’s dual Manifestos (1890 and 1904) that created some distance between the Church and plural marriage. Congressional hearings were under way since 1904 on whether or not to expel Utah Senator and Mormon Apostle Reed Smoot from the United States Senate. Polygamy, especially post-Manifesto polygamy, was at the center of the debate. By intentionally remaining silent about the continuance of plural marriage after the 1890 Manifesto, Smith hoped to avoid stirring further public anger against the Church.

Blood Atonement and the Origin of Plural Marriage impressively assembled affidavits, testimonies, and other evidence in support of the Joseph Smith–Nauvoo roots for plural marriage. Smith also appended to


the work “some facts regarding” the origin of the RLDS Church, briefly previewing a historical argument he would lay out more fully later (89). Smith wrote *The “Reorganized” Church vs. Salvation for the Dead* in 1905 because of an editorial in the *Improvement Era* (1904) that featured a letter from RLDS president Joseph Smith III, who alleged that the LDS Church had been rejected and was no longer recognized as authoritative or valid by God after the martyrdom. Smith responded in detail to what he felt was an “absurd and misty” assertion by Joseph Smith III (3). In particular, Smith honed in on the claim that the Church lacked the authority or divine commission to redeem the dead (4). Using LDS sources, including the sermons of Joseph Smith, as well as RLDS sources, Smith flipped the RLDS argument, declaring vicarious work for the dead a singular marker of the retention of priesthood authority and divine approval. “A church without salvation for the dead,” proclaimed Smith, “cannot be the Church of Christ” (5).

As a staff member of the Historian’s Office, Smith performed real historical work in assembling primary sources and historical arguments in defense of Mormon doctrine. And while his purpose was predominantly confessional, Smith’s defense showed the potency of combining scripture and the historical record to preserve Mormon doctrinal claims. For Smith, the two documentary records were equal in their evidentiary value. Ultimate proof of Mormon truth claims, however, also involved tracing their origins back to the Church’s founding prophet, Joseph Smith, whose prophetic mantle became central for Mormon writers in the twentieth century who hoped to shore up questions on the historical authenticity of Mormon doctrine, practice, and authority.

*Origin of the “Reorganized” Church: The Question of Succession* (1907) 47

*Origin of the “Reorganized” Church* (1907) was Smith’s first published work following his appointment as Assistant Church Historian in 1906. Continuing his defense against polemics from RLDS missionaries traveling throughout Utah, the book borrowed its form from a two-part lecture series he presented at the Weber Stake Tabernacle in Ogden, Utah,


in the spring of 1907. Smith offered the lectures at the invitation of his father-in-law, Lewis Shurtliff, who was president of the Weber Stake.

In addition to responding to the proselytizing of RLDS missionaries, LDS officials expressed growing concerns about the Salt Lake Tribune, which, since the election of Reed Smoot to the United States Senate, had seemingly redoubled its efforts to discredit the Church. The Tribune’s weekly vitriol was catalyzed further when former Utah senators Frank J. Cannon and Thomas Kearns began running a series of editorials to turn public opinion against the elected Smoot while hearings to debate his retention in the Senate continued in Congress.

When Smith spoke before the Mormon congregation gathered at the Weber Stake Tabernacle, he spoke generally in the “spirit of self-defense” (3–4). He also had a specific target audience in mind: those whose “faith . . . may be weak” (3). He appeared concerned that the sizeable press generated by the RLDS Church in recent years was distorting the RLDS Church’s still relatively negligible size among Mormon groups. Despite the assertion by some detractors that LDS membership was in decline after the exodus to the Great Basin in 1847, Smith’s projections based on census data showed little sign of a significant apostasy. The Utah-based Church was still the largest within the Latter-day Saint tradition, and a comparative few, according to Smith, joined the RLDS Church at its organization in 1860.

Smith was confident that the Church’s historical claims could stand up against what he believed was the inauthentic account of the RLDS Church. Like his fellow Assistant Church Historian B. H. Roberts, he felt that the faithful retelling of Mormon history could both teach the

48. Smith witnessed or engaged in a debate with RLDS officials at the Historian’s Office on a few occasions. RLDS missionary Amos Milton Chase debated Smith on the origins and divinity of LDS teachings on plural marriage in January 1904. Smith recorded the exchange in his journal. See Joseph Fielding Smith, Journal, January 14, 1904, and August 19, 1903, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.


principles of the gospel and validate the broader mission and claims of the Church. Smith spent the bulk of his initial lecture recounting the origins of the RLDS Church (11–19), and here partially unveiled his historical methodology: history served a confessional purpose as a tool for evaluating truth claims and locating precisely where divine loyalty rested among the two Mormon traditions. “Alleged” revelation aside, history, according to Smith’s reading, made it “quite evident” that the RLDS Church was the “offspring” of the church of James Strang (29–30). The RLDS Church thus lacked any claim on the LDS Church’s miraculous origin story, which by the presidency of Joseph F. Smith had become so enmeshed with the identity of the main body of Saints as to function as both sacred narrative and collective memory.

In his second lecture, Smith systematically challenged the RLDS Church’s contention that the ecclesiastical office of president and prophet should remain with the patriarchal line of Joseph Smith. He talked his audience through three themes—the scriptural law of lineage, Joseph Smith III’s alleged appointment by Joseph Smith, and his subsequent ordination—performing scriptural exegesis along the way using the Doctrine and Covenants, a text both Mormon traditions regarded as scripture. Doubting that Joseph Smith ever “‘appointed,’ ‘blessed,’ and ‘ordained,’” his namesake as his successor (82), Smith investigated a variety of possible channels from which the RLDS Church might have inherited priesthood authority and the keys to administer the kingdom of God (59). He concluded that priesthood keys to administer the Church remained with the presiding Quorum of the Twelve at the death of Joseph Smith (82–85, 136–139).

Smith proved adept at crafting his defense using RLDS Church sources like the Saints’ Herald and the multivolume History of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (16). The budding

51. See B. H. Roberts, Outlines of Ecclesiastical History (Salt Lake City: George Q. Cannon and Sons, 1893), vi.

historian seemingly borrowed many of his themes from Roberts’s earlier work, *Succession in the Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (1894), which Smith referenced in a later edition of his own work.53 Beyond an impulse to add his voice to the institutional discussion on priesthood succession, the publication of *Origin of the “Reorganized” Church* suggested a settled direction for Smith’s career as an institutional Mormon historian, one that would rely on history to promote and defend the Church and its leaders.

**Essentials in Church History (1922)**54

Twelve years after his call to the apostleship in 1910 and one year after his appointment as Church Historian in 1921, Smith published his most influential historical work. As a longtime employee of the Historian’s Office, Smith became aware of the need for an accessible account of the Church’s sacred past. Prior to the release of *Essentials*, seekers of a more complete retelling of Mormon history had few options. Interested readers could sift through fellow Assistant Church Historian B. H. Roberts’s edited six volumes of *History of the Church* (completed in 1912) or seek out Roberts’s serially produced column “History of The Mormon Church” in *American magazine*55 in addition to other disparate volumes on isolated periods in Church history.56 Roberts, with six years of articles chronologically retelling the Mormon past, seemed primed to author such a new history. Church leaders, however, expressed concerns about the extensive cost of a multivolume set and instead commissioned Smith to author a single volume for a general Church audience.57

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55. Previously titled *The American Historical Magazine*.


*Essentials* was released as the Church’s priesthood manual for 1922, but it quickly became the premier institutional history on the LDS Church. For twenty-six editions, Church-owned Deseret Book sold ten thousand copies a year, and the book did not go out of print until after Smith’s death in 1972, when
Smith set out to construct a history that could be “used for general reading, and . . . meet the requirements of a text-book in the priesthood quorums, Church schools and auxiliary organizations” (iii). In writing only the “essentials,” Smith carried out a careful selection process, framing facts in such a way as to offer his target audience a faithful retelling of only the most pivotal historical moments of the Restoration. He framed the development of Mormon history with the same periodization found in prior works by Mormon authorities. In particular, Smith placed the Restoration in the context of “a falling away,” or what James E. Talmage called the “great apostasy” in his influential work (7).

More than a decade before Talmage’s work, B. H. Roberts devoted an entire section to the wholesale apostasy that plagued the early Christian church in his Outlines of Ecclesiastical History. Unlike Talmage and Roberts, however, Smith had little use for sources beyond the LDS scriptural canon to prove the “necessity for a restoration” (22). He attempted to maneuver seamlessly between history and scripture, theology and reality. In fact, Smith wedded the pairs so closely that the entire history of the Church seemed to carry a sense of divine inevitability. For example, Smith expressed gratitude to the “great souls who conducted the Protestant Revolution” (21). He credited the Protestant Reformation that occurred centuries before the founding of the Church with preparing “the way for one who was yet to come with a mission of restoration and everlasting power” (21). It was clear to Smith after reviewing the early history of his ancestors that Joseph Smith “was prepared to direct the work of . . . the building of the Kingdom of God” (24).

The unfolding of the kingdom of God in the “Dispensation of the Fulness of Times” was of the utmost concern and often overshadowed contemporary world events in Smith’s narrative (303). When US history entered

Mormon leaders commissioned the Church’s Historical Department to write a new volume to take its place. Leonard J. Arrington and his counterparts in the History Division of the Church’s Historical Department were tasked with publishing objective, professional historical scholarship on Mormon history. The Story of the Latter-day Saints (1976), written by James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard, was the intended replacement volume for Essentials, but some Mormon leaders expressed concerns upon its release that the volume was too secular and would cause some to doubt their faith. Leonard J. Arrington, Adventures of a Church Historian (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 139–40.


