Book Reviews

LARRY E. DAHL and CHARLES D. TATE, JR., eds. *The Lectures on Faith in Historical Perspective*. Religious Studies Center Monograph Series, vol. 15. Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1990. ix, 310 pp. Appendixes, subject and scripture indexes. $11.95.

Reviewed by Noel B. Reynolds, professor of political science at Brigham Young University and president of F.A.R.M.S., with appreciation to Tad Louis Cowley for research assistance.

This distinctive volume, which continues the Religious Studies Center's tradition of high production quality, may prove a landmark publication in three important senses. Most importantly, it provides a new edition of the text of the "Lectures on Faith" together with charts comparing the textual variations among the four major earlier editions (1835, 1876, 1891, and 1985) as well as the variations between the 1835 edition and this 1990 edition—useful resources for students of the lectures. Less significant for scholars, but probably of more value to most readers, are the excellent "discussions" of the seven lectures by Dennis F. Rasmussen, Joseph Fielding McConkie, Rodney Turner, Robert L. Millet, Robert J. Matthews, and Ardeth G. Kapp. Third, the book is nicely constructed for popular study of the lectures; it brings together in one place both the lectures and much of what has been thought and said about them and supplements them with an extensive bibliography of related materials. In addition to these contributions, the volume represents a vigorous and well-designed effort to rehabilitate the largely disregarded lectures.

In a helpful introduction, editor Charles Tate explains the guidelines governing changes made for the 1990 edition of the lectures. Scholars might object to the decision to modernize punctuation, spelling, format, and sentence structure rather than reproduce the original 1835 version. One criticism of this modernized edition is that it will not lend itself to authorship studies. But as I have used this edition, I have become more sympathetic to the

editors' approach and have detected little change in meaning. Eliminating the distracting imperfections in the 1835 text has rendered it more readable. Most helpfully, the editors have numbered the lists of questions and answers following each of the lectures. These improvements, combined with updated scripture references, make studying the lectures much easier. And for those who need to have the original, the editors have charted all the variations of their version from the 1835 version.

The editors' desire to promote the lectures explains the apologetic tone of the volume. The chapter on historical background by Larry Dahl summarizes previously published information[1] in a way designed to reduce doubts about the value of the lectures or Joseph Smith's intimate involvement in preparing, delivering, and publishing them. Dahl cautiously reports the authorship studies which have all concluded that Sidney Rigdon was the main author. The essays on the lectures' topics are designed to promote the importance of certain ideas in the lectures, to advance our understanding and appreciation of those ideas, and to defend them where they might seem to contradict Latter-day Saint scriptures or teachings. These essays do not criticize or explain the lectures; rather, in most instances, they pick up the subject of the given lecture and elaborate on it, providing what many readers will find to be more inspiring and informative treatments of the topics than were the original Kirtland lectures.

The essay on Lecture 1 by philosopher Dennis Rasmussen is an excellent example of such a discussion. After showing briefly how one might make sense of the idea that faith is a principle of action and power in both men and God, he goes on to a longer discussion of some of the "latent ideas" that "seem to follow from the first lecture" (166). In particular, Rasmussen is interested in the apparent commitment to happiness as a standard of good and in Joseph Smith's statement that "happiness is the object and design of our existence."[2] Recognizing the relativist implications of these kinds of teleological ethics, Rasmussen argues that "at its highest level faith as the principle of action . . . becomes the principle of duty to keep the commandments of God" (173). He justifies this move from an ethics of happiness to a Kantian ethic of duty by arguing that the highest happiness results from doing one's duty. In light of the debate between deontological ethics and utilitarianism in contemporary ethical theory, readers with a philosophical bent will be interested in how Rasmussen interprets this lecture.

Rasmussen was well chosen to write the lead essay both because of his natural familiarity with the pervasive philosophical character of the lectures and because of his ability to deal with complex philosophical issues in a gospel context without using technical jargon that would discourage general readers. In featuring Rasmussen, the editors make a courageous statement in a community where some ever-vigilant but overzealous critics interpret every resort to philosophical argument as evidence of "secular humanist" tendencies (205).

