Type: Journal Article

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Source: *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship*, Volume 50 (2022)
Published by: The Interpreter Foundation
Page(s): vii-xx

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INTERPRETER

A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship

Volume 50 · 2022 · Pages vii- xx

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Offprint Series

ISSN 2372-1227 (print)
ISSN 2372-126X (online)

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I'm writing to call readers' attention to a new book that, in my judgment, will be intensely interesting to at least a few members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints — *God: An Anatomy*.[1] The author, Francesca Stavrakopoulou, will be familiar to some as the telegenic British-accented host of programs for the BBC, Britain's Channel 4, and, in America, the History Channel on the archaeology, history, and religion of ancient Israel and Judah. Not merely a television host, she is also the holder of a doctorate from the University of Oxford and of a chair in Hebrew Bible and ancient religion at the University of Exeter in England.

God: An Anatomy is a massive tome that, including endnotes, extends to very nearly 600 pages. But its length is only one reason, and not the major one, why I can't simply recommend it for *all* Latter-day Saint readers. It is most emphatically not a Latter-day Saint book.

1. Francesca Stavrakopoulou, *God: An Anatomy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2021).

"I've never believed in God," Dr. Stavrakopoulou says flatly, on her book's very first page.[2] Understandably in that light, the book is neither reverent nor awestruck in its approach to her vastly important subject. For her, what she's discussing is merely a matter of ancient history, not a clue to the ultimate nature of reality or of any relevance to the heavens, human salvation, or an afterlife. After all, she believes in none of those things. And yet, her very lack of belief also frees her from any obligation to grind theological axes and permits her to go with her data. And that liberty, I think, has allowed her to create a book that offers rich material for believers in the Restoration and that can, in some important ways, support the teachings of Joseph Smith and his successors.

Not surprisingly, so far as I can see, *God: An Anatomy* seems to have received far more enthusiastic reviews from secularists than from religious believers. And here, as in many other regards, the unique position of the Latter-day Saints in the religious world is apparent.

From the time Joseph emerged from the grove of trees near his home outside of Palmyra, New York, in the spring of 1820, the Latter-day Saint view of God has diverged from the mainstream Christian conception of deity — and, for that matter, from mainstream Judaism and Islam. It could not have been otherwise, given his vision of the Father and the Son.

"I have always declared God," he said to a sizable audience fewer than two weeks before his martyrdom, "to be a distinct personage, Jesus Christ a separate and distinct personage from God the Father, and that the Holy Ghost was a distinct personage and a Spirit: and these three constitute three distinct personages and three Gods."[3] "That which is without body or parts is nothing. There is no other God in heaven but that God who has flesh and bones."[4] Somewhat more than a year prior to his death, in a statement that has since been canonized in the Doctrine and Covenants, he taught that "the Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man's; the Son also; but the Holy Ghost has not a body of flesh and bones, but is a personage of Spirit. Were it not so, the Holy Ghost could not dwell in us" (D&C 130:22).

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2. Ibid., 1. Hereafter, page references to Stavrakopoulou's book are supplied, for the most part, parenthetically within the main text.

3. "History, 1838–1856, volume F-1 [1 May 1844–8 August 1844]," p. 101, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-f-1-1-may-1844-8-august-1844/107.

4. "Discourse, 5 January 1841, as Reported by William Clayton," p. 7, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-5-january-1841-as-reported-by-william-clayton/4.

In what is arguably the most controversial sermon that he ever delivered, the famous King Follett Discourse, he declared that

> God Himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens! That is the great secret. If the veil were rent today, and the great God who holds this world in its orbit, and who upholds all worlds and all things by His power, was to make Himself visible, — I say, if you were to see Him today, you would see Him like a man in form — like yourselves in all the person, image, and very form as a man; for Adam was created in the very fashion, image and likeness of God, and received instruction from, and walked, talked and conversed with Him, as one man talks and communes with another. …
>
> Having a knowledge of God, we begin to know how to approach Him, and how to ask so as to receive an answer. When we understand the character of God, and know how to come to Him, He begins to unfold the heavens to us, and to tell us all about it. When we are ready to come to Him, He is ready to come to us.[5]

Given her own lack of theological commitments, I don't expect that Francesca Stavrakopoulou would be shocked or offended by such a declaration. On the contrary, I have little doubt that she would find it intriguing.[6] She might even, within the parameters of her atheism, find in it something to cheer. Why? In the very first pages of *God: An Anatomy*,

5. "History, 1838–1856, volume E-1 [1 July 1843–30 April 1844]," p. 1970, 1972-73, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-e-1-1-july-1843-30-april-1844/342; capitalization modernized; paragraph divisions altered.