59. Roberts, Outlines of Ecclesiastical History, 121–228.
into Essentials, it served as the backdrop for the suffering and hardships of the Church’s first generation. Smith also softened some of the more objectionable moments in Mormon history to avoid obscuring the Church’s exceptional progress in building the kingdom of God. He could not excuse the massacre that occurred at Mountain Meadows in September 1857, “a crime . . . treacherous and damnable in the extreme.” Yet he laid blame for the slaughter of the emigrant wagon train from Arkansas predominantly with John D. Lee and “enraged Indians aided by a number of white men” (511). Smith failed to tie the “white men,” other than Lee, to Mormon stakes in southern Utah, and Smith wrote that the participants only committed the heinous murders because they were “lured to the meadows” by the Indians and seemed to partake of the “frenzy of the redmen” (515). It is unlikely Smith consulted the archives of the Historian’s Office on the massacre, and he seemed content with leaving Mormon militiamen in southern Utah out of his retelling.\

The majority of Essentials (574 pages) focuses on the era of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, describing the First Vision, the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, the growing organization of the Church, and colonizing in the Rocky Mountains. Later chapters were divided by the administrations of each subsequent Church President beginning with President John Taylor. His first edition concluded with the administration of Heber J. Grant, and future editions were updated to include the administration of the current Church president (vi). For the final posthumous edition, published in 1973, Church leaders asked the Historical

60. Smith was later accused by one historian of the massacre of ignoring the records in the Historian’s Office “of which he is the custodian.” More use of the Church’s records by Smith, she felt, would have yielded the conclusion that the massacre “was definitely not the crime of a single individual, nor the responsibility of only one man.” Juanita Brooks, The Mountain Meadows Massacre (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1950), 160. Previously, in Blood Atonement and the Origin of Plural Marriage (1905), Smith boldly declared “The ‘Mormon’ people were not guilty of the Mountain Meadows massacre” and cited Hubert H. Bancroft’s History of Utah (1889) to lay blame solely with Lee. Smith, Blood Atonement and the Origin of Plural Marriage, 44. In 2008, Richard E. Turley Jr., then Assistant Church Historian and Recorder for the LDS Church, and former historians for the LDS Historical Department, Ronald W. Walker and Glen M. Leonard, reversed Smith’s conclusion in the opening to their book, Massacre at Mountain Meadows: “The perpetrators [of the massacre] were members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, aided by Indians.” Walker, Turley, and Leonard, Massacre at Mountain Meadows, iv.
Department to update the book one final time to include the administrations of Joseph Fielding Smith and Harold B. Lee. Smith’s conceptualization of twentieth-century Mormon history organized by prophetic administration was a convention that lingered in LDS curriculum for another four decades after his death.

Based on the popularity of Essentials in the middle decades of the twentieth century, the volume’s appeal outweighed limitations in its content and historical perspective. By the 1970s, when Deseret Book considered replacing Essentials, the book had been republished in over twenty unique editions. Designed as curriculum, Essentials was as much a theological treatise as it was a work of history, which might explain its broad appeal. Firmly rooted in the institutional documentary record, the book trailed closely the movements of LDS leaders over the first century of the Church’s existence (at the expense of a more social or cultural history, which Smith lacked training to write). His operating paradigm accounted for God’s direct control over the critical moments in Mormon history played out by a cast of characters either for the kingdom of God or against it. As Church Historian he was writing to arm his readers with a cohesive and readable narrative that fit with the Church’s mission and could be used to fend off its most vocal critics.

Life of Joseph F. Smith, Sixth President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (1938)

Twenty years after the death of his prophet-father, Smith published a biography for the enjoyment of Smith family descendants; yet, the detail with which Smith approached the life of his father carried wider implications for understanding the early-twentieth-century Church. Smith wrote as a historian and a son, a Mormon leader and a member of the Smith family. The end product was a positive sketch of the Church’s

61. Arrington, Adventures of a Church Historian, 139.
62. For example, from 1998 until 2017, LDS Melchizedek Priesthood and Relief Society classes taught from a series of manuals entitled Teachings of Presidents of the Church. Each year, a different Church president’s life and teachings were studied, until the series concluded in 2017 with Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Gordon B. Hinckley.
63. Gibbons, Joseph Fielding Smith, 224; Arrington, Adventures of a Church Historian, 139.
64. Joseph Fielding Smith, Life of Joseph F. Smith, Sixth President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1938) (490 pp.).
sixth President that defended the Church and marked its arrival as a modern, increasingly global organization.

Life of Joseph F. Smith opened with a lengthy discussion of Smith family genealogy. Smith had already proven himself well versed in the details of his family tree. “The Lord had work for” Joseph Smith Sr.’s family to perform, and Smith hoped to show that they were “loyal to . . . the Prophet Joseph Smith and died with a firm testimony of the restoration” (32, 36). He was especially committed to documenting the loyalty of Hyrum Smith, his paternal grandfather. Life of Joseph F. Smith narrated Hyrum’s rise to Assistant President of the Church following Oliver Cowdery’s excommunication in 1838 (67–68). This appointment placed Hyrum as “a prophet, seer, revelator and president of the Church.” Therefore, Hyrum and Joseph Smith “jointly held the keys of this dispensation” (68). In case Hyrum’s pivotal role in the administration of the early Restoration was in doubt, Smith reprinted discourses given by Hyrum to the Latter-day Saints in Nauvoo (chapters 6 and 8). Smith’s descendants, through the line of Hyrum, stood in stark contrast with the RLDS descendants of Joseph Smith, who were “engaging with the enemies of the Church in the futile endeavor to destroy” the Restoration (355).

Smith’s biography of his father also reveals more about the growth and transformation of the twentieth-century Church. Still reeling from the effects of federal prosecution for polygamy in the late nineteenth century, the Church remained in dire financial straits, but emerged

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65. In January 1841, Hyrum Smith was appointed to replace Oliver Cowdery as a “prophet, and a seer, and a revelator” to “act in concert” with Joseph Smith. Cowdery had been ordained as a second elder of the Church on April 6, 1830. Hyrum Smith was also chosen to “take the office of Priesthood and Patriarch” for the Church (D&C 124:91–94; D&C 20:3). William Clayton recorded a clarification on Hyrum’s status made by Joseph Smith in a July 1843 sermon: “Hyrum held the office of prophet to the church by birth-right & he was going to have a reformation and the saints must regard Hyrum for he has authority.” Shortly after the death of Joseph and Hyrum, Brigham Young commented at a conference in Nauvoo that “if Hyrum had lived he would not have stood between Joseph and the Twelve, but he would have stood for Joseph . . . [and] would have acted for Joseph.” Andrew H. Hedges, Alex D. Smith, and Richard Lloyd Anderson, eds., Journals, Volume 2: December 1841–April 1843, The Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2011), xviii–xix; Andrew H. Hedges, Alex D. Smith, and Brent M. Rogers, eds. Journals, Volume 3: May 1843–June 1844, The Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2015), 61; “October Conference Minutes,” Times and Seasons 5, no. 19 (October 15, 1844): 683.
from the presidency of Joseph F. Smith on improved financial footing. As described by Smith, his father’s presidency was marked by “great prosperity and advancement in the Church” (420). Joseph F. Smith presided over the dedication of land for two temples outside of the continental United States, the first in Cardston, Alberta, and the second in Laie, Hawaii (421–23). He also oversaw the construction of the Church Office Building (later renamed the Church Administration Building), “a suitable, modern” structure capable of housing officers of a growing, global Church. Joseph F. Smith was also instrumental in the purchase of multiple Church history sites and the creation of a monument at Joseph Smith’s birthplace, in Sharon, Vermont, commemorating the prophet’s one-hundredth birthday in 1905 (353–70, 427–29). Smith also took an unprecedented trip to Europe as Church President to visit missions and congregations. According to Smith, his father “in all of these lands . . . bore testimony to the divine mission of Joseph Smith” (396–97). In sum, his father oversaw an era where “missionary work abroad” was spreading rapidly and “Zion at home has been strengthened” (485).

A few potentially sensitive events in Joseph F. Smith’s life were only peripherally discussed or, in some cases, granted a reasoned explanation. For example, Smith only briefly addresses the challenges in his father’s first marriage to Levira Clark, citing Levira’s health, her husband’s prolonged stay in the mission field, and family “interference” as the reasons behind the separation (230–31). Perhaps the most turbulent period of Smith’s administration, the congressional debates over the seating of Mormon Apostle Reed Smoot (1904–1907) were referenced but not granted extensive treatment. Smith outlined the debates that raged in Congress, but he did not explain the role his father played in the hearings. Instead, he celebrated the nationwide publicity that prompted some to join the Church (329–33).

