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Book Review

Gordon Shepherd, University of Central Arkansas*

Joseph Fielding Smith: A Mormon Theologian by Matthew Bowman. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2024. 124 pages. $110 Cloth, $14.95 Paper, $14.95 eBook.

> In the fall of 1962, I was bagging groceries at the old Sudberry Maxwell Food Town in Salt Lake City on Ninth South, one block west of Liberty Park. In line to have their groceries checked were Joseph Fielding Smith and his wife, Jessie Evans. Jessie was a semi-regular customer at the store because she knew one or two of the older, female checkers and loved to visit while her groceries were being rung up. Jessie was a colorful, gregarious woman who sang with an operatic voice for fifty years in the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. Dressed in a plain, colorless grey suit, the 86-year-old Joseph Fielding stood stiff and stoically while Jessie chatted amiably. I bagged two modest sacks of groceries and began to place them in a grocery cart. Apostle Smith stopped me and said, "I'll take those." Jessie immediately turned from her conversation and said, "Oh, Joseph! Let the boy do his job!" The apostle harrumphed but said nothing further. I proceeded to push the grocery cart to the side parking lot where Joseph Fielding pointed to the couple's grey Ford Falcon. "Put the groceries on the floor in the back," he instructed, "not on the seat. I don't want them falling over." "Yes sir," I said.

Mathew Bowman has written a fine, eminently readable, intellectual portrait of the tenth president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Joseph Fielding Smith was the son of the Church's sixth president, Joseph F. Smith, and the grandson of Hyrum Smith, the older brother of Church founder and prophet, Joseph Smith Jr. The brothers were assassinated together in Carthage, Illinois by a mob in 1844.

I indulged my boyhood memory of Joseph Fielding at the outset of this review in part because, as a freshman student at the University of Utah, I

* Gordon Shepherd is Distinguished Professor Emeritus at the University of Central Arkansas.

thought of him as a doctrinaire old man among the Church's senior leadership and as a dour and punctilious scriptorian who was out of date with the times, but never as an intellectual or scholar. This early impression was strengthened when I resumed my studies at the University of Utah three years later, after serving an LDS mission to Mexico and subsequently coming under the influence of Lowell Bennion, who was an associate dean of students at Utah and an adjunct professor of sociology at the time. Bennion became my intellectual hero and role model. He was a deeply read scholar, conversant with the best European and American thought in both theology and social science, and he combined his intellect with humility and humanity. As a budding scholar, I was drawn to Bennion, not to Smith.

In retrospect, however, was it fair of me to disparage Smith's intellect, to think of him as dogmatically uninformed, and certainly not as a theologian—a type of religious thinker I thought was necessarily trained in intellectual history, whose essential task was to reconcile religious doctrines with secular thought and scientific advancements? No, I was not objectively fair in my judgments. Bowman's concise appraisal of Fielding Smith's twentieth-century standing as a major exponent of Mormon doctrine—and hence of the Church's theology, as understood by many ordinary Latter-day Saints in the pews—is entirely persuasive.

Fielding Smith had no college degrees, no formal training in theology or philosophy or the history of ideas, and certainly none in science, whether physical or social science. But he was intelligent, rigorous, and devoted. He had a keen intellect and an overriding commitment to the exhaustive study and understanding of the teachings of his inherited faith. He was, as Bowman describes him, an autodidact. And like many autodidacts, Fielding Smith developed a kind of common sense arrogance toward the presumed superior sophistication of university-trained scholars and intellectuals. As a theologian, he was an unwavering defender of the faith and systematizer of Mormonism's core doctrines rooted in the King James Bible, the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price—the Church's standard canonical works which, as he fashioned their contents, reinforced and amplified one another. This casting of the intertextual scriptural unity of the Church's standard works was, Bowman suggests, Fielding Smith's most important and enduring contribution to the theological exposition of Mormon doctrine in the twentieth century. In acknowledging this, it is also accurate to say that he was not a creative or innovative theologian. He certainly was not a theologian concerned

about reconciling Church doctrine with contemporary currents of thought or scientific advancements—the defining intellectual orientation and quality of mind that I thought as a student were necessary for one to be respected as a theologian. Instead, he was a dogmatic apologist and—in his own, self-taught way—became highly skilled in theological apologetics.

