

For the Salvation of Zion

Steven C. Harper



I climbed the stairs in the Smith Family Living Center at BYU in 1992 and walked sheepishly into the small office that housed BYU Studies. I had been home from the Canada Winnipeg Mission for less than a year but long enough to know that I'd never be an engineer like my father. I still didn't know what I could become, and I felt anxious about that.

I had enrolled in a class on editing for publication and been assigned to BYU Studies for some experiential learning, as we now call it. I did not know what BYU Studies was. I didn't know what an academic journal was. I didn't know who John W. (Jack) Welch was, that he had recently been named the fourth editor in chief, or that he had found chiasmus in the Book of Mormon while serving his mission in Germany.¹ I didn't know what chiasmus was.

No one knew then that Jack was beginning what would be a quarter-century tenure in his new role, but he had already set the course for it. He had seen no reason to revolutionize what BYU Studies was—a

1. See John W. Welch, "Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies* 10, no. 1 (1969): 69–84. John W. Welch served as the editor in chief of *BYU Studies* from 1991 to 2018. Previous editors include Clinton F. Larson (1959–1967), Charles D. Tate Jr. (1967–1983), and Edward A. Geary (1984–1991). To learn more about these past editors, see Neal E. Lambert, "Clinton F. Larson: 'I Miss His Booming Laugh,'" *BYU Studies* 49, no. 2 (2010), 178–83; Charles D. Tate Jr., "BYU Studies in the 1970s," *BYU Studies* 31, no. 4 (1991): 11–14; Charles D. Tate Jr., "Brigham Young University Studies: Its Purpose, Its Freedom, Its Scope," *BYU Studies* 8, no. 1 (1967): 1–5; and Edward A. Geary, "Confessions of a Chameleon," *BYU Studies* 31, no. 4 (1991): 15–19.

quarterly journal committed to showcasing the complementary nature of revealed and discovered truth, welcoming contributions from all fields of learning written for educated nonspecialists. He was determined, however, to “expand the variety of its articles and the size of its reading audience,” based on the belief that “*BYU Studies* can and should offer the world the best scholarly perspectives on topics of academic interest to Latter-day Saints.”²

I had barely qualified academically to be at BYU, but as a missionary I had tasted the exhilaration of seeking learning by study and faith, with my head and my heart as God-given allies. One day on the Canadian prairie, it seemed as if the Lord was speaking to me in Doctrine and Covenants section 93 when he said, “Obtain a knowledge of history, and of countries, and of kingdoms, of laws of God and man, and all this for the salvation of Zion” (D&C 93:53). So I walked into the BYU Studies office and surveyed the room where I would spend much of the next two years, eager but uncertain whether my mind was capable of the required rigor and unaware of how naïve my faith was.

I met Jack and learned to admire his mind. I worried that my ignorance would be exposed, but Jack was kind to me and cultivated my potential. It was gratifying to see my name listed for the first time as an editorial assistant in issue 33:2.

I was studying paleography and early Church history, so Jack assigned me to work with Bruce Van Orden on his edition of the letters William Phelps wrote to his wife Sally in 1835.³ Then Jack assigned me to assist Jan Shipps as she closely compared William McLellin’s six journals to typescripts she and Jack were preparing for publication.⁴ Like Jack, Jan was a generous and exacting mentor whose knowledge I admired and coveted. Their confidence in me nurtured self-confidence.

My conviction that Joseph Smith was a revelator came from studying McLellin’s journals and his copies of the Savior’s revelations to Joseph. William became convinced that Joseph was a revelator late in the summer of 1831 when he met three of the Book of Mormon’s witnesses on the Illinois prairie. He walked and “talked much” with them

2. John W. Welch, “BYU Studies: Into the 1990s,” *BYU Studies* 31, no. 4 (1991): 21.

3. See Bruce A. Van Orden, “Writing to Zion: The William W. Phelps Kirtland Letters (1835–1836),” *BYU Studies* 33, no. 3 (1993): 542–93.