Lecture 2 makes the point that men and women can come to know God only as he chooses to reveal himself to them. The importance of this teaching is appropriately emphasized in the vigorous essay by Joseph Fielding McConkie. Using forceful language, McConkie develops the themes of Lecture 2 with a mastery of modern scriptures that does not characterize the authors of the original lectures. Like Rasmussen, he goes beyond the simple theme of the lecture to develop a rich complexity of possible implications. The lecture establishes that, down to the time of Abraham, people knew of God through traditions originating from the appearances and words of God to Adam and Cain. Encouraged by these traditions, all God's children could seek their own witnesses of God's existence.

McConkie goes beyond this idea to develop a somewhat different point—that God's order consists of holy men who can be witnesses of God and declare his doctrines and scriptures and that this order is not limited to the President of the Church. These inspired men can write inspired doctrinal books, even though "'not . . . by way of commandment'" (195). Although McConkie is explicitly arguing to broaden the generally accepted view of who can write inspired doctrinal books, one senses that his concept of who can contribute to the knowledge of God may not be so broad as the lectures seem to suggest; they point twice to the conversations between God and Cain following Abel's murder as important early sources of knowledge about God.

Because of their similar content, Lectures 3 and 4 were assigned by the editors to a single essayist. In reading these two lectures, most contemporary Latter-day Saints would have a strong sense that they were reading a sectarian Protestant document. As essayist Rodney Turner points out, these lectures employ thirty-nine verses from the Bible and two from the Doctrine and Covenants to "prove" or "extrapolate" God's nature (199). In these lectures, the reader encounters the paradoxical thesis that in order to have *faith* in God,

one must first have *knowledge* of his nature. One of the main strengths of Turner's approach is the way he uses modern scriptures to discuss both this point and the following unfamiliar premises taken from the lectures:

1. "It is the first principle of the gospel to know for a certainty the Character of God" (200; italics omitted).[3]
2. "'God' is not one solitary being, but the sum total of all those men and women who achieve a fulness of exaltation" (201–2).
3. "We know of no identifiable personage who has always existed *as God*, yet God—at least in *principle*—has always existed" (202).
4. "If one of [the gods] were to modify or discard even a single attribute, the perfect unity that makes all gods one god would be violated" (210).
5. "Law did not create God; God created law" (214).

One does not know quite how to take Turner's adamant rejections of reason as a legitimate means for learning about God when he himself explicitly and implicitly turns to "purely theoretical argument" (210) to make many of his key points. His attack on "secular humanism" (205–6) makes sense with respect to humanism's disbelief in the divine, but one wonders if humanism's rationalistic methods are distinct from the strategies of proof used in the Lectures on Faith.

The most sensitive assignment, Lecture 5, was given to Robert L. Millet, dean of Religious Education at Brigham Young University. The doctrine of the Godhead expressed in this lecture seems in conflict with Latter-day Saint teaching—a problem that has often been associated with the 1921 decision to delete the lectures from the Doctrine and Covenants. Millet successfully puts the casual critic of this lecture off balance by quoting an extraordinary endorsement of the lectures by Elder Bruce R. McConkie: "It is without question the most excellent summary of revealed and eternal truth relative to the Godhead that is now extant in mortal language. . . . To spiritually illiterate persons, it may seem hard and confusing; to those whose souls are aflame with heavenly light, it is a nearly perfect summary of those things which must be believed to gain salvation" (221).[4] In the same spirit, Millet suggests to the reader that the desired harmony between Lecture 5 and the scriptures will be found by

those who search prayerfully and "give solemn and ponderous thought" (222) to these insights, which he unequivocally attributes to Joseph Smith. For Millet, there is no authorship issue worth considering. Without qualification, he cites all passages from the lectures as Joseph Smith's words.