Smith’s biography continued his father’s efforts to reorient the attention of the Saints toward the founding prophet Joseph Smith. He attempted to shape collective Mormon memory of Joseph F. Smith by portraying him as a twentieth-century manifestation of the Restoration’s first prophet: “Never since the days of the Prophet Joseph Smith . . . has there arisen . . . any teacher or authority who possessed a clearer understanding of the revealed truth . . . as did President Joseph F. Smith. The mantle of the Prophet Joseph Smith rested mightily upon him” (407). Life of Joseph F. Smith was a passionate defense of the modern Church and a reminder to the Saints that the spiritual power and inspired leadership experienced in the early Church remained despite modernizations
in doctrine and practice, including the relatively recent transition away from plural marriage. Smith’s portrayal was devotional to be sure, but by tapping into the prophetic legacy of the Smith family, Smith showed the continuity of the foundational doctrinal innovations of Joseph Smith’s restoration and steadied his father’s legacy in an era of change.\textsuperscript{66}

\textbf{Church History and Modern Revelation, 4 vols. (1946–1949)}\textsuperscript{67}

By 1946, when Smith published the first of four volumes in the series \textit{Church History and Modern Revelation}, he was already distinguished for his expansive knowledge of Church history. He had in the last decade plucked from the voluminous \textit{History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints} the most important teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith for a one-volume reference work (1938, \textit{Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith}, discussed below). The Church Historian seemed the natural choice to develop curricula dealing with Church history and Joseph Smith’s revelations “for the study of the Melchizedek Priesthood Quorums” (1:v). In addition to a number of other apostolic duties, Smith chaired the General Church Melchizedek Priesthood Committee and, with his fellow brethren, expressed growing concern that many Latter-day Saints possessed a weak understanding of Mormon history and doctrine.\textsuperscript{68}

Smith and his fellow General Authorities may have felt a responsibility to safeguard Church members against the dawning of a new era in the study of Mormon History, since by this time both insiders and outsiders were reevaluating the life of Joseph Smith. National historian Fawn Brodie, for example, had published her controversial \textit{No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith} (1945) just a year before the release of the first volume of \textit{Church History and Modern Revelation}. Smith’s four-volume work carried significant traces of the standard historical narrative generated by Joseph Smith’s team of scribes beginning in 1838. Rather than penning a fresh institutional version, Smith leaned heavily on the late B. H. Roberts’s edited \textit{History of the Church} (known as the \textit{Documentary History of the Church}) for his source material. George F. Richards, President of the Quorum of the Twelve and drafter of the


\textsuperscript{67} Joseph Fielding Smith, \textit{Church History and Modern Revelation}, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1946–49) (833 pp.).

\textsuperscript{68} Gibbons, \textit{Joseph Fielding Smith}, 368.
introduction to the multivolume work, invited priesthood holders to “have in their possession the volumes” of the Documentary History of the Church when they attended quorum meetings (1:v). The utility of Smith’s multivolume account is found in its relative conciseness and its pedagogical capacity to reimmerse the Latter-day Saints in their past, further solidifying institutional memory.

The “momentous times” the Saints were living in called for a more prepared body of believers who could “guard against the introduction of false doctrines, theories and practices into the Church” (1:v). An intellectually inoculated membership would be immune to the “evil designing persons” who sought to “lead away many after them” (1:v). Thus, Smith never intended Church History and Modern Revelation to be a comprehensive retelling of Mormon history; instead, the structure of the volumes suggested a genuine effort on the part of Smith to simplify the historical record for lay instructors responsible for teaching in priesthood quorums. Each chapter began with a lesson outline supported by references and suggested readings. Smith confined his commentary to “Notes” sections, where he offered limited historical analysis and often injected primary source quotations and outside perspectives.

In some ways Smith modeled what became the modern curricular form used by the Church Educational System and Church auxiliary and priesthood courses. With few exceptions, lessons proceeded chronologically through Church history, pausing to consider Joseph Smith’s revelations as canonized in the Doctrine and Covenants. Revelations were placed in their respective historical contexts, but their content upstaged extensive use of the historical record. Divine revelation to God’s prophets provided the substance of Smith’s Church history, infusing it with teachable moments for a modern audience. For example, when Smith discussed “The Vision” recorded in Doctrine and Covenants 76, he briefly described the circumstances in which the revelation was received and then devoted nearly two entire chapters to its revolutionary doctrine (see chapters 54 and 55). “The Vision,” he believed, was unsurpassed in its “sublimity and clearness in relation to the eternal destiny of the human family” (2:50). The revelation’s unique doctrine made it of the highest importance, “a priceless heritage” that “could not come from the mind of man” (2:50). For Smith, history was made when God entered into the lives of his children; the Church Historian’s dual subject matter—Church history and modern revelation—was in reality a single, unified topic.

What Church History and Modern Revelation evinced most was an institutional shift toward retrenchment, more fully under way in the
Church by midcentury. Suspicious of modern intellectual and secular theories, Church leaders, with Smith and others at the vanguard, initiated a move away from accenting parallels between the Church and the outside world to focus more insularly on scripture and prophetic counsel.\(^{69}\) Smith attempted to focus the course of study in the Church’s seminaries and institutes of religion and in its Sunday instruction to align more closely with modern revelation and the foundational teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith.\(^{70}\)

**Part II: Theological Works**

For most of his professional and ecclesiastical career as Church Historian, Joseph Fielding Smith occupied dual roles, moving seamlessly between narrator of the past and theologian. In 1910, Smith was selected as an Apostle, a calling that allowed him to maintain his place at the Historian’s Office but added more import to his publications, since his name now bore the title of a “special witness” of Christ (see D&C 107:23). He fulfilled his many responsibilities faithfully, but also he found it increasingly difficult to differentiate and draw boundaries around his long list of duties. Prior to his call as Church President in 1970, Smith at one point served simultaneously as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve, chairman of the Church Committee on Publications, president of the Genealogical Society of Utah, president of the Salt Lake Temple, and Church Historian. His writings reflected the diversity of tasks he absorbed for a globalizing Church.

As transformation enveloped the Church in the twentieth century, Smith honed in on a sacred narrative that located the indispensable restored truths of the gospel on an eternal timeline. Smith did the sifting work for Church members and determined which doctrines and practices had always existed and were thus nonnegotiable and irrefutable. Occasionally, some of his fellow Church leaders felt he overstepped his bounds, like when he publicized his views on evolution, expressed most completely in his book *Man: His Origin and Destiny* (1954). Nonetheless, the majority of Smith’s works went unchallenged by his colleagues, which gave him great latitude in establishing an orthodox path for Latter-day Saints.

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What follows is an analysis of the thrust of Smith’s theological works. In addition to situating his readers on the path to eternal progression, Smith championed family history and temple work as well as tracked the appearance of signs foretelling the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. He warned of the imminence of the end times during a period when millenarianism was beginning to wane in Mormondom. What Smith proposed to the twentieth-century Church is a way of reading religious performance within the context of a simplified sacred history and eternal destiny.

Salvation Universal (1912) and Elijah the Prophet and His Mission (1924)

Smith’s interest in genealogy started well before he published the pamphlet Salvation Universal on behalf of the Genealogical Society of Utah in 1912. Smith was a founding member of the Society, served as secretary for the organization, and, in 1910, became associate editor of the Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine. Smith later served as president of the Genealogical Society of Utah for nearly three decades beginning in 1934 as an Apostle. In conjunction with his duties for the Society, Smith toured libraries in Chicago, New York, Boston, and Washington, DC, to learn the best practices for managing a genealogy library. He also published regular columns for the Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine and the Improvement Era.

73. Joseph Fielding Smith, Elijah the Prophet and His Mission (Salt Lake City: Genealogical Society of Utah, 1924) (32 pp.). In a 1957 reprinting of Salvation Universal by Deseret Book, the pamphlet was combined with Smith’s Elijah the Prophet and His Mission (1924) into a single book.
75. McConkie, True and Faithful, 39.
76. Smith and Stewart, Life of Joseph Fielding Smith, 150–51.
77. The column was first published in the November 1909 edition of the Improvement Era and continued to be published in subsequent editions until March 1910. See Joseph F. Smith Jr. [Joseph Fielding Smith], “Salvation Universal,” Improvement Era 13, no. 1 (November 1909): 38–45; Joseph Fielding Smith,
Salvation Universal laid out the LDS plan of salvation and responded to general criticism that the Church maintained an exclusive hold on salvation for the living and the dead (7). Smith’s notions on salvation did not amount to Christian universalism in its truest sense. “Certain laws must be observed, and ordinances complied with,” wrote Smith; yet Mormons, in Smith’s estimation, “are broader and more liberal in our teachings than the believers in the faith-only theory of salvation” (7–8). Vicarious ordinances for the dead played a crucial role in this more liberal view. Ordinances performed through the holy priesthood for the living and the dead were the only way in which salvation could be offered to the entire human family. These publications also indicated that Smith believed the Saints were not doing enough to seek out and redeem their family lines.

Smith began to develop a significant corpus of work on family history from talks he gave to Mormon wards and stakes as well as for the Genealogical Society and the Daughters of Utah Pioneers. Smith specifically prepared detailed remarks on Elijah for a public lecture sponsored by the Genealogical Society in October 1920 and repackaged them for his 1924 book, Elijah the Prophet and His Mission.

When Smith stood before the congregation in the Assembly Hall to speak on family history, he did so not just as a prominent member of the Genealogical Society or out of loyalty to his role as Assistant Church Historian. His audience likely consisted almost entirely of Church members who would give extra weight to Smith’s role as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. He therefore seized the opportunity to instruct on matters of history and doctrine related to the salvation of humankind. Smith proved to be a capable biblical

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Elijah the Prophet and His Mission; Salvation Universal (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 59.


scholar, recounting the history of Elijah in the Old Testament and the ancient prophet's status among the religions of the world (6–18).

Biblical history, however, was only peripheral to Smith's purpose. What mainly followed was a discussion of Elijah's mission, especially "in the dispensation of the fullness of time" (18). Smith's source text for his address was a sermon given by Joseph Smith on March 10, 1844, and reprinted in the *History of the Church.* While Smith briefly quoted from the Doctrine and Covenants, he reproduced large sections of Joseph Smith's sermon, coloring the text with his own analysis. *Salvation Universal* and Smith's discourse for the Genealogical Society of Utah articulated the doctrinal underpinnings of why Latter-day Saints build temples and perform vicarious work on behalf of the dead. The doctrinal foundation Smith set forth would be reiterated in his future works and serve as a reference point for Latter-day Saints throughout the twentieth century.