6. I also think that she would enjoy the articles on divine corporeality by David Paulsen, written in one case with Carl Griffin. Unfortunately, they don't appear in her bibliography: David L. Paulsen, "Early Christian Belief in a Corporeal Deity: Origen and Augustine as Reluctant Witnesses," *Harvard Theological Review* 83, no.2 (April 1990): 105–16, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1509938; Kim Paffenroth, "Paulsen on Augustine: An Incorporeal or Nonanthropomorphic God?" *Harvard Theological Review* 86, no.2 (April 1993): 233–35, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1510005; David L. Paulsen, "Reply to Kim Paffenroth's Comment," *Harvard Theological Review* 86, no.2 (April 1993): 235–39, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1510006; Carl W. Griffin and David L. Paulsen, "Augustine and the Corporeality of God," *Harvard Theological Review* 9, no. 1 (January 2002): 97–118, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4150740.

she supplies a bit of autobiographical information that leads me to that hunch:

> While I was studying theology and religion at university, there was a broad assumption among lecturers and students alike that the God of the Bible is without a body. This was a formless, imageless, invisible deity, who in the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament) revealed himself in words mysteriously uttered through his prophets, and then in the New Testament became flesh ("incarnate") in Jesus Christ, in order to die for the sins of humanity before resurrecting and ascending back to the heavens. But as I looked closely at the books comprising the Bible, I couldn't find this bodiless God. Instead, these ancient texts conjured a startlingly corporeal image of God as a human-shaped deity, who walked and talked and wept and laughed. A god who ate and slept and felt and breathed. And a god who was distinctly male. (2)
>
> As my undergraduate studies progressed, no one seemed to talk about the body of the biblical God — until one memorable lecture, when the gender politics of modern Christian theology were being discussed. I was excited to discover that feminist theologians had long taken issue with the maleness of God in their scriptures. And yet it soon transpired that the way in which both feminist and traditionalist theologians proposed getting around this sticky issue was to insist that God couldn't possibly have a sex or a gender, because God didn't have a body. I vividly recall protesting in the question-and-answer session at the end of the lecture, "But lots of biblical texts suggest that God is masculine, with a male body." "The problem isn't God," replied the professor — a highly respected Christian theologian, and a man of the cloth. "The problem only arises when we take the Bible's descriptions too literally." He went on to explain that those troublesome biblical portrayals of a corporeal, masculine God were simply metaphorical, or poetic. "We shouldn't get too distracted by references to his body," he said. To do so, he claimed, was to engage too simplistically with the biblical texts. Apparently, we had to look not just at the texts but through the texts, to engage their theological truths. (2–3)

> Everyone else in the room seemed remarkably content with this approach to the God of the Bible, but I found it deeply frustrating. Why should I look past the clear image of God as a gigantic man with a heavy tread, weapons in his hands and breath as hot as sulphur? (3)
>
> Everyone else in the room, my theology professor included, was censoring the Bible, sanitizing its deity of any mythological, earthy or unsettling characteristics. I was disappointed by them. And disappointed for them. (3–4)

It seems fairly clear that, for Professor Stavrakopoulou, God doesn't literally exist but is to be considered something like a fictional literary character — at one time, a very vivid and lively one — who has been turned bland and dull by later readers of the book (or, truer to her way of thinking, in the disparate biblical books) in which he is far and away the most significant protagonist. A once spectacular figure of myth, he has been domesticated, tamed, and left (quite literally) toothless.

Alice Roberts, an English biological anthropologist and, like Stavrakopoulou, an outspoken atheist, academic, television presenter, and author, enthuses that "where pious theologians have abstracted him into emptiness, Stavrakopolou gives him back his substance, and he's so much more interesting in this bodily form!"[7]

"The modern God of the West and the ancient God of the Bible are very different beings," Dr. Stavrakopoulou writes. "Western intellectuals have not only rendered the biblical God lifeless, but reduced him to a mere phantom, conjured by the human imagination." Today, in a complaint in which Latter-day Saints, with their belief in ongoing modern revelation, heartily join, he is "a god who is everywhere and sees everything, but remains absent and says nothing" (415).

With no theological dog in the hunt, Dr. Stavrakopoulou takes it upon herself to clear off the accretions and, perhaps even more, to restore the deletions that have obscured the original God of the Bible from almost all of its modern readers.