One of the first issues Millet addresses is the oft-remarked Protestantism of the lectures. Referring to this and the theory that they were early, experimental, and sectarian, he asserts that they "are neither primitive nor Protestant" (223). Millet's subsequent efforts to reconcile Lecture 5 with current Latter-day Saint teachings are admirable and well-written academic exercises—though they are puzzling. His first alternative explanation of the treatment of God the Father as a spirit being suggests that Joseph might not have grasped the Father's corporeality by 1835. But that explanation seems to play right into the primitivist thesis he rejects. The other alternatives offered by Millet feature interpretations by which the language is made to imply what the Church now expressly teaches.

The second troublesome issue in Lecture 5 is the character of the Holy Spirit, which, as Millet says, "seems to be relegated to some type of mystical connecting link between the other two members of the Godhead" (233). Millet acknowledges that there is little evidence before Nauvoo that Joseph understood the Holy Ghost as a distinct personage, except the statement just before his death to the effect that he had "always declared" it that way (234).[5] Millet further hypothesizes that there may well have been "a significant chasm" between the Prophet's understanding and what he taught to the Saints (234). Few Latter-day Saints would question that Joseph knew more than he said, but it is harder to believe that what he taught was *different* from what he knew. The reader is left to wonder how it is that the awkwardness of composing such strained arguments never moves Millet to mention or consider the widely accepted and well-supported possibility that these lectures were largely authored by Sidney Rigdon, who clearly did not have all the understanding of Joseph Smith, and to acknowledge the doctrinal variations and Protestantism as consistent with that account of authorship.

Millet ignores the authorship issue and even makes his predicament more severe by insisting on the authoritative correctness of the lectures. He points out that the Saints in 1835 accepted them as the "doctrine of the Church" (238) and claims that they were "wholly approved" by the Prophet in their present form (238–39). These claims overstate the documented facts. The most that can be shown

is that Joseph may have been involved in preparing the lectures for publication. But even that belief depends on a statement written several years later. In contrast, the minutes of the Church conference that approved publication of the new Doctrine and Covenants report language identifying the revelations as Church doctrine and the lectures as "judiciously arranged and compiled, and . . . profitable for doctrine."[6]

Millet establishes his unequivocal devotion to the lectures by quoting a 1972 statement by Elder Bruce R. McConkie: "In my judgment [Lecture 5] is the most comprehensive, intelligent, inspired utterance that now exists . . . in one place defining, interpreting, expounding, announcing, and testifying what kind of being God is. It was written by the power of the Holy Ghost, by the spirit of inspiration. It is, in effect, eternal scripture; it is true (239)."[7] Quotations like this help us understand why Elder McConkie might have urged including the lectures in the 1981 edition of the scriptures. And they may also partially explain the effort made in the present volume to rehabilitate the lectures among Latter-day Saints.

The dual topic of Lecture 6, as discussed by Robert J. Matthews, is the necessity of sacrifice and of knowing that one's life is acceptable to God. Matthews shares the view of the other writers that the lectures "are the greatest and most profound treatises on faith that we know of" (241). However, it is noteworthy that Matthews goes far beyond the text of Lecture 6 to demonstrate and develop these principles from modern scriptures and the teachings of modern prophets.

The final essay is distinctive in that it evidences little intention to promote the lectures themselves. Rather, Ardeth G. Kapp offers a well-conceived and inspiring explanation of the fruits of faith in her response to Lecture 7. While her approach is not scholarly, the essay reveals her devout spirit and encourages the reader to be faithful.

The issue that continues to provoke the most interest relative to the "Lectures on Faith" is Who wrote them? To his credit, Larry E. Dahl, as one of the editors, discusses the available evidence, though this evidence tends to undermine the view that Joseph Smith was primarily responsible for the lectures.

Opinions on the authorship and status of the lectures in Latter-day Saint literature vary widely. Elder McConkie's view is quoted above. Probably no other Church leader has supported this view so strongly. Obviously, it was not shared by the Church leadership that dropped the lectures from the canon in 1921, explicitly reiterating

the statement that the lectures were not scripture but merely "helps."[8] Those leaders possibly were inclined to agree with Elder John A. Widtsoe, who believed the lectures were "written by Sidney Rigdon and others."[9] Three independent authorship studies using different but reputable techniques conclude that Sidney Rigdon is the primary author of the lectures. Not a single lecture can conclusively be attributed to Joseph Smith.[10] Dahl's brief survey of these studies tends to emphasize their limitations and gently downplay the significance of their conclusions, but he does distance himself from those who want to give Joseph Smith full responsibility for the lectures.