**The Way to Perfection: Short Discourses on Gospel Themes (1931)**

By 1931, close to seven years had lapsed since Smith's latest book project, which was sponsored by the Genealogical Society of Utah. *The Way to Perfection* surveyed the principles, doctrines, and history associated with "the large place salvation for the living and the dead occupies in the life of every Latter-day Saint" (3–4). He apparently experienced "much hesitation" about such a project, but after "repeated requests" and further persuasion from the board of directors of the Genealogical Society of Utah, he acquiesced (3–4). With First Presidency approval, the book provided an "authoritative" and definitive response to a "real need" among the Latter-day Saints. With over ten separate printings, the book remains one of Smith's most successful endeavors. Royalties for the book, all of which Smith donated to the Genealogical Society of Utah, were still trickling in four years after his death.


83. *Topical Outlines to the Way to Perfection* (Salt Lake City: Genealogical Society of Utah, [1932]), 1.

The Way to Perfection was advertised as a compilation of Smith’s “short discourses on gospel themes” but was more accurately a fresh, cohesive creation by Smith. Like The Progress of Man (1936), the unofficial sequel to The Way to Perfection, the book was intended as a course on genealogy, but it was suitable for use more broadly in other classes throughout the Church. Unlike The Progress of Man, which focused more exclusively on the sojourn of humankind in the backdrop of world history, Way to Perfection reemphasized, as was done in LDS temples, gospel fundamentals and the history of the earth from the time of creation.

“In many respects,” according to Smith, “genealogy has almost reached the status of an exact science” (3). He believed that textbooks on the topic could be prepared in such a way that they “would be almost permanent” (3). While the precise methods for conducting genealogy research remained outside of his focus, Smith’s discussion of the doctrines that granted family history work its form and significance in the lives of the Latter-day Saints shared the same level of definitiveness because “the principles of the Gospel do not change” (4). Smith was ultimately concerned with the truths of the gospel as practiced “in human lives” (4). Thus, The Way to Perfection carried a prescriptive tone as it attempted to “dress” “old and familiar subjects” in “new clothes” and chart a definitive path to exaltation so that Latter-day Saints could “awake to their privileges and duties” (4).

In his quest to stir Church members to action, Smith reemphasized Mormon teachings on lineage and priesthood, especially as it pertained to a ban preventing those of African descent from participating in temple ordinances or holding the priesthood. In this, Smith’s emphatic tone allowed his remarks to rise to the top as other Church leaders deferred to the status quo on the subject. According to Smith, “our place among the tribes and nations evidently was assigned to us by the Lord” (46). He devoted an entire chapter to recounting “the saddest story in history”—the biblical account of Cain and Abel—to contrast the chosen lineage of Abraham with the cursed seed of Cain (97). To link the descendants of Cain to “the negro of the present day,” Smith had to look beyond the Bible, which offered “no definite information

on this question,” and turn instead to the Pearl of Great Price and the teachings of Joseph Smith (103). Smith was confident that the curse pronounced on Cain’s descendants did not originate with Brigham Young, but was formulated by Joseph Smith. He admitted the evidence for such a claim was sparse, but reminiscences from Church leaders who knew Joseph Smith personally supported his assertion (110). In addition, Smith recycled an earlier statement from B. H. Roberts to link the roots of the temple and priesthood restriction to the “indifference or lack of integrity” shown by the descendants of Cain in the preexistence (105).86 On lineage and the priesthood, Smith indeed did not offer anything new, but he rearticulated a justification for the ban’s existence to a new generation of Saints that gave the circulating folklore new life in the twentieth century.

Smith’s teachings on blacks and the priesthood were housed neatly within the book’s broader framework. Saints born into a “favored lineage” were beholden to a “higher calling” to seek out and redeem their ancestors (48, 54). For Smith, the work of redeeming the dead grew out of an understanding of the eternal family structure and God’s revealed process for bringing salvation to His children. Thus, The Way to Perfection ultimately helped readers locate themselves within “what went before and what shall come hereafter” so that they may one day do all that was required to receive a place “with God . . . in his presence, . . . possessing the same kind of life which he possesses,” and in turn “be like him” (19, 331).

86. Smith would be more explicit on this point in Answers to Gospel Questions, stating that blacks were “not valiant” in the premortal existence, and, “because of their lack of obedience, they . . . came here under restrictions. One of those restrictions is that they were denied the priesthood.” Joseph Fielding Smith, Answers to Gospel Questions, ed. Joseph Fielding Smith Jr., 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1966), 5:163. According to W. Paul Reeve, Smith’s writings indicated “a transition” in Mormon thought on the priesthood and temple ban as “the premortal life slowly supplanted the curse of Cain justification” for the ban “even as the premortal reason experienced a modification of its own, from ‘neutral’ to ‘less valiant.’” Reeve, Religion of a Different Color, 255. Scholars attribute the “pre-existence thesis” first to Orson Hyde, and it was subsequently expanded and modified by Smith. See Max Perry Mueller, Race and the Making of the Mormon People (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 218–19.
The Progress of Man (1936)\textsuperscript{87}

As expressed by Archibald F. Bennett, a longtime employee of the Genealogical Society of Utah, Smith’s *The Progress of Man* was “in reality the story of man’s progress in life upon this earth until he reaches his exaltation in the celestial kingdom” (5). *Progress of Man* fits within a genre of other historical works that bequeathed to Mormonism a historical theology and a consciousness through which to view world developments.\textsuperscript{88} This historical technique was not the wholesale creation of Smith and others; the template was found in Protestant histories of Christianity and adapted to fit the LDS restoration narrative.\textsuperscript{89}

Smith retained some of early Mormonism’s fervent millenarianism. By the 1920s, the imminence of the millennium was less prevalent in the discourse of Mormon leaders, tempered by modernizing trends in the Church.\textsuperscript{90} Nonetheless, Smith spotted in recent world events cause for contemplation about the last days. “We are living in perilous times,” Smith declared. “Today we are witnesses of all . . . things” signaling the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, including “great changes in governments . . . tyranny . . . blood and carnage in the offing” (1). Smith was writing in 1936, the same year Hitler violated the Treaty of Versailles and sent troops into the demilitarized Rhineland. In consequence of these “grave conditions,” the board of the Genealogical Society of Utah felt it “timely” to create a course of study detailing the history of man on earth proving that “God rules among the nations” and that Jesus Christ would soon “rule upon the earth” (1–2). The class study manual for *Progress of Man* wished all who “receive the endowment in the Temple, and to labor in behalf of the dead” to “have a thorough understanding of the history of man.” The most faithful would also understand the “true government of God” and the future destiny of the earth and its inhabitants.\textsuperscript{91}

\textsuperscript{87} Joseph Fielding Smith, *The Progress of Man* (Salt Lake City: Genealogical Society of Utah, 1936) (530 pp.).

\textsuperscript{88} See, for example, Talmage, *Great Apostasy*; Roberts, *Outlines of Ecclesiastical History*.

\textsuperscript{89} Bowman, “James Talmage, B. H. Roberts, and Confessional History,” 84.


\textsuperscript{91} *Discussion Themes for Class Studies of “The Progress of Man”* (Salt Lake City: Genealogical Society of Utah, 1937), 4.
In profiling world history in *The Progress of Man*, Smith engaged the “time of apostasy” in greater detail than any of his previous works (167). Though he rarely cites sources, his treatment of the Great Apostasy is derivative of earlier works by B. H. Roberts and James E. Talmage.92 All three authors, borrowing from nineteenth-century historians, conceived of premodern history in three distinct periods: the Classical Period, where science, literature, and philosophy thrived; the Dark Ages, a “departure from the light of truth”; and the Renaissance, or the “revival of learning” (193, 197).93 Smith quoted from John Addington Symonds’s influential *Renaissance in Italy*: “The word ‘Renaissance’ has of late years received a more expanded significance than that which is implied in our English equivalent—the ‘Revival of Learning.’ We use it to denote the whole transition from the Middle Ages to the modern world” (197).94 This simplified rendering of premodern history placed emphasis on the Protestant Reformation, the precursor to America’s fertile religious marketplace where the Restoration blossomed. Protestant reformers, according to Smith, “God-fearing and sincere, were sent to prepare the way” for the Restoration of the gospel (237).

The upward trajectory of world civilization was evidence to Smith that God was actively preparing the landscape in which the restored gospel would emerge. Unabashed in his feelings about the Constitution or America’s role in the gospel plan, Smith wholly embraced American exceptionalism, despite the Church’s rocky past with its host nation. Following a discussion of colonial history and the American Revolution, Smith reprinted the Constitution in full. He believed “that the Constitution was given by inspiration of the Almighty to honorable and wise men raised up for this purpose” (335). Smith’s benevolent account of US history mirrored the patriotic expressions running through the core


93. Smith borrowed this perspective on the Middle Ages and the Renaissance from contemporary Mormon writers and from nineteenth-century Protestant theologians and historians who conceived of the Middle Ages as a period of spiritual and intellectual darkness and decline in civilization reversed only by the classical learning and advances of the Renaissance era. Current scholarship now notes significant advances during the Middle Ages and pushes back on the narrative of a “Dark Ages.” Eric R. Dursteler, “Historical Periodization in the LDS Great Apostasy Narrative,” in Wilcox and Young, *Standing Apart*, 23–54.

of the twentieth-century Church.\textsuperscript{95} Acknowledging that the US government was the “best form of government” ever created, Smith detailed the more godly government to come when Christ would reign on the earth (472). His historical timeline extended into the future, and modern developments portended future prophetic fulfillments.