4. Jan Shipps and John W. Welch, eds., *The Journals of William E. McLellin, 1831–1836* (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies, 1994).

and other Saints that summer. Of August 19, William wrote, “I took Hiram the brother of Joseph and we went into the woods and set down and talked together about 4 hours. I inquired into the particulars of the coming forth of the record, of the rise of the church and of its progress and upon the testimonies given to him.” Of the next morning, William wrote, “I rose early and betook myself to earnest prayr to God to direct me into truth; and from all the light that I could gain by examinations searches and researches I was bound as an honest man to acknowledge the truth and Validity of the book of **Mormon**.” Here was learning by study and also by faith.⁵

William asked Hyrum Smith to baptize him. Soon William’s journal entries got even more compelling. He walked to Ohio and met Joseph at a conference on October 25. Then they walked home together. Four days later, while still at Joseph’s home, William prayed and asked God for a revelation, and Joseph received it. William had told God but not Joseph what he was after—the answers to five anxiety-causing questions. And he wanted to know—really know—if Joseph was a revelator.⁶

William wrote that “the Lord condescended to hear my prayr and give me a revelation of his will, through his prophet or seer (Joseph)—And these are the words which I wrote from his mouth.” William scribed the original revelation, then copied it carefully into his journal.⁷ As the days and months wore on, he tried to live by it, and when he failed, he alternately repented or rationalized his thoughts and actions.⁸

5. Shipps and Welch, *Journals of William E. McLellin*, 33, bold in original. For the rest of the story, see Mitchell K. Schaefer, “‘The Testimony of Men’: William E. McLellin and the Book of Mormon Witnesses,” *BYU Studies* 50, no. 1 (2011): 99–110.

6. W. E. McLellin, “Our views relative to the legal Successor . . . ,” *Ensign of Liberty* 1 (January 1847): 61, <https://archive.org/details/EnsignOfLiberty18471849/page/n59>. See also Shipps and Welch, *Journals of William E. McLellin*, 44–45.

7. Shipps and Welch, *Journals of William E. McLellin*, 45–46, bold in original.

8. It requires analysis of a constellation of documents to arrive at this conclusion: The revelation now in Doctrine and Covenants 66: “Revelation, 29 October 1831 [D&C 66],” [9], The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed October 31, 2018, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-29-october-1831-dc-66/1>; McLellin’s August 4, 1832, letter to his relatives, found in Shipps and Welch, *Journals of William E. McLellin*, 79–86; McLellin’s 1831 and 1832 journals, in the William E. McLellin papers 1831–1878, MS 1358, box 1, folders 1–2, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, available at <https://eadview.lds.org/findingaid/000241441/> and in Shipps and Welch, *Journals of William E. McLellin*, 29–78; and Joseph

I read William's journal entries closely under Jan and Jack's supervision. I learned from them the historical method and the discipline of document editing. For me, those academic endeavors were delightfully entwined with inescapable evidence that Joseph Smith revealed the mind and will of Jesus Christ. In 1848, a decade after he became bitterly disaffected from Joseph, William called it "evidence which I cannot refute."⁹

BYU Studies challenged and changed my naïve assumptions about revelation and about human nature. I learned that revelation to William and through Joseph was a marvelous but imperfect process.¹⁰ I found that William and Joseph were complex souls. Jack sent me to Independence, Missouri, to verify the text of William's 1832 letter to his relatives. In it William recounted his conversion, affirmed that Joseph was "A Prophet, a Seer and Revelater to the church of christ," and rationalized his disregard for the revelation the Lord gave to answer his concerns.¹¹ I felt frustrated with William for being both fixed and fickle in his faith, and I felt empathy for him and for myself.

Working on William McLellin's journals, letters, and revelation manuscripts helped my faith mature and showed that it could be strengthened by scholarly work. I learned to think more carefully and critically, to identify and question some of my assumptions, and to expect and cope with ambiguity and paradox in people and in the Church. BYU Studies was the right environment for me to come of age. There I encountered and bridged what Bruce C. Hafen called "the gap between the real and the ideal" on my journey from naïve to informed faith in the restored gospel of Jesus Christ.¹²

Smith's June 6, 1832, letter to Emma: "Letter to Emma Smith, 6 June 1832," [2]–[3], Joseph Smith Papers, accessed October 31, 2018, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-emma-smith-6-june-1832/1>.

9. McLellin, "Our views," 61.

10. For more on this, see Steven C. Harper, "That They Might Come to Understanding": Revelation as Process," in *You Shall Have My Word: Exploring the Text of the Doctrine and Covenants*, ed. Scott C. Esplin, Richard O. Cowan, and Rachel Cope (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012), 19–33. See also Steven C. Harper, "Historical Headnotes and the Index of Contents in the Book of Commandments and Revelations," *BYU Studies* 48, no. 3 (2009): 53–66; and Steven C. Harper, "The Rich Man, Lazarus, and Doctrine & Covenants 104:18," *BYU Studies* 47, no. 4 (2008): 51–54.