To his professional credit as an academic historian, Bowman's study of Fielding Smith's stature as a major LDS thinker is not a partisan exercise. He is seeking neither to vindicate nor disparage Smith's doctrinal claims but to understand more finely what they were, how they were related to one another, how and why they were shaped in the way they were, and—implicitly—why they appealed so strongly to a large fraction of LDS Church members over the course of Fielding Smith's long life and beyond. These are the basic kinds of questions to ask and objectively attempt to answer in writing intellectual history, regardless of whether you personally agree or disagree with the ideas and beliefs set forth by your research subject(s).

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Joseph Fielding Smith: A Mormon Theologian is a singular work in a projected series of "Introductions to Mormon Thought." According to the foreword of Bowman's book, "Our purpose in this series is to provide readers with accessible and short introductions to important figures in the intellectual life of the religious movement that traces its origins to the prophetic career of Joseph Smith Jr" (vii). The ostensible goal of this series is to stimulate and contribute to a broader understanding of Mormonism in the comparative context of the larger world and culture in which it operates. Given the relatively short, introductory format of books in this series, any one volume's capacity for achieving this goal is necessarily limited, but in its aggregate, the series promises a welcome contribution to Mormon studies and the expansion of interdisciplinary work among scholars. Bowman's book in particular aims to elucidate Fielding Smith's emerging role as an ecclesiastical apologist for the LDS Church at a time when organized religion was forced to define itself in response to the rising tide of modernism and secular thought in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

A responsible author's book not only deserves critical assessment but also to be reviewed in a way that provides potential readers with a fair overview of the book's contents. What follows is my synopsis of *Joseph Fielding Smith: A Mormon Theologian*, which comprises 124 pages, a foreword, four topical chapters, a bibliographic essay, notes, and an index.

1. An Intellectual Life. Chapter 1 provides an overview of major influences on Fielding Smith's intellectual development, beginning with his birthright legacy as the son of a largely absent from home, polygamist apostle, Joseph F. Smith, who was on the lam during the tense and trying years of the 1880s federal crackdown on polygamy in the Utah Territory. Fielding Smith served a frustrating proselyting mission to England at the age of 22, in which the universal rejection of his message of the restored gospel, especially among learned members of the Protestant clergy, stimulated his lifelong dedication to mastering the dialectics of scriptural exegesis to refute if not persuade the church's detractors. In 1902, following his British mission, he was appointed by his now-church president father to a position in the Church Historian's Office. Eight years later in 1910, his father elevated him to the LDS apostleship at the relatively young age of 34. As the Church's youngest apostle, Fielding Smith increasingly worried that Progressive Era intellectuals, both outside and inside the church, were leading people astray with secular ideas that controverted scriptural truth. Subsequently, his deeply felt familial loyalty and ecclesiastical duty to combat modern heresies became major motivational concerns for the remainder of his life. Chapter 1 proceeds to specify the key administrative roles that Fielding Smith acquired over the long extension of his ecclesiastical career which bolstered his growing doctrinal influence as a dogmatic theologian, including: Church historian, president of the Genealogical Society, member of the General Church Board of Education, chairman of the Church Publication Committee, and chairman of the executive committee of the Brigham Young University Board of Trustees. All of these organizational vehicles placed Joseph Fielding at the center of overseeing the intellectual life of an embattled church seeking respectability and advancement of its global proselytizing mission as Jesus Christ's divinely restored and only true church in the first half of the twentieth century.

2. Texts. Chapter 2 explores Joseph Fielding's rational literalism and systematic proof-texting approach to studying, understanding, and applying scripture to contemporary personal concerns and social problems. The direction and tenor of his defensive theological orientation continued to be shaped early in his career by turn-of-the-century disputes with authorities of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints over the LDS Church's most controversial doctrinal claims, especially Joseph Smith Jr.'s teachings about plural marriage. As the bedrock premise of his defense against the "Reorganites" and all other detractors of Mormonism's alleged Christian heresies, Fielding Smith

never departed from his theological commitment to the authority of modern revelation contained in both LDS and RLDS scriptures. His search for, and systematization of, mutually corroborating scriptural evidence in the Church's four canonical texts emphasized that these texts should always be studied and appreciated together, not separately. In defending his religion's cosmology and origin narrative, Fielding Smith found himself in theological alignment with Protestant fundamentalists in their repudiation of modern science as the ultimate arbiter of truth and reality for sinful humanity in need of salvation. His anti-science stance in the early decades of the twentieth century put him at odds with scientifically trained general authorities of the LDS Church, including James E. Talmage and John A. Widtsoe—and especially with another autodidact, B. H. Roberts—concerning the age of the earth. To Fielding Smith, the eons of scientific geologic time postulated by scientific study contradicted the foundational Garden of Eden narrative that is the predicate of Judeo-Christian salvation history, and he was unwilling to accommodate his doctrinal views to the more progressive developments of Mormon theology. Chapter 2 ends with unresolved tension between Fielding Smith's unyielding scriptural interpretation of time and the cosmos and the more intellectually flexible views of some of his ecclesiastical colleagues.