*Progress of Man* might be considered Smith’s most ambitious project up to this point. His source base was varied: he drew from a number of prominent textbooks and likely relied on the expanding library of the Genealogical Society of Utah. More importantly, he demonstrated how blurred the line between history and theology could become in Mormonism. Rooted in history, *Progress of Man* nonetheless had a moral purpose and a message calculated to help the Saints contextualize their own progress toward salvation in the kingdom of God.

*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith: Taken from His Sermons and Writings (1938)*\textsuperscript{96}

The year 1938 was a productive one for Smith and the Historian’s Office. In addition to finishing the biography of his father, discussed earlier, he was also compiling a volume of the most important teachings of his great-uncle Joseph Smith. It is unclear how involved Smith was in the selection and editorial process, but the volume’s structure and purpose bore the perspective of the Church Historian, who felt the Latter-day Saints were drifting from the foundational teachings of the founding prophet of the Restoration. Smith was privately critical of teachers in the Church Educational System who had absorbed “too much philosophy of a worldly nature” and were acting “without regard for the revealed word of the Lord.” Smith wondered, if this trajectory continued for “the next 20 years,” what would “be left of the foundation laid by the Prophet Joseph Smith?”\textsuperscript{97} He felt that the “members of the Church


\textsuperscript{96} Joseph Fielding Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith: Taken from His Sermons and Writings as They Are Found in the Documentary History and Other Publications of the Church and Written or Published in the Days of the Prophet’s Ministry* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1938) (410 pp.).

\textsuperscript{97} Smith and Stewart, *Life of Joseph Fielding Smith*, 211–12.
quite generally desire to know what the Prophet Joseph Smith” said on “important subjects” (3). Prior to the publication of *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, Smith submitted the manuscript to the First Presidency for their review and approval (3). *Teachings* received the sanction of Mormon leaders, which meant the book and its contents became the authorized version of the founding prophet’s teachings. While *Teachings* was not explicitly historical in nature, Smith’s training influenced the work’s overall content and tone. His compilation aimed to make available the discourses and writings of Joseph Smith found in sources “not accessible for general use” (3).

*Teachings* was not without a precursor. In 1912, Edwin F. Parry published *Joseph Smith’s Teachings* as a missionary tract.98 He organized his tract by alphabetical topic, pulling his source material from the expansive *History of the Church*. In Smith’s opinion, Parry’s small volume stirred public interest for more of Joseph Smith’s writings. Rather than following Parry’s topical organization, Smith structured his volume by periods, proceeding through Joseph Smith’s teachings in chronological order. His volume did not involve extensive research from the corpus of documents managed by the Historian’s Office. The source base was still more expansive than Parry’s by including early Church periodicals such as *The Evening and the Morning Star*, the *Times and Seasons*, the *Far West Record*, and the *Messenger and Advocate*. Smith also relied on the Journal History of the Church compiled by Assistant Church Historian Andrew Jenson, the unpublished manuscript history of the Church, and the print volumes of *History of the Church* (i).99


99. In 1838, Joseph Smith with the assistance of Sidney Rigdon, George W. Robinson, and, later, James Mullholland, began work on a manuscript history of the Church. The project was not finished until 1856, when George A. Smith and Wilford Woodruff extended the manuscript through August 1844. It was published as the “History of Joseph Smith” in the *Times Seasons* in Nauvoo until February 1846 and continued in Utah in the *Deseret News* beginning in November 1851. B. H. Roberts’s seven-volume *History of the Church* (1902–12, 1932) relied heavily on the manuscript, but Roberts also made extensive silent revisions and updates to the history. “Introduction to History, 1838–1856 (Manuscript History of the Church),” Joseph Smith Papers, http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/doc/introduction-to-history-1838-1856-manuscript-history-of-the-church. For an index of original sources for the material found in *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, see “Sources for Teachings of the
Though he footnoted sparingly, Smith found space to explain Joseph Smith’s words using the standard works and historical context. For example, he used an 1834 statement by Joseph Smith concerning members who failed to “comply with and obey” the Word of Wisdom to expound upon a brief 1838 statement on the same topic (117). Smith also relied on the historical abilities of the late B. H. Roberts. He printed in full the entire funeral sermon known as the “King Follett Discourse,” delivered by Joseph Smith on April 7, 1844, using Roberts to explain some of the sermon’s more complex doctrinal elements (342–62). He also quoted a 1909 *Improvement Era* article in which Roberts annotated the King Follett Discourse as it appeared in the *Times and Seasons*.100

Until the Church’s publication of *Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (2007), Smith’s compilation *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* remained the most influential compilation of the sermons and writings of the Church’s founder. The volume’s intention to “promote faith among the members of the Church” made it a popular resource for teachers and students in seminaries and institutes (4). Smith’s *Teachings* also provided a discursive backdrop to his own presidency as he attempted to focus the Church on the founding prophet’s teachings.

*The Signs of the Times: A Series of Discussions* (1942)101

The content of Smith’s next published work came from a six-part lecture series he gave in fall 1942. Just four months before Smith gave the first lecture before a packed crowd at the Lion House in downtown Salt Lake City, the United States achieved its first significant military victory in World War II, defeating the Japanese in a naval battle at Midway in June 1942. The US was in the throes of war, and Smith’s mind was weighed down with the conflict that had whisked his enlisted son across the world. Smith’s doctrinal and historical prowess, well known among the Latter-day Saints by 1942, had made him the natural choice for a lecture series dealing with the signs of the times. Smith’s earlier writings showcased a propensity for millenarian thinking as he surveyed the world scene and uncovered signs that the Second Coming of Jesus Christ


was approaching. Beginning in about 1909, Smith decided to comb through newspapers and magazines to track the number of “calamities, destructions, plagues” that had occurred throughout the world, at the encouragement of his prophet-father. He wrote of his “astonishment” that, according to his informal study, the “commotions among men” were increasing steadily since the 1893 completion of the Salt Lake Temple (99). His conclusion suggested that at least some Church leaders were adjusting their position on the Millennium’s imminence: the end was not immediately at hand, but the earth and its inhabitants were participants in a predictable declension narrative that would result in the earth’s destruction and the ushering in of the kingdom of God.

Smith began his six-part lecture series at the Lion House, which served as a social center for the Young Women’s Mutual Improvement Association. His first discourse filled the building to capacity, forcing subsequent lectures to be held at nearby Barratt Hall, a building erected for the Latter-day Saints’ University. The lectures were designed to raise funds for planned renovations on the Lion House. Demand and interest were high, prompting Smith to publish the talks in paperback form by December 1942.

Smith attracted some critics with his literalist interpretations of scripture. For example, one of his lectures referenced a neighbor who appeared “almost . . . angry” at his predictions of the impending destruction awaiting the earth, which Smith based on a perceived correlation between modern events and scriptural prophecy, especially given events then occurring in Europe in the build up to World War II (99). Many of Smith’s critics took exception with his apocalyptic predictions, accusing him of voicing errant judgments a loving God would never deliberately impose on his children (78–79). Smith, however, continued to build off of the apocalypticism the wartime seemed to engender, warning the unrighteous to repent or the “judgments of the Lord [would] overtake them.”

Beyond a special interest in the signs of the times or his versatility with LDS scripture, Smith seemed to genuinely long for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Smith remarked in one of his lectures: “I am praying for the end of the world because I want a better world. I want

102. Barlow, Mormons and the Bible, 133–41.
104. Gibbons, Joseph Fielding Smith, 345.
105. Gibbons, Joseph Fielding Smith, 312.
the coming of Christ. I want the reign of peace. I want the time to come when every man can live in peace and in the spirit of faith, humility and prayer” (149). For Smith, both the past and the future were known to God and could be found out through revelation. Once known, it became his “duty . . . to raise the warning voice” (108).

**The Restoration of All Things (1945)**

In 1944, as World War II continued to ravage Europe, the Pacific, and Asia, Smith took on a new assignment. Accustomed to lecturing before congregations on Temple Square and elsewhere, Smith was invited to participate in the weekly radio series “Sunday Evening from Temple Square” to reach a larger Mormon audience. The half-hour program broadcasted by Church-owned KSL featured a lecture and special musical numbers. Church leaders relieved Smith of his travel to far-flung stake conferences for the duration of the series so that he could remain in Salt Lake City and focus more exclusively on preparing polished sermons for the broadcast.107

Since the 1920s, the Church had used radio as a public medium for sharing and defending the message of the Restoration. In 1935, Mormon leaders established the Radio, Publicity, and Mission Literature Committee to produce scripts for film and radio programs.108 The committee helped produce “Sunday Evening from Temple Square,” featuring Smith’s broadcasts. Smith titled his lecture series “The Restoration of All Things” and used that general theme to address a wide range of topics that included “The Dispensation of the Fulness of Times,” “The Restored Church,” “The Redemption of Judah,” “The Coming of Elijah,” and “Salvation for the Dead.” His weekly radio program aired on Sunday evenings from the beginning of June until the end of December 1944. The depth and breadth of the lectures and the short period of time in which they were created marked an impressive achievement for Smith. Response to the lectures was overwhelmingly positive. Transcripts of the broadcasts were mailed out by the thousands each week to meet

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requests, and then compiled into a stand-alone collection titled *The Restoration of All Things* in 1945.\(^{109}\)

The ongoing war influenced the tone and content of the lectures. According to Smith, Church members were “living in the final dispensation of the world’s history” (11). The Lord was “gathering and restoring in one—or in unity—all things in Christ” in preparation for his coming (19). In his opening lecture, Smith declared the prophecies concerning “the calamities, wars and tribulations which were to precede” the Second Coming “now at hand” (11). The war, however, was entirely avoidable, according to Smith: “Men have loved darkness rather than light and the consequences of such action is now being felt by every nation, tongue and people.” Beyond the civil discord and fraught politics from which the war emerged, nations lacked peace because they were willfully disregarding the mission and message of Jesus Christ (283).