"Stripping away the theological veneer of centuries of Jewish and Christian piety," she announces, "this book disentangles the biblical God from his scriptural and doctrinal fetters to reveal a deity wholly unlike the God worshipped by Jews and Christians today." "The God revealed

7. Alice Roberts, review of *God: An Anatomy*, by Francesca Stavrakopoulou (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2021), https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/563773/god-an-anatomy-by-francesca-stavrakopoulou/.

in this book is the deity as his ancient worshippers saw him: a supersized, muscle-bound, good-looking god, with superhuman powers, earthly passions, and a penchant for the fantastic and the monstrous" (4).

In pursuit of her argument, she dedicates much of her book to a multidisciplinary reconstruction of the original divinity worshipped by biblical peoples (who, she contends, was related to the divinities worshipped by the cultures that surrounded them). She organizes her treatment anatomically, from the ground up. It is comprised of five sections (Part I, "Feet and Legs"; Part II, "Genitals"; Part III, "Torso"; Part IV, "Arms and Hands"; Part V, "Head") and an epilogue. In turn, each part is made up of between three and five chapters. Thus, for example, Part V treats the divine ears, nose, and mouth in a quintet of separate pieces.

I won't go into detail regarding the four chapters of Part II — can you see why I don't recommend this book for all Latter-day Saints? — but I'll cite the anonymous review of her book that appeared in *The Economist*: "This book is a great rebel shout… [A] rollicking journey through every aspect of Yahweh's body, from top to bottom (yes, that too) and from inside out. … Ms. Stavrakopoulou has almost too much fun."[8]

Indeed. I'm reasonably certain that more than a few religiously devout readers, including Latter-day Saints, won't find *God: An Anatomy* entirely "fun." Nevertheless, more than a few reviewers have pronounced it both fun and — they're certainly correct in this — extremely readable (as one might perhaps expect from a person who hosts popular television broadcasts). Here, for example, is Jack Miles, author of such books as *God: A Biography*, *Christ: A Crisis in the Life of God*, and *God in the Qur'an*, writing for the *Catholic Herald*:

> Brilliant … Fascinating … Boldly simple in concept, *God: An Anatomy* is stunning in its execution. It is a tour de force, a triumph, and I write this as one who disagrees with Stavrakopoulou both on broad theoretical grounds and one who finds himself engaged with her in one narrow textual spat after another … Great fun to read … A stunning book.[9]

8. "A theologian presents God as few readers will have seen him before: Francesca Stavrakopoulou's book will offend some. But it will delight more," *The Economist* (2 October 2021); https://www.economist.com/books-and-arts/2021/10/02/a-theologian-presents-god-as-few-readers-will-have-seen-him-before.

9. Jack Miles, "Getting to grips with God," *Catholic Herald* (2 September 2021), https://catholicherald.co.uk/getting-to-grips-with-god/.

It is also, writes the prolific and popular author Karen Armstrong in the *New York Times*,

> A detailed and scrupulously researched book … [Stavrakopoulou] proceeds, in 21 chapters packed with knowledge and insight, to "anatomize" the divinity from head to toe, starting with the "standing stones" that marked the footsteps of deities in the Late Bronze and Early Iron Age and ending with images of God that enabled people to imagine that they were somehow communing with him "face to face."[10]

Latter-day Saints will note Ms. Armstrong's language when she rather complacently says that ancient people "imagined" that "they were somehow communing with [God] 'face to face.'" Neither the modern metaphorical understanding of divine anthropomorphism nor, for that matter, Stavrakopoulou's atheism allows reports of such encounters to be taken at face value. We're pretty much on our own — though, in this matter, oddly on middle ground between two extremes that both deny the literal corporeality of God.

Stavrakopoulou, of course, believes that God was and is simply a creation of human minds and imaginations. As an ideologically sympathetic reviewer in *New Humanist* writes, "What emerges is a deity more terrifyingly alive, more damaged, more compelling, more complex than we have encountered before. More human, you might say."[11] And, near the conclusion of *God: An Anatomy*, she herself describes the divine image that she has created: "This was a god more like the best of us and the worst of us. A god made in our own image" (423).

It is at this point that a Latter-day Saint will want to speak up. Jack Miles, the reviewer for the *Catholic Herald*, notes that Stavrakopoulou consistently tries to break what she calls the "fetters" of metaphorical understanding and to take descriptions of God literally. But, he suggests, even she doesn't do so consistently. And that is certainly true. For instance, the strong statement of Deuteronomy 32:4 notwithstanding, she never contends that the God of ancient Israel was actually a literal rock. Yes, metaphorical readings have largely and wrongly erased God's body from mainstream Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Still, there are

10. Karen Armstrong, "Piecing Together God's Body, From Head to Toe," *New York Times* (25 January 2022); https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/25/books/review/god-francesca-stavrakopoulou.html.