Furthermore, Dahl's discussion of historical evidence concerning authorship is incomplete and insufficiently critical. Dahl notes, for example, the contemporary journal entry by Zebedee Coltrin stating that Sidney Rigdon "'presided' over the school," but dismisses it with the ungrounded speculation that perhaps Rigdon was really only the teacher (11). Dahl also refers to an October 1834 entry in the *History of the Church* indicating that Joseph Smith was busy preparing for the School of the Elders.[11] But only by conjecture can Dahl conclude that such evidence implies Joseph was personally working on the lectures (7–8). The only strong historical link between Joseph and the lectures is the January 1835 *History of the Church* entry indicating that he was working on the committee that was preparing them for publication.[12] Such a statement is not sufficient historical evidence that Joseph was responsible for their content or method. Even if we acknowledge Rigdon as the main author, we have no way to determine how closely Joseph reviewed or edited the lectures.

Dahl's conclusions should also be more tentatively stated due to the character of the cited historical sources. The *History of the Church* was not begun until 1838. The entries mentioning the Lectures on Faith and the School of the Elders are, therefore, latter reconstructions done in the pen of Joseph's various scribes. As Dean C. Jessee points out in the introduction to *The Papers of Joseph Smith,* Joseph's dependence on scribes to keep his records may partially prevent the reader from knowing the mind of the Prophet.[13] Joseph's original diaries and personal writings, which provided most of the source material from which the *History of the Church* was later compiled, make no mention of the lectures.

A major weakness of *The Lectures on Faith in Historical Perspective* is the failure to seriously consider alternative scenarios that might explain the available facts about the authorship and use

of the lectures. The volume is designed to promote a single view, rehabilitating the decanonized lectures, in spite of any awkwardness this view creates. Though the following is not an exhaustive study of this matter, it demonstrates that one can spin quite a different theory, one that would accommodate a broader range of facts and agree better with the positions taken currently by the presiding quorums of the Church.

The year 1835 was a time in which Joseph's leadership was under persistent attack; within a few years, all the key actors in the publication of the lectures turned against Joseph and left the Church. According to Brigham Young, Oliver Cowdery included the "Article on Marriage" in the 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants in spite of Joseph's repeated requests that it not be included.[14] Thus how can we conclude any particular level of enthusiasm for the lectures on Joseph's part merely from their inclusion and his signature on the prefatory letter? Perhaps Joseph merely felt bound by the vote of the 1835 conference, which was presided over by Rigdon and Cowdery in his absence.

The 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants included not only the Lectures on Faith, but also two items known to have been written by Oliver Cowdery (and possibly W. W. Phelps)—the statements on government and marriage.[15] The preface to the 1835 edition explicitly acknowledges that all three of these nonrevelatory items are written in response to criticisms of the Church. Viewing the lectures as a response to criticism might help to explain their philosophical tone and atypical style. One possibility is that the Lectures on Faith were a response to criticism of those like Charles Finney. Finney's lecture on theological method began with the assertion that "Mormonism is ridiculous *credulity,* founded in utter ignorance or a disregard of the first principles of evidence in relation to the kind and degree of testimony demanded to establish any thing that claims to be a revelation from God." Contrary to the distinctive Mormon style with its emphasis on testimony, the Kirtland lectures frequently appeal to what Finney calls the "affirmations of reason."[16] Assuming that the published version of Finney's lectures reflects what he had been saying about the Mormons in his years on the lecture circuit, one may infer from the similarities in format, philosophical tone, and principles of evidence between Finney's published lectures and the Kirtland lectures that the former may have influenced or even prompted the production of the latter. If the lectures are such a response, written to a critic of the Church rather

than written as a guide for the general membership, it may be inappropriate to view them as scripture, regardless of authorship—a question which remains unresolved.