Smith was also aware that the KSL radio signal transmitted his lectures into the homes of members of other faiths living throughout the Intermountain West. Thus, he offered a defense of the Church and an invitation. On August 27, 1944, Smith wished to “address . . . particularly . . . all non-believers in Joseph Smith” (121). Smith used English clergyman William Paley’s *Natural Theology* (1802) to draw parallels between the original establishment of Christianity and the founding of the Church. “In every respect,” Smith contended, Joseph Smith and his followers “filled the requirements of Dr. Paley’s test of genuineness” (126–27). In mixing biblical literalism with reason and rational theology, Smith mounted a defense of the Prophet that took cues from the late Apostles James E. Talmage and John A. Widtsoe. His apologetics, however, never strayed too far from scripture and history. To outsiders, the founding prophet’s religious claims led naturally to his indictment as an impostor; for Smith, history offered the best chance of exonerating him.

Smith also presented to nonbelievers and Mormon doubters a pathway for knowing the truth of the Restoration. By the mid-twentieth century, proselyting copies of the Book of Mormon were printed with Moroni 10:3–5 prominently placed just inside the front cover, offering an institutionally sanctioned path for knowing the “truth of all things.”\(^{110}\) According to Smith, “Thousands have put [Moroni’s] promise to a test.”

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Smith was “one of these” who gained a testimony by “the voice of his Spirit that . . . this book is verily true” (88). In his estimation, determining the veracity of Mormon truth claims could be collapsed into one singular choice—the Church was either entirely true or entirely false. His lectures, therefore, vocalized a more systematized Mormon theology, but they also assigned listeners an errand grounded in the Restoration’s revelatory roots, where, like the young Joseph, the honest seeker could ask for and receive a testimony of the Church.

*The Restoration of All Things*, in the tradition of B. H. Roberts, James E. Talmage, and others, presented a highlight reel of the notable in Mormon doctrine. So thorough a survey of Mormon doctrine primed Smith for later more exhaustive multivolume attempts at defining and ordering LDS theology.

**Man: His Origin and Destiny (1954)**

In the 1920s, one of Smith’s fellow Assistant Church Historians, B. H. Roberts imagined a blended work of history and theology that reconciled the revealed gospel plan—from the creation of the world to the death and resurrection of all people—with recent advances in science. By September 1928, he had produced approximately forty-three chapters of a manuscript he titled *The Truth, the Way, the Life*. Roberts declared this latest volume “the most important work that I have yet contributed to the Church, the six-volume *Comprehensive History of the Church* not omitted,” and viewed his manuscript as the culmination of over fifty years of Church service and gospel study. Roberts authored the manuscript as a curriculum for the Seventies quorums, a task he had undertaken before with his *Seventy's Course in Theology* (1907), but he also suggested that if publication was expedited, the book could serve as a course of study for all Melchizedek Priesthood quorums in 1929.

A committee of Mormon leaders, however, invited Roberts to revise portions of his manuscript that did not square with officially sanctioned LDS doctrine. Roberts resolutely declined their request. The suggested revisions included his speculative theory on “pre-Adamites,” a species

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of humans who allegedly existed before the book of Genesis chronicled the creation of Adam and Eve.\textsuperscript{114} Biblical literalists like Smith balked at Roberts’s attempt to bring the traditional biblical record into accordance with new evidence in the fields of geology and organic evolution.\textsuperscript{115} In April 1930, Smith publicly denounced Robert’s “Pre-Adamite Theory” before attendees at a genealogy conference.\textsuperscript{116} Roberts was outraged when Smith’s address appeared in print, and he demanded an opportunity to defend his manuscript before the Quorum of the Twelve. In January 1931, Smith and Roberts presented their opposing views at a meeting of the Apostles, confident that the collective attention of the Church leadership could produce a resolution.\textsuperscript{117} The First Presidency determined in April 1931, however, that there was “no advantage to be gained by a continuation of the discussion,” and both Roberts and Smith were asked to cease public discussion of controversial topics.\textsuperscript{118}

The moratorium held steady for over two decades until the 1950s, when John A. Widtsoe, the last of the trained scientists then in the Quorum of the Twelve, passed away.\textsuperscript{119} Smith retained the materials he used to undermine Roberts’s manuscript and, sensing that some members in the quorum might be more sympathetic toward his perspective, published his antievolution Man: His Origin and Destiny in 1954 as a “defense of the fundamental principles of the Gospel for the benefit of our youth,” who were being inundated with “modern theories of so-called science and philosophy” (1). Smith wrote the book as a manual for the Church’s seminaries and institutes.

As part of a five-week Church Educational System seminar at Brigham Young University held in June and July 1954, Apostle Harold B. Lee assigned Smith’s work as reading to the seminary and institute teachers in attendance.\textsuperscript{120} In addition, Smith was invited to speak and read

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{114} Sherlock, “‘We Can See No Advantage,’” 65.
  \item \textsuperscript{115} Allen, “Story of The Truth, the Way, the Life,” 694–703.
  \item \textsuperscript{116} Joseph Fielding Smith, “Faith Leads to a Fulness of Truth and Righteousness,” Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine 21, no. 4 (October 1930): 147–49.
  \item \textsuperscript{117} Allen, “Story of The Truth, the Way, the Life,” 703–6; Larson, Truth, the Way, the Life, an Elementary Treatise, li–liv.
  \item \textsuperscript{118} Sherlock, “‘We Can See No Advantage,’” 70–71.
  \item \textsuperscript{119} Prince and Wright, David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism, 45.
  \item \textsuperscript{120} Prince and Wright, David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism, 47–49; Mauss, Angel and the Beehive, 97.
\end{itemize}
Joseph Fielding Smith as Historian

excerpts from his book at the seminar in late June. It was clear, however, that not all Mormon leaders embraced the book’s antiscience message. Nearly two weeks after Smith spoke, J. Reuben Clark, a member of the First Presidency, attended the seminar and gave a talk entitled “When Are the Writings and Sermons of Church Leaders Entitled to the Claim of Being Scripture?” His sermon was not an outright public censure of Smith, but it was designed to instruct Church members on how to discern the authoritativeness of statements made by their leaders. President David O. McKay and his counselors in the First Presidency ultimately concluded that Man: His Origin and Destiny “should not be used as a study course in the seminaries and institutes” because it did not represent the official position of the Church on evolution or science.  

However, Smith’s book remained in print and faced few significant public challenges to its premises. According to fellow Apostle Mark E. Petersen, who penned the book’s foreword, Smith’s volume was not antiscience but endeavored to “coordinate . . . the pure truth of both science and revelation” (vi). Petersen saw Smith as a “profound student of scripture” and a “deep student of science” (vi). To add stature to his scientific conclusions, Smith also invited Mormon chemist Melvin A. Cook to draft an introduction. Cook shared Smith’s outlook: “Every principle of the baser sciences must square with . . . revealed truths” (viii). Such an outlook, however, made Smith selective in his sources. To “square” science with Mormon doctrine, Smith relied on two bodies of sources: the standard works and a careful selection of scientific literature informed by his antimodernist bent. For example, when Smith presented his perspective before the Quorum of the Twelve, he leaned heavily on the creationist views of geologist George McCready Price enshrined in The New Geology (1923). To many scientists, Price’s work had obvious theoretical and factual shortfalls, all matters that scientist and Apostle James E. Talmage vocalized to Smith and fellow Church leaders in meetings about The Truth, the Way, the Life back in 1931. Nonetheless, when Man: His Origin and Destiny reached print, it retained Price’s conclusions bolstered by the opinions of other creationists and religious authorities who opposed higher criticism of the Bible (xv; chapter 7).

In five chapters, Smith deconstructed the “Hypothesis of Organic Evolution,” but his real enemy remained the “web of modernism” that had reached pandemic levels among religious and secular authorities, causing the erosion of the “fundamental doctrines of Christianity” (132). Modernist assumptions formed the basis of much of the “pernicious doctrine” that prompted the theory of evolution or even Roberts’s musings on “Pre-Adamites” (133–34).\(^{123}\) The antidogmatism of modernist thought struck at the heart of Smith’s orthodoxy, which privileged modern revelation and the immutability of scripture over secular learning.\(^{124}\)

In chapter three, Smith proceeded through eighteen fundamental doctrines of the Church that, as “revealed truth,” were not susceptible to change or modification (50–59). Smith’s earlier conflict with Roberts was fueled by disparate views on who held the authority to define official Church positions. Roberts had questioned Smith’s “competency to utter such dogmatism either as a scholar or as an Apostle.”\(^{125}\) Smith, however, believed it was his apostolic duty to systematize and preach revealed truth, for “true religion is dogmatic. All truth is dogmatic” (54–55, italics in original). A religious paradigm comprised of unchanging truths, according to Smith, ran counter to the “evolutionist,” who dealt only in observable facts. The “scientist . . . denies . . . his religious fellows the right” to know and teach “truths, which scientifically cannot be discerned,” Smith asserted (55–56). For him, incontrovertible dogma was not the sign of a weak intellectual mind or an overzealous religious authority, but the marker of authentic religion.

