

## From the Editor



As I scan the contents of this new issue of *BYU Studies Quarterly*, I am gratified by the hard work of the many authors, reviewers, editors, and assistants that has made this latest installment possible. I am also excited to send this issue to you, our readers, all around the world.

As scholars and users of academic research, we all are curious. We wonder about a lot of amazing things as we try to understand better why things are the way they are and what we should be doing as we go forward in our individual and collective lives.

On these *BYU Studies* pages, I hope you will gather wonderful information about several topics. But perhaps even more than finding interesting and useful data, I hope that you will encounter things to wonder about: good questions, new questions, and old questions revisited in a new light. A classic German handbook on clear writing and thinking quotes Arvid Brodersen as saying: “How does one get ideas, when one has none? One poses a clear, specific question! Herein lies more than most would think. A good question is half an answer (“Gute Frage ist halbe Antwort”).<sup>1</sup>

Scholarship exists to seek answers to good questions. But what are good questions? Good questions probe not only the way things are, but also how things have changed. Good questions help people notice

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1. Arvid Brodersen, “Die Schule des Schreibens” [The School of Writing], quoted in Ludwig Reiner, *Stilkunst: Ein Lehrbuch deutscher Prosa* (Munich: Beck, 1961), 105; my translation.

otherwise obscure details and paint a more complete picture of ideas in their original contexts.

General grazing can be beneficial for daily edification, but a scholarly undertaking has a specific objective and focused plan. As with much in life, if you do not know where you are going, how will you know when you get there? Good questions are not leading questions that already assume a conclusion. Still they are hopeful questions.

Such is the case in the article by Assistant Church Historian Richard Turley and his associate Jeffrey Cannon about the first black converts in Soweto, South Africa, before and shortly after the 1978 revelation welcoming the priesthood ordination of all worthy men. Their research began with questions about the conditions faced by black investigators in South Africa during apartheid. They wondered, as several blacks investigated the Church in the 1960s and 1970s in South Africa and were not allowed to be baptized, what were the concerns of their mission presidents? What role did apartheid animus or the Church's priesthood prohibition play in that decision? When the priesthood ban was lifted in 1978, did governmental, cultural, and old racial views hamper the integration of blacks into the Church community in South Africa?

In asking good research questions, a gospel scholar can at least imagine ways in which knowing the answer to the question would be beneficial for some gospel purpose. Sometimes such answers would help people understand the scriptures more accurately, live the gospel more fully, and respond to difficult challenges or problems more confidently and faithfully.

For Benjamin Spackman's article about the all-important concept of the Atonement the underlying question was, how do the ancient Hebrew meanings of salvational terms compare with the ordinary meanings that we associate with those words today? His question arose when he was intrigued to learn that "salvation began as a military term." From that, a further question arose: What can we learn from these original meanings that might help us understand the scriptures today? Particularly, how can a study of biblical terms such as *redeemer* give insight into modern applications of atonement? And should these original meanings supplant or support or augment our understanding of atonement terminology in our modern scriptures and in contemporary doctrinal discourse?

Good questions like these may well have several possible answers, and a thoughtful person develops criteria to use in evaluating those possible answers. Scholars consider all the possibilities. They ask themselves, "Why do I accept certain ideas and reject others?" They articulate

their reasons openly and honestly. Good questions may then compare, contrast, distinguish, or combine. They usually call for detailed descriptions, specific responses, and focused explanations, which help unpack complexities. Good questions lead to explanations for strange oddities.

Along this line, the primary question behind Eric Eliason's article on folklore, folk magic, seer stones, and salamanders frankly asks: Why are so many Mormons today bent out of shape when they learn that Joseph Smith used a seer stone to translate the Book of Mormon? Eliason, a professional folklorist, wonders how to evaluate and understand folkloristic practices about supernatural experiences. What has changed in America since 1830 that makes Joseph's ready use of folk magic seem so unusual today when it was not seen as so unusual two hundred years ago? And why don't more Mormons know about the place of folk practices in the nineteenth-century Church, let alone in civilizations all over the world even today?

In academics, good questions are those for which one can at least imagine that possible evidence exists. Until well-formulated questions have been asked, one cannot recognize what evidence is relevant and what is not.

Illustratively, the article by Reid Neilson is based on documentary evidence in letters written by Edward Stevenson, the first missionary of the Church to serve at the port city defending the world-famous Rock of Gibraltar. In addition to wanting to know about how missionary work was conducted in the 1850s, Neilson's detailed familiarity with these documents raises and answers many good questions: How did the Church's 1852 announcement about polygamy affect missionaries who were called that year? Can Stevenson's work be called successful? What was it like to spend more than a year proselyting alone? What obstacles did this elder encounter, and how did he meet those challenges?

These are inherently interesting questions, and yet scholars must ask themselves more specifically, "Why am I interested in this question?" Gospel scholars especially have certain goals in mind, wanting to acquire knowledge that can be used in teaching, counseling, persuading, and entreating others to make eternally correct choices. Formulating such goals is no simple task. It requires thoughtful study and experience with applicable goals in mind.

The work of Lindon Robison and David Just models this inquisitive process. They had heard respectable economists simply take it as a given that people are 95 percent selfish, motivated by selfish interests. But these authors questioned that assertion. As economists, their

personal experiences did not square with that assumption, so they devised experiments to test an alternative hypothesis, namely, that people are motivated by a large number of factors. Their study supports their instinct. Knowing that people operate within a complex of interconnected motives, selfishness being just one of them and often not the main one, can provide all people with an improved interpersonal operating mindset.

Thus, a good question is a live question, something one would care about, would be willing to spend resources to actually know about. When relevant needs arise, certain questions move to the top of our interest list. In a project he has conducted for more than twenty years, Robert Lively has asked a host of questions about “who is knocking at my door?” What motivates LDS missionaries? How are they trained and led? What do they do, and how are they perceived? How do elders, sisters, and senior missionaries feel about their experiences? How does serving others affect their own lives?

Good answers are found in all of these articles, giving up-to-date and new information. Gospel scholars have broad perspectives and recognize faddish or passing tendencies in our thinking. To be avoided are misdirection, obsolescence, excesses, and self-serving fads. Self-examination, rigorous peer evaluations, and expert book reviews cap off the process of offering answers to good questions. And this issue features constructive reviews of a fine selection of books about theology, biography, race, polygamy, and one author’s personal missionary memories.

Gospel scholars, like all serious academicians, realize that hard work is involved in the pursuit of truth and goodness. Convenient answers may not always be immediately forthcoming. Scholars and readers humbly recognize that some problems must be held in abeyance, not forgetting them, but waiting and watching for further information to be found. Indeed, if people are watching for nothing, that is usually all they will find. Each article in *BYU Studies Quarterly* invites readers to enjoy these recent results and at the same time to keep looking for what is waiting around the next corner.