3. Progress. Chapter 3 is an extension of the preceding chapter's exposition of Fielding Smith's rigorously consistent, scriptural approach to framing and answering fundamental questions concerning his Church's purpose and mission in the modern world. By "progress," Bowman does not mean the progressive development of Fielding Smith's theological assumptions and orientation. To the contrary, a basic hallmark of Smith's theological exposition over the entire course of his long ecclesiastical career was its emphatic fidelity to the "plain" or literal reading of LDS scripture, not its progressive development. His intellectual fidelity to scriptural literalism was precisely what put Fielding Smith on a collision course with every kind of philosophical, theological, or historical theoretical orientation grounded in principles of evolutionary or "progressive" change. This included, of course, his emphatic rejection of the Darwinian theory of evolution based on the biologically amoral laws of natural selection. To Fielding Smith, the heretical dangers of developmental, evolutionary theories went beyond the science of biology per se to include the "laws" of history in general and the history of the LDS Church in particular. For him, history could not be understood as humanly constructed and certainly not as progressively moving toward more civilized and morally upright societies. Like fundamen-

talist theologians from other faith traditions, Fielding Smith's internally reinforcing constellation of LDS scriptural truth requires believers to acknowledge a theocentric universe in which human history is preeminently teleological. In this view, the teleological character of history is God's plan for the testing of his children and their spiritual growth. God's laws and commandments are eternal, not evolutionary; so too is the authority and governance of his church to administer the eternal ordinances of salvation. Fielding Smith insists that these fundamentals have existed in their fullness in every epoch of human history since the beginning of time. He contends that human history is a cyclical tale of corruption and apostasy from compliance with God's eternal laws and the periodic need for historic restoration of eternal doctrinal truths and practices through divinely inspired and authorized priesthood leaders. If this sounds like a textbook summary of the basic proselyting message that Mormon missionaries are trained to deliver to potential converts, it is, and it owes much of its streamlined religious logic to Joseph Fielding's tireless efforts to combat what he saw as the heretical dangers of naturalistic theories of history that expel God from the center of their narratives. It is within this anti-progressive understanding of teleological, salvation history that the founding of the LDS Church and its own particularistic history in the latter days of human time is made supremely important. His dedicated commitment to defend and justify his Church's exclusive truth claims is part and parcel of Fielding Smith's theological rejection of evolutionary theories concerning human origins. It is also the basis for his rejection of liberal Protestants' suppositions regarding the historical evolution of ethical monotheism and the theological elevation of religiously mandated compassionate conduct in human relations over the importance of correct doctrine. Flowing also from his apologetic stance concerning teleological history is Fielding Smith's emphasis on the importance of divinely chosen racial lineages to drive and implement God's will on earth—especially in the last days or preordained end times, in which the divinely restored Church of Jesus Christ must perform its instrumental role in realizing God's plan for the salvation and eternal life of the entirety of the human race. For orthodox Mormons today, Joseph Fielding Smith's straightforward formulation of the Church's scriptural doctrines constitutes a theological narrative that they embrace as self-evidently true through systematic lay study of the Church's canonical books.

4. Orthodoxy. Chapter 4 is defined by a single word that captures the essence of Fielding Smith's fundamental concerns as a Mormon theologian. Ecclesi-