Thus, Smith’s *Man: His Origin and Destiny* attempted to parse “true science,” which could coexist with revealed truth, from its theoretical counterfeit. Smith called for a return to “the word of the Lord,” which imparted an “abiding knowledge that no theory or false doctrine can destroy” (8). His antievolutionist perspective was nevertheless packaged with broader rhetoric asserting the fundamental doctrines of the

\(^{123}\) Across three chapters Smith discussed “Adam’s Place in the Earth’s Destiny,” never mentioning B. H. Roberts by name, but clearly refuting the idea that Adam was not “the first man on the earth” (see chs. 15–17).

\(^{124}\) It is important to note here that Smith’s anti-intellectual sentiments were not the only ones on learning, especially secular learning, to operate in Mormon thought. A Joseph Smith revelation invited Latter-day Saints to “seek ye diligently and teach one another words of wisdom; yea, seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118).

\(^{125}\) Quoted in Keller, “Discussion Continued,” 81.
Church, helping his side win the day. Smith devoted three chapters to the “Doctrine of God,” three chapters to the “Authenticity of the Scriptures,” and several chapters to the plan of salvation. Man: His Origin and Destiny therefore carried broad implications for the intellectual trajectory of the Church. Its popular reception offered the final word on the Roberts/Smith debate, but it also foreshadowed a more systematized (or correlated) corpus of core doctrines that shaped the institutional message of the Church in the latter half of the twentieth century.

PART III: Compiled Works

By the 1950s, Joseph Fielding Smith’s years of service for the Church surpassed over a half century, and he had amassed many sermons and writings. During the final twenty years of the Church Historian’s life, family members began abridging his historical and theological publications into a format that was easily distributable to the wider Church. Taken together, the closing volumes documenting his lifework provided commentary on a spectrum of gospel themes. They contained Smith’s final injunctions as he drew near to his eventual call as President of the Church and evidenced that his conservative voice had become the mouthpiece of orthodoxy. The works also collectively displayed an intrepidness that came with Smith’s growing seniority in the Quorum of the Twelve. At a time when the Church was working toward correlating its curriculum and organizational structure, Smith offered his authoritative voice on what could be relied on as Mormon doctrine and practice and what could not.


Months after Smith published his provocative Man: His Origin and Destiny (1954), efforts were under way to release the first of a three-volume compilation of sermons and writings spanning his then over forty-year ecclesiastical service as Church Historian and as an Apostle. His son-in-law Bruce R. McConkie, then a member of the First Council of the Seventy, was primarily responsible for gathering and organizing Smith’s vast corpus of previously published writings. The expansive Doctrines

of Salvation was McConkie’s first large-scale editing project and gave him the requisite training and confidence to publish his own doctrinal compilation, the controversial but popular Mormon Doctrine: A Compendium of the Gospel (1958), four years later.\textsuperscript{127} McConkie looked to Smith, “the leading gospel scholar and the greatest doctrinal teacher of this generation,” as an ecclesiastical and familial mentor (1:v). In codifying Smith’s sermons and writings, McConkie hoped the inquiring reader would find “a host of answers . . . to gospel questions frequently asked” (1:v). Each volume, organized topically by theme, also contained a robust index, allowing the volumes to function as reference works on gospel doctrine.

Doctrines of Salvation (fig. 3) was not without precursors that informed the organization and structure of the series. Sixteen years prior to the release of his own selected teachings, Smith published a lengthy anthology of the Prophet Joseph Smith’s sermons.\textsuperscript{128} Other prophets, too, received abridged editions of their sermons and writings, compiled mostly by other General Authorities. For example, a year after the death of President Joseph F. Smith, the Church’s Committee on Courses of Study for the Priesthood Quorums assembled his discourses into a Church textbook entitled Gospel Doctrine.\textsuperscript{129} G. Homer Durham published the teachings of President Heber J. Grant in Gospel Standards, a companion volume to Gospel Doctrine, to “form . . . a body of doctrine and practice based upon the teachings of Joseph Smith.”\textsuperscript{130} A multivolume treatment of a living Apostle’s teachings, however, was unprecedented.

At the time of printing, Smith’s published books and pamphlets totaled over fifteen volumes. In addition to quoting occasionally from

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\item \textsuperscript{127} President David O. McKay and a pair of Apostles, Mark E. Petersen and Marion G. Romney, reported numerous errors in McConkie’s initial edition of Mormon Doctrine. The First Presidency recommended that a new edition of the book not be published and determined that all future books produced by General Authorities required the approval of the First Presidency before their publication. McKay eventually relented on a second edition of Mormon Doctrine with revisions that was released in 1966. Prince and Wright, David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism, 49–53.
\item \textsuperscript{128} See Smith, Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith.
\item \textsuperscript{129} John A. Widtsoe and Joseph F. Smith, Gospel Doctrine: Selections from the Sermons and Writings of Joseph F. Smith, Sixth President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1919), vi.
\item \textsuperscript{130} Heber J. Grant and G. Homer Durham, Gospel Standards: Selections from the Sermons and Writings of Heber J. Grant (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1941), xvii.
\end{itemize}
these books, McConkie drew material from Smith’s numerous articles, talks, and correspondence. Smith, for much of his apostolic career, was a regular contributor to newspaper columns. His sermons and writings were featured in the Deseret News, including its Sunday edition of the Church News, as well as the Improvement Era, Relief Society Magazine, Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine, and Millennial Star. Among his columns was a feature that appeared serially throughout 1931 in the Church News entitled “A Peculiar People,” where he offered short surveys of important gospel principles.\textsuperscript{131} Smith was also a regular speaker at the Church’s semiannual general conference for over four decades.\textsuperscript{132}

\textsuperscript{131} See, for example, Church News, May 2, 1931, 2; August 29, 1931, 2; and December 12, 1931, 7.

\textsuperscript{132} Smith’s general conference addresses were featured in more detail in a later volume, Take Heed to Yourselves!
McConkie’s preference for Smith’s more concise writings harmonized with his personal vision for the editorial project. He desired to provide a resource for students to understand the gospel in its “plainness and simplicity” (2:v). McConkie’s source base included much of Smith’s unpublished and published correspondence on difficult gospel questions. His answers were succinct and leaned heavily on scripture or prophetic counsel; thus, they translated well to the topical structure of McConkie’s series.

Smith’s authoritative and simplistic mode of expounding gospel principles made McConkie’s three-volume series a suitable companion for a focused study of the LDS scriptural canon. In addition, *Doctrines of Salvation* enshrined Smith’s conservative doctrinal and theological views in an accessible and semiofficial format. The popular reception enjoyed by the volumes installed Smith’s viewpoints in the minds of a generation of Latter-day Saints who would see the gospel as Smith understood it. Replete with numerous cross-references to LDS scripture, Smith’s teachings, to the lay observer, seemed to be in lockstep with the revealed gospel throughout all dispensations. Indeed, even if Smith never reached the highest office in the Church, following the release of *Doctrines of Salvation*, his influence on collective expressions of Mormon doctrine and practice was no longer in doubt.

*Answers to Gospel Questions, 5 vols. (1957–1966)*

Aside from working on manuscripts for public consumption, Smith would frequently sit down at an old typewriter and, “using the hunt-and-peck method,” answer the increasingly voluminous private correspondence sent by Church members seeking answers to difficult or misunderstood components of the gospel (fig. 4). Smith’s efforts, while time consuming, eventually led the *Church News* to reprint some of his replies to the most commonly asked questions. In 1953, at the request of Smith’s neighbor Richard L. Evans, editor of the *Improvement Era*, Smith published his correspondence on a monthly basis in the *Improvement Era* starting in 1953. See Joseph Fielding Smith, “Your Question,” *Improvement Era* 56, no. 7 (July 1953): 502.

136. See, for example, “Answer to Questions,” *Church News*, September 23, 1933, 3, 8.
Era, he launched a monthly column entitled “Your Question.”

Smith’s attachment to the Improvement Era stemmed from, in the tradition of his prophet-father, Joseph F. Smith, his service as the magazine’s editor for a number of years.

Smith’s past service to the Era meant he understood the magazine’s reach. Throughout its history, the Era served as the publishing platform for a number of Church organizations, but, by 1953, it fit broadly under the auspices of the Church’s priesthood quorums and Mutual Improvement Associations. Church magazines ensured that the general membership maintained frequent contact with the institutional position on

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138. Smith’s father, Joseph F. Smith, was one of the founding editors of the Improvement Era. See Improvement Era 1, no. 1 (November 1897).
139. See Improvement Era 56, no. 6 (June 1953): 380.
gospel topics, preventing the spread of unsanctioned folklore. Printing concise, scripturally sourced answers to gospel questions was done before in the Era in an unattributed column that followed immediately after President Joseph F. Smith’s “Editor’s Table.”\(^{140}\) Apostle John A. Widtsoe also contributed to a regular feature in the Era entitled “Evidences and Reconciliations,” which eventually provided the source material for a 1943 volume by the same title.\(^{141}\)

Smith’s reputation as an authority on gospel doctrine carried personal meaning for his son Joseph Fielding Smith Jr., who frequently requested answers from his father to challenging gospel questions while in the mission field.\(^{142}\) Perhaps out of a desire to help his father’s “answers” become more deeply rooted among the general membership, Smith Jr., like his brother-in-law Bruce R. McConkie, sorted and compiled his father’s vast correspondence—including his regular columns in the Era—for publication in the five-volume Answers to Gospel Questions (1957–1966). The volumes provided a remedy, at least partially, to what Smith saw as rampant scriptural illiteracy among the Latter-day Saints. It seemed a “difficult thing,” Smith confessed, “to eliminate from the minds of some of our brethren cherished notions that are contrary to the revealed word” (1:xv). Too many of the “members of the Church” were “mentally lazy so far as seeking the words of life” (2:xiii). Increasingly bothered by the persistence of false doctrine and historical misconceptions among Church members, Smith hoped the published volumes would “settle once and for all time the problems discussed, which occur and re-occur so frequently, yet are answered in the revelations in the Standard Works” (1:xviii). Smith long envisioned a more systematized Church soaked in the fundamental, unchanging truths of the gospel.