11. Shipps and Welch, *Journals of William E. McLellin*, 82.

12. See Bruce C. Hafen, "On Dealing with Uncertainty" (devotional address, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, January 9, 1979), <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1979/08/on-dealing-with-uncertainty?lang=eng>; Bruce C. Hafen, "Love

I applied what I learned at BYU Studies in an MA program at Utah State University, writing my thesis on what William's journals and others like them revealed about who joined the Church in the 1830s, how they were proselytized, and what shaped their choices. I earned a PhD in early American history at Lehigh University and then taught for two years in the history and religion departments at BYU-Hawaii before joining the Church History and Doctrine faculty at BYU in 2002.

Jack approached me at that point and invited me to be the document editor for BYU Studies. I considered it a high honor and accepted, knowing that I'd be following historians who had become heroic to me.¹³ The best part of the job was mentoring young scholars in the discipline of document editing, helping them apply the historical method, and observing the maturation of their faith.¹⁴

I confess, however, that by 2011 I became less active in my BYU Studies role.¹⁵ That year I moved to Jerusalem, became preoccupied with my teaching assignment there, and got out of the habit of attending BYU Studies meetings. Then I transitioned to a consuming assignment as the managing historian and a general editor of *Saints: The Story of the Church of Jesus Christ in the Latter Days*. I never lost my faith in or love for BYU Studies, but it became easy to overlook. I missed the fellowship of the Church History Board, but I didn't change my ways.

Jack didn't forsake me. I tried to tell him repeatedly that I couldn't do it anymore, but he kept my name in each issue. He visited with me from time to time. There was no pressure, but he made sure I knew I was always welcome, that BYU Studies would take me back whenever I wanted to contribute again. Then one day he suggested that maybe I

Is Not Blind: Some Thoughts for College Students on Faith and Ambiguity" (speech, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, January 9, 1979), https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/bruce-c-hafen_love-is-not-blind-thoughts-college-students-faith-ambiguity/; and Bruce C. Hafen, "Faith Is Not Blind" (devotional address, Brigham Young University-Hawaii, Laie, January 24, 2017), <https://devotional.byuh.edu/media170124>.

13. James B. Allen served as document editor from 1970 to 1982, Ronald W. Walker served from 1983 to 1992, and Brian Q. Cannon served from 1993 to 2001.

14. For example, Mark B. Nelson and Steven C. Harper, "The Imprisonment of Martin Harris in 1833," *BYU Studies* 45, no. 4 (2006): 113–106; and Jordan Watkins and Steven C. Harper, "'It Seems That All Nature Mourns': Sally Randall's Response to the Murder of Joseph and Hyrum Smith," *BYU Studies* 46, no. 1 (2007): 95–100.

15. See Edward L. Kimball, "Confession in LDS Doctrine and Practice," *BYU Studies* 36, no. 2 (1996–97): 7–73.

could be his successor. My heart rate jumped as nagging insecurities returned. My ignorance would be exposed, especially compared to Jack. I worried that I would always be compared to Jack. I told him to keep looking and suggested some better candidates.

He dropped the idea, but I kept thinking about it. BYU Studies had given me profound and enduring experience of learning by study and by faith. It had launched my career. I mused about what I could potentially give back. A few months later when BYU extended the invitation to me to be the editor in chief, I was almost ready to receive it. I talked it over with my brother, David, as we strolled past the Salt Lake temple and the site where Orson Pratt's observatory once stood.¹⁶ David had spent some time with me at BYU Studies a quarter century earlier. He understood where I had come from and what was at stake for me. He observed that if the only contribution I could make was to help a student experience what I did, I ought to do it. As that thought sank in, concern about how I would be perceived resolved into peace that I could work "for the salvation of Zion" (D&C 93:53).

I don't expect my tenure to last nearly as long as Jack's. To paraphrase Lloyd Bentsen: you know Jack and I'm not him.¹⁷ Like Jack, however, I want *BYU Studies Quarterly* to remain committed to showcasing the complementary nature of revealed and discovered truth. I welcome contributions from all fields of learning written for educated nonspecialists. I will expand the variety of articles based on the belief Jack instilled in me: BYU Studies owes readers the best perspectives on topics of academic interest to Latter-day Saints.¹⁸

16. "Vision Statement," The Temple and Observatory Group, http://templeandobservatory.org/?page_id=40.

17. "Lloyd Bentsen," Wikiquote, updated January 30, 2018, https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Lloyd_Bentsen. This quote was said by Lloyd Bentsen in reference to Jack Kennedy at a vice-presidential debate in 1988.

18. Welch, "BYU Studies," 21.