

Q & A

A Conversation with Dennis L. Largey

Department Chair of Ancient Scripture *Interview by R. Devan Jensen*



Dennis L. Largey, department chair, and Jeanine Ehat, department secretary, schedule professors to teach classes with a total enrollment of nearly 13,000 students. Courtesy of Richard Crookston.

Q: You started teaching at BYU–Hawaii. What led you there?

A: I played volleyball as a freshman at Santa Monica City College in Southern California. In the national tournament, our team played the Church College of Hawaii team. The Church College coach remembered several of us from the competition and invited us to try out for his team in Hawaii. I went to Hawaii as a nonmember of the Church and ended up making the basketball and volleyball teams.

Through a series of events and the influence of several good friends, I was eventually baptized.

When my doctorate was almost complete, I was hired at BYU–Hawaii in the Physical Education Department. I taught professional preparation courses, the surfing class, and coached the men’s volleyball team. Two years later I accepted a full-time position in the Religion Department.

Q: Look at all the snow outside. Why did you choose to come here?

A: I was offered a year’s leave from BYU–Hawaii to teach here. My son’s asthma led us to choose to stay in Utah, where it was more favorable for his health. I am grateful that Dean Robert J. Matthews extended my appointment another year, and I received more one-year appointments until I was hired in 1989. I’m glad to be here. BYU is a great place with great students and great colleagues.

Q: What do you like most about teaching at BYU?

A: When you prepare to teach, you get totally immersed in the scriptures. There is a difference between studying to teach and just studying; you leave no stone unturned in your preparation for class. I love it when you look in the students’ eyes and see that they got it, the message got through, and the power of the word was evident. I have loved my association with students in the classroom and on a personal level when they come for various reasons to my office.

Q: Tell us about the upcoming *Doctrine and Covenants Reference Companion*. What will be its most helpful features?

A: The *Doctrine and Covenants* volume will be the next book in the series of Reference Companions. Patterned after the *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, the *Doctrine and Covenants* book will contain articles on people, places, phrases, doctrines, general topics of interest, and more, all arranged from A to Z. One of the most helpful features of the volume is having all the information under one cover.

Q: What are your colleagues doing in terms of teaching and publishing?

A: We have dedicated teachers here. Professors in our department make serious goals each year to improve their teaching. The scholarship aspect

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of our responsibility enhances classroom teaching rather than detracting from it. My colleagues care greatly for their students and work very hard to provide them with a meaningful

experience in their classes. Alumni surveys and student evaluations have been encouraging indicators that our classes are meeting the “aims of a BYU education” in regard to being intellectually enlarging and spiritually strengthening. As for research and publishing, faculty members in ancient scripture are making wonderful contributions both in and out of LDS circles. Examples include works dealing with topics such as Solomon’s temple, the English Bible, the book of Abraham, the life of Christ, and works that explicate LDS beliefs and doctrines. ✕

Q&A with J. Spencer Fluhman

Interview by Christopher C. Jones

J. SPENCER FLUHMAN (fluhman@byu.edu) IS AN ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF CHURCH HISTORY AND DOCTRINE AT BYU. CHRISTOPHER C. JONES (chrisjones13@gmail.com) IS A MASTER’S STUDENT OF HISTORY AT BYU.

AFTER GRADUATING SUMMA CUM LAUDE FROM BYU IN 1998 WITH A DEGREE in Near Eastern studies, Fluhman obtained an MA (2000) and PhD (2006) from the University of Wisconsin–Madison in history. Fluhman was recently selected to participate in the Young Scholars in American Religion program at the Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture at Indiana University–Purdue University at Indianapolis.

Q: Congratulations on your recent selection to the Young Scholar program. Can you tell us a bit about the program?

A: The program had its beginnings in the early nineties. The Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture, with funding from the

Lilly Endowment, established the program to support young university faculty working in the field of American religion. Every few years, ten to twelve young scholars meet in Indianapolis for seminars aimed at enhancing their research and writing, classroom teaching, and professional

development. Over the course of their appointments, seminar participants are expected to write a publishable piece of research. Some of those articles are published in the center’s journal, *Religion and American Culture*. I will be a seminar member at the center from 2007 to 2009.

Q: How were you selected? Did you have to apply?

A: The center accepts applications in a national competition before each seminar series. Applicants submit

vitae, essays describing their scholarly work and teaching, and letters of recommendation.

Q: What will your responsibilities and schedule include in this program?

A: I will attend five seminars, held in October and April, over the next couple of years. The seminars alternate between teaching, research, and professional development emphases.

Q: Do you feel like it is an important achievement for a historian of Mormonism to be recognized and selected for this program?

A: I think it is another signal that Latter-day Saint Church history is increasingly being seen as an important part of the larger story of American religious history. With as rich history and documentary archive as we have, non-Latter-day Saint scholars are drawn to the field in greater numbers these days, too. It is an exciting time to be working in the field.

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Q: What current research are you working on?

A: I am expanding the study I began in graduate school, which surveys American perceptions of early Latter-day Saints. I have tried to use

those perceptions as a window into how Americans came to grips with the religious and cultural changes of the nineteenth century. I have found that we have a great deal to learn about how and why people perceived Joseph Smith and the Church the way they did. When it is done, I hope to have assembled a history of “Mormonism in the American mind” from 1830 to 1896.

Q: What is the current state of Mormon studies? What do you see in its future?

A: I am excited about Mormon studies. Interdisciplinary interest in the Church, its people, and our past is a sign of a certain maturity with regard both to the Church and to the academy. One of the most exciting things about this surge in interest is the ways it brings people from within and outside the Latter-day Saint tradition together in a search for understanding. It forces those of us on the inside to be clearer about ourselves, and, on the other hand, it forces those on the outside to replace old stereotypes with more nuanced and compelling understandings of us. In my mind, it is a win-win scenario.

Q: What advice do you have for young Latter-day Saint students of Mormon history who aspire to follow in your footsteps and pursue Mormon studies professionally?

A: The first thought I have is simply to echo what Latter-day Saint scholar Richard L. Bushman recently wrote. I agree with him that it would be a mistake for Latter-day Saint schol-



ars to check their beliefs at the door when they write. I see no compelling reason for a believing scholar to obscure his or her faith in any way. Second, it will serve any young scholar well to work toward mastering the wider field and historical context. A valid criticism of past Latter-day Saint histories is that too few are accessible to folks outside the tradition. Translating our history for non-Latter-day Saint readers is hard work, to say the least, but it is work that must be done if we hope to do justice to the real significance of the story. I guess I am restating what has been said by President Spencer W. Kimball, Elder Neal A. Maxwell, and others through the years: Latter-day Saint scholarship of lasting significance will issue from those who are, in effect, bilingual, possessing both a vocabulary of faith and one that works in the modern academy. So, there is your answer (finally!): be the best Latter-day Saint you can be, and squeeze every drop of insight you can from the wider historical field. ✕