astical preoccupation with the twin problems of orthodoxy and heresy is a characteristic of monotheistic religions that are organized in a priestly authority hierarchy and which place a premium on the importance of correct doctrine. This was precisely Fielding Smith's institutional position as an LDS general authority (and eventual church president) and in his self-appropriated calling as a theological defender of his family's beleaguered faith tradition at the turn of the twentieth century. Smith excoriated the doctrinal claims of both liberal and conservative Protestants as false misrepresentations of true Christianity that resulted from their rejection of modern revelation. But his own abhorrence of the permissiveness and moral iniquities of modern society also aligned him theologically with the anti-modernist stance of Christian fundamentalists. With fundamentalists he shared a dogmatic insistence on the primacy of scripture for fathoming God's will and the nature of reality, religious zeal for preserving orthodox standards, and the corresponding moral necessity of squelching heresy. In his institutional roles of apostolic authority, Fielding Smith was positioned to be both a stalwart apologist for orthodoxy and a prosecutor of heretics. In this regard, Bowman reviews Smith's long-standing efforts—as exemplified in the Heber Snell case in the late 1940s—to expel liberal thinkers from employment in the Church educational system and suppress their written work. The Second World War strongly reinforced his deeply pessimistic views of human nature, which grievously reveals itself, he believed, whenever people are bereft of orthodox religious authority and revelatory guidance. Subsequently, Fielding Smith insistently pursued his theological vendetta against Snell, a Church Institute teacher who was supported by other humanistic LDS intellectuals, notably University of Utah philosophy professor Sterling McMurrin and Brigham Young University history professor Richard Poll. Over time, others were enjoined in the theological fray, including several of Smith's conservative acolytes—apostles Harold B. Lee, Marion G. Romney, and Mark E. Peterson as well as BYU President Ernest J. Wilkinson—and more liberal figures such as University of Utah LDS Institute Director Lowell Bennion and chemistry professor Henry Eyring, among others. At issue were questions of orthodox conformity to LDS scripture in opposition to academic freedom, the findings of modern science, and—especially for Bennion and McMurrin in context of the swelling political and moral ferment of the post-war Civil Rights Movement—the Church's ban on African American male ordination to the Latter-day Saint priesthood. In the short run, Fielding Smith and the conservatives had their way. Snell's book, *Ancient Israel: Its Story*

and Meaning, was withdrawn from use in Church schools, and Snell felt forced to retire from his teaching position at the Church's Institute of Religion at Utah State University. Bennion was released from his position as Director of the LDS Institute at the University of Utah and McMurrin was threatened with excommunication from the Church. Bowman concludes Chapter 4 with some reflections on heirs—not only Fielding Smith's own deeply held commitment to preserving Mormon doctrinal purity as a Smith heir but also to the ecclesiastical heirs of his own theological orthodoxy. These included especially his son-in-law, Bruce R. McConkie, an apostle who perpetrated his strict interpretation of how Church members should believe and live their lives following Fielding Smith's death in 1972.

I like Bowman's concluding statement and will quote a portion of it: "In the end, Fielding Smith is something of a mystery; a *sui generis* thinker in his own generation who became the model theologian for many after him; one definitely suspicious of the intellectual establishment of his day whose thought was as complex and comprehensive as theirs; a pessimist in a time of optimism. And yet, to understand the history not simply of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the twentieth century but of the emergence of conservative religion in the United States and beyond, Fielding Smith, and those like him, must be taken seriously" (90).

In his bibliographic essay, Bowman classifies Fielding Smith's 25 published books and numerous articles, pamphlets, sermons, and other writings into two primary categories, history and theology, while emphasizing how intimately interconnected these two intellectual projects were in his thinking. Smith's teleological study of history supplied documentary facts and events which were then filtered and interpreted through the lens of doctrinal scripture and religious belief; likewise, his exposition of Mormon theology was bolstered by reference to selected, corroborating historical facts and events. For orthodox believers, Fielding Smith's historical and theological scholarship constitute a consistent, unified religious brief for the validity of their Church's exclusive truth claims.

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Bowman does not task himself with writing a critical or theoretical analysis of Joseph Fielding Smith's emergence as Mormonism's apologetic theologian par excellence, but he does speculate on the forming factors of his childhood and young manhood that shaped his deep pessimism concerning human nature, his focused discernment of the modern forces of wickedness and evil in secu-

lar society, and his underlying defensiveness and sensitivity to being the object of persecution by the enemies of his faith. Bowman references similarities in Smith's doctrinal approach to fundamentalist scriptorians in other religions, which suggests the underlying psychological and social circumstances common to combative conservativism. He matter of factly identifies him as a cultural racist, in spite of Fielding Smith's adamant insistence that his core beliefs were uncontaminated by the culture in which he lived but formed only by a plain and careful understanding of the scriptures, illuminated by revelation and God's spirit. A similar conclusion regarding Smith's doctrinal blindness concerning sex discrimination and gender inequality is just as plausible, but these were not major issues for many Latter-day Saints during most of Fielding Smith's lifetime and he didn't systematically address them, so neither does Bowman.