These observations are not based on an exhaustive study of any of the materials mentioned. Much scholarly work on the lectures remains to be done. There needs to be extensive research into the writings and teachings of Rigdon, Cowdery, Phelps, and others. Also, someone needs to take a closer look at Finney and Campbell and the extent to which their widespread influence in frontier America might have touched the Latter-day Saints.

In spite of the incomplete nature of these conjectures, a significant question emerges: Why is it that several rather obvious alternative ways of understanding the Lectures on Faith are not mentioned in this work? Failure to deal with these obvious possibilities limits the volume's long-range value as a starting point for future spiritual and scholarly study.

NOTES

[1] See Leland H. Gentry, "What of the Lectures on Faith?" *BYU Studies* 19 (Fall 1978): 5–19. Dahl is the first to notice evidence that the lectures may have been delivered before December 22 (12); he also points out the absence of documentary evidence for the widely reported conclusion that Sidney Rigdon and Joseph Smith were the "primary teachers" for the school (10–11).

[2] Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith,* comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972), 255–56.

[3] Smith, *Teachings,* 343–45.

[4] Quoting Bruce R. McConkie, A *New Witness for the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 72.

[5] Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds. and comps., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph,* Religious Studies Monograph Series, vol. 6 (Provo and Salt Lake City: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University and Bookcraft, 1980), 378.

[6] Joseph Smith, Jr., *The History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,* ed. B. H. Roberts, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1958), 2:244; hereafter cited as *HC.*

[7] Bruce R. McConkie, "The Lord God of Joseph Smith," *Speeches of the Year, 1971–1972* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 1972), 4.

[8] Gentry, "What of the Lectures on Faith?" 10–11.

[9] John A. Widtsoe, *The Message of the Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1969), 2.

[10] See Wayne A. Larsen and Alvin C. Rencher, "Who Wrote the Book of Mormon? An Analysis of Wordprints," *BYU Studies* 20 (Spring 1980): 249, Appendix E ("Lectures on Faith"), revised and reprinted in Noel B. Reynolds, ed., *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins,* Religious Studies Monograph Series, vol. 7 (Salt Lake City and Provo: Bookcraft, 1982), 183–84; Elinore H. Partridge, "Characteristics of Joseph Smith's Style and Notes on the Authorship of the Lectures on Faith," Task Papers in LDS History, no. 14 (Salt Lake City: Submitted to History Division, Historical Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1976); and Alan J. Phipps, "The Lectures on Faith: An Authorship Study" (Master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1977).

[11] *HC* 2:169–70.

[12] *HC* 2:180.

[13] Dean C. Jessee, ed., *Autobiographical and Historical Writings,* vol. 1 of *The Papers of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), xxiv.

[14] Concerning the "Article on Marriage," Joseph F. Smith recorded a statement by Brigham Young: "Prest. Young spoke 12 minutes in relation to Sec. 109 B[ook] of Doctrine and Covenants ["Article on Marriage"]. Saying Oliver Cowdery wrote it, and incisted on its being incerted in the Book of D. & C. contrary to the thrice expressed wish and refusal of the Prophet Jos. Smith" (Joseph F. Smith diary, October 9, 1869, on file in the Archives Division, Church Historical Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City).

[15] Bruce A. Van Orden has examined the common assumption that Oliver Cowdery wrote the 1835 statements on government and marriage and advances persuasive evidence that Cowdery and Phelps worked together on these and that Phelps's background for writing the government statement in particular was significantly stronger than Cowdery's. See his "W. W. Phelps: His Ohio Contributions, 1835–36," in *Regional Studies in Latter-day Saint Church History: Ohio,* ed. Milton V. Backman, Jr. (Provo, Utah: Department of Church History and Doctrine, Brigham Young University, 1990).

[16] Charles G. Finney, *Finney's Lectures on Theology* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1986), 19, 21.