The series Answers to Gospel Questions also included Smith’s unpublished correspondence (vol. 2) and the occasional answers offered while fulfilling apostolic responsibilities at Church meetings.\(^{143}\) The Apostle’s son received permission “to search through [Smith’s] files covering many years to see if there were not other answers to questions which

\(^{140}\) Joseph F. Smith, “Editor’s Table. Congress and the ‘Mormons,’” and “Questions and Answers,” Improvement Era 6, no. 6 (April 1903): 469–74.


\(^{142}\) Smith and Stewart, Life of Joseph Fielding Smith, 294.

\(^{143}\) See, for example, vol. 4, chs. 40 and 41.
might . . . prove of value to the reading public” (2:v). Smith, however, retained ultimate editorial control over his correspondence selected for print (2:v). The selected questions were the ones that seemed “most timely, or most significant, or most frequently repeated” (1:v).

The five volumes of *Answers to Gospel Questions* ensured that Smith’s painstaking effort to resolve the questions of inquiring members received a permanent and public place next to his many other contributions to the institutional memory of the Church. To make the series more useful to future answer seekers, Smith Jr. appended to the final volume a comprehensive list of the over two hundred fifty questions published in the series, complete with volume and page number (5:191–99). Outside of etching Smith’s authoritative answers into the gospel consciousness of Latter-day Saints, *Answers to Gospel Questions* added a foreword to the broader program of correlation and other institutional efforts to codify and consolidate Church curriculum just getting under way in the 1960s. In reality, *Answers* did not fully settle the numerous doctrinal and policy conundrums in the Church, but its intention to do so stemmed from a pervasive belief of the gospel’s relative simplicity.

*Take Heed to Yourselves! (1966)*144 and *Seek Ye Earnestly (1970)*145

Joseph Fielding Smith Smith Jr. followed the ambitious *Answers to Gospel Questions* series with another two-volume project. He hoped to demonstrate how his father, over the course of six decades as a General Authority, answered a divine mandate originally issued to Joseph Smith to “say nothing but repentance unto this generation” (*Take Heed*, v). With the approval and assistance of Deseret Book, Smith Jr. thought it appropriate to publish “a selection” of his father’s sermons on two major themes: “the necessity for repentance and the need to seek earnestly for knowledge and understanding of the saving principles of the gospel” (*Seek Ye Earnestly*, vi; *Take Heed*, vi).

The resulting two volumes, *Take Heed to Yourselves! (1966)* and *Seek Ye Earnestly (1970)*, were created primarily from Smith’s public sermons at Church conferences and meetings. Included were talks Smith gave on occasion in his local congregation, the Salt Lake Eighteenth Ward, and at meetings of the Ensign Stake (*Take Heed*, 284–85, 306). Smith Jr.

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also pulled material from his father’s general conference addresses and his columns in the *Improvement Era*. It is unclear who recorded Smith’s many local addresses or how his son acquired the full text of talks given at less prominent venues. For example, *Seek Ye Earnestly* included a talk Smith gave before a group of Mia Maids (a class in the Church’s organization for young women) in Rexburg, Idaho, in 1968 (*Seek Ye Earnestly*, 87–92). Smith also delivered an address as part of the “Know Your Religion Series” sponsored by Brigham Young University in which he urged a congregation at the Salt Lake Seventeenth Ward chapel to keep the commandments (*Seek Ye Earnestly*, 73–84).

Smith Jr. also periodically included excerpts from his father’s printed works. For example, a chapter describing conditions in the Dark Ages, the period in which the “papal kingdom attempted the exercise of authority . . . over the consciences of men,” had appeared in full in Smith’s 1922 *Essentials in Church History* (*Seek Ye Earnestly*, 326–27; *Essentials in Church History*, 15). Where the volumes did not feature direct excerpts from Smith’s printed works, his son added cross-references pointing readers to more of Smith’s published teachings on particular topics (*Seek Ye Earnestly*, 349).

*Take Heed to Yourselves!* and *Seek Ye Earnestly*, both published by 1970, did not include talks Smith gave as Church President, a calling he received shortly after the death of President David O. McKay in January 1970.\(^{146}\) In a fitting close to both volumes, Smith Jr. included his father’s testimony. Smith testified of the restoration of the gospel and urged the people to “return to your homes, teach the people. Call upon them to repent wherein they need to repent, to get on their knees before the Lord, to remember their covenants . . . and to walk faithfully and humbly in the sight of their Eternal Father.” Smith’s calls to repentance indeed permeated his writings and rhetoric and came as he read in every decade of his over sixty years of Church service the signs of the times and witnessed “the judgments of the Almighty . . . being poured out upon the inhabitants of the earth” (*Take Heed*, 438).

**Conclusion**

Joseph Fielding Smith’s intellectual influence reached far into the fabric of Latter-day Saint belief and culture, as well as its historical tradition.

\(^{146}\) A published compilation of some of President Smith’s discourses was published by the *Deseret News* in 1971, namely, J. M. Heslop and Dell R. Van Orden, *Joseph Fielding Smith: A Prophet among the People* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971). It is unclear what role Smith had in the book’s release.
His historical approach was after what some have titled the “response tradition.” The Church Historian was stirred to action in defense of the Church and produced a master narrative of Mormon history that became the preferred institutional account for twentieth-century Latter-day Saints. He wrote often in the interest of the Smith family or out of duty to the Church he served faithfully. He also penned his works along-side and in the confessional style of prominent Mormon intellectuals like James E. Talmage and B. H. Roberts, who borrowed unapologetically from the providential narratives of European Protestant romantics of the nineteenth century. For these writers, the arc of history was not godless, nor was it disconnected from the divine march of time. But by seeing God in the historical events of the Restoration, Smith was not sideling himself as an authentic historian. Perhaps in the opinion of some scholars who follow professional historical conventions, Smith’s confessional history lacked appeal, but his historical craft should not be extracted from the era in which he developed his historical voice. The untrained Smith was a historian by yearning and learning, developing his historical trade in a period when the Church was undergoing unparalleled changes in the public eye and was in need of defense.

The bulk of Smith’s theological works were produced for an uncorrelated Church. Especially after the deaths of his colleagues Talmage and Roberts in the 1930s, Smith’s productiveness allowed him to become a pervasive, orthodox voice for Mormonism. As the Church emerged out of its period of transition into American acceptability after 1920, Smith took on the role of sorting out and defining the Church’s core doctrines and anchoring the Church to a more traditional and conservative doctrinal foundation.

Smith’s prowess as a doctrinal scholar and his direct and authoritative tone provided an interpretation of Mormon history and doctrine for a Church without a formal creed but in search of definitive answers to ambiguities in the restored gospel. The correlation program of the 1960s and 1970s involved forces larger than Harold B. Lee and Smith, but Smith ensured the vast stream of Mormon doctrine and practice flowed steadily toward conservatism. Smith’s books still occupy shelf space in

147. The “response tradition” was a “genre closely related to apologetic history,” where Mormons responded directly to critics often using scripture and exhibiting a “general tendency toward proof texting.” Walker, Whittaker, and Allen, Mormon History, 207.

many Latter-day Saint living rooms and meetinghouse libraries, holding his place as one of the primary doctrinal voices for generations of Latter-day Saints. More importantly, a quick search of the Church’s teaching manuals, as well as general conference sermons and books published by apologetic writers and General Authorities, turns up hundreds of references to Smith’s corpus of writings, underscoring his lasting influence. The launching point, however, for Smith’s prolific career remains the Historian’s Office that hired him shortly after his mission. His almost impulsive defense of the Church was developed from his time working in history as he learned to marshal the records of the Historian’s Office to defend his faith. From there, Smith grew to blend a potent mixture of history and theology that shaped how Latter-day Saints viewed their history and engaged their religion. Scholars thus must pass through Joseph Fielding Smith as historian and theologian to understand Smith as apostle or prophet or the broader move toward conservatism that enveloped the intellectual culture of the twentieth-century Church.

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Appendix: The Published Books of Joseph Fielding Smith in Chronological Order

Employment in Church Historian’s Office, 1901–1906


The “Reorganized” Church vs. Salvation for the Dead. [N.p., 1905].

Appointment as an Assistant Church Historian, 1906–1921


Calling as an Apostle, 1910–1970

Salvation Universal. Salt Lake City: Genealogical Society of Utah, 1912.

Appointment as Church Historian, 1921–1970


Elijah the Prophet and His Mission. Salt Lake City: Genealogical Society of Utah, 1924.


Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith: Taken from His Sermons and Writings as They Are Found in the Documentary History and Other Publications of the Church and Written or Published in the Days of the Prophet’s Ministry. Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1938.