Subsequently, of course, issues of gender equality and sexual identity have become major concerns for Mormons, just as they are for everyone else in twenty-first century America and throughout the world. Gender issues, hand in hand with continuing ethnic and racial conflicts over mass migration movements across international borders, political polarization, destabilized democracies, and rising authoritarianism globally, call for greater understanding of the role that religions and their leaders are playing to exacerbate or mediate these conflicts. This is particularly true for comprehending the mixed political and cultural messages that current LDS leaders are communicating both to Church members and the public at large. These mixed messages have been expressed by general authorities in the context of their unwavering commitment to sponsoring and managing a growing international church through massive missionary outreach, while the LDS Church in America is simultaneously losing the affiliation of large numbers of younger members—especially women—over political and culture war issues.

Bowman's concluding admonition to both scholars and readers of his book, that to understand religious leaders like Joseph Fielding Smith is important for understanding not only modern Mormonism but also other contemporary conservative religions, is an implicit call for much more comparative analysis. Detailed case studies are always an important start, but comparative studies of contemporary religion and religious leaders, on both a national and global scale, lead to the requirements of social science methodology and more theoretical analysis. Here is a launching point for current MSSA scholars (like Ryan Cragun and Jesse M. Smith, who have recently published *Goodbye Re-*

ligion: The Causes and Consequences of Secularization, NYU Press, 2024) to collaboratively engage with historians and religious studies scholars who share common interests.

I should conclude at this point but righteously have overcome the temptation to do so by adding a few random observations that Bowman's excellent intellectual portrait of Joseph Fielding Smith has stimulated. Historically, organized religion may function both as an agency of cultural preservation and as a driver of social change. In the nineteenth century, early Mormonism was an ecstatic religious novelty that paid a steep price for its manifest heresies at the hands of establishment Protestant faiths and the federal government. In self-preserving accommodation mode, the LDS Church increasingly became an agency of religious and cultural preservation in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. If and when new religions survive to become established churches, most also become intrinsically conservative institutions—especially those whose authority and truth claims are based on founding texts. For this reason, conservative apologists like Joseph Fielding Smith have a theological advantage over progressive, reform-oriented factions within the faith itself. Most people value stability and even certitude in their lives, not intellectual inquisitiveness and ambiguity. Basing their theological position on a "plain," common-sense reading of the faith's founding texts and credos, conservative apologists appeal to people in the pews who are comfortable with their faith and to religious seekers who are looking for clarity and certainty. The latter, in fact, constitute the primary religious market targeted by LDS proselyting missionaries.

However slowly, conservative religions must change too, of course, when responding and adapting to changing social conditions beyond their institutional control. The Roman Catholic Church is Western history's preeminent example of this kind of conservative adaptation and change over time. It is the issue of conservative change that pointedly confronts the LDS Church today in a world of intense political turmoil and polarizing cultural divisions. The Church's conservative apologists resist accommodating policy changes that seem contrary to a literalistic understanding of doctrine. Meanwhile, its liberal intellectuals push to open up the Church to empower women, accept its gay and transgender members, tolerate greater academic freedom, and welcome individual and cultural differences among its global followers. For conservatives, correct doctrine is the most important aspect of their religious faith; for liberals, it is the bonding ties of religious community. This disagreement

over what is most important is analogous to the division in politics between those who believe certain policies are the most important part of democracy and those who think shared democratic values are what is most important politically. In both cases, liberals argue that policy per se isn't democracy and doctrine per se isn't religion either. The tension between these two positions is the tension between the need to preserve traditional order (and those who benefit most from its preservation) and the need to change (and those who would benefit most from doing so). This is the kind of tension that is explicitly addressed in Armand Mauss's seminal book, *The Angel and the Beehive: Mormonism's Struggle with Assimilation* (University of Illinois Press, 1994), and, modestly, in Shepherd and Shepherd's article, "Conflict and Change in Open and Closed Systems," published in *Voices for Equality: Ordain Women and Resurgent Mormon Feminism* (Greg Kofford Books, 2015). These and other interdisciplinary works offer social science approaches to addressing the questions that underlie Matthew Bowman's lucid thesis concerning the importance of understanding conservative theologians—as epitomized in the writings of Joseph Fielding Smith—and their appeal to lay members and prospective converts.