11. Mathew Lyons, "Book review: *God: An Anatomy*," *New Humanist* (14 October 2021), https://newhumanist.org.uk/articles/5869/book-review-god-an-anatomy.

places where descriptions of God should be taken metaphorically, even from the perspective of committed, believing anthropomorphists.

And have elements of human culture affected our perceptions of the divine? Absolutely. Without question. As Brigham Young put it,

> I do not even believe that there is a single revelation, among the many God has given to the Church, that is perfect in its fulness. The revelations of God contain correct doctrine and principle, so far as they go; but it is impossible for the poor, weak, low, grovelling, sinful inhabitants of the earth to receive a revelation from the Almighty in all its perfections. He has to speak to us in a manner to meet the extent of our capacities.[12]

Writing to William W. Phelps on 27 November 1832, Joseph Smith exclaimed, "Oh Lord God, deliver us from this prison, almost as it were, of paper, pen and ink, and of a crooked, broken, scattered and imperfect language."[13]

Having made her case, though, Stavrakopoulou also devotes attention to the ways in which the biblical God became the attenuated, abstract, bodiless entity — or, in some cases, the *non*entity[14] — of much sophisticated modern mainstream Christian theology.[15] She sees the process as having commenced already in ancient times. But many years were required before that process was complete:

12. Brigham Young, "The Kingdom Of God" (8 July 1855), *Journal of Discourses* 2:314, https://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/JournalOfDiscourses3/id/1981/rec/2.

13. "Letter to William W. Phelps, 27 November 1832," p. 4, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-william-w-phelps-27-november-1832/4.

14. For example, the *nihil* of John Scottus Eriugena (ca. 800–877 AD), the "Ground of Being" or *Seinsgrund* of Paul Tillich (1886–1965), and the mysterious "creativity" behind the universe as taught by Harvard theologian Gordon Kaufman (1925–2011).

15. Many years ago, I participated in a small seminar, informally called a "trialogue," of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim theologians in Graz, Austria. One evening, the organizer of the seminar sponsored a public event that featured Professor Gordon Kaufman, from Harvard, who was one of the seminar participants. Many of those who attended came from the small Muslim community in Graz, and it was thought that Kaufman's undemanding form of nominally Christian theology would appeal to them because they found it unthreatening. Instead, they were indignant. They could see no real difference between his theology and atheism. Nor, honestly, could I.

> He was hidden, but he was far from disembodied. Instead, God became ever more transcendent. The Jerusalem temple had once been the meeting place of heaven and earth. Now, heaven would begin to stretch away, further from the world, taking the deity deeper into its highest heights, leaving only God's Torah, his inscribed "name," or increasingly ephemeral traces of his "holiness" and "glory," in residence. (418)[16]

Latter-day Saints typically, and I think correctly, see what we call the Great Apostasy as first and foremost a matter of the loss of priesthood authority. But we also recognize doctrinal changes, which we often blame on the influence of Hellenistic philosophy on post-apostolic Christian thinkers. Stavrakopoulou recognizes the same factor in her story of the transformation — the literal *de-forming* — of God, which she and many others see as occurring already in the famous and enormously important Septuagint Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, as well as in the works of such thinkers as Philo of Alexandria (ca. 20 BC–ca. 50 AD):

> It was the cultural heft of certain forms of philosophical abstraction that would strike the deadly blow to God's body. But it was a slow death. In some communities, the emergence of Greek versions of the Hebrew Scriptures in the third and second centuries BCE had encouraged the gradual — and seemingly natural — metamorphosis of ancient Levantine mythology into cutting-edge Jewish metaphysics. In a Graeco-Roman world in which Judaism and its subsequent Christian inflections were minority religions, some Jewish and Christian intellectuals were keen to demonstrate the erudite, sophisticated truths of their own theologies by identifying the God of their scriptures with constructs of the supreme Divine in Greek philosophy. Qualities and attributes of the Jewish and Christian God were instinctively but insistently mapped onto broadly Platonic abstractions: in Greek, scriptural references to God's breath (pneuma) and word (logos) became the divine Spirit and Reason of the higher, immaterial world, while references to God's anatomical features, such as his head, hands, and feet, became increasingly complex metaphors and multi-layered allegories, pointing to higher, esoteric truths. (418)

16. Stavrakopoulou believes that statues of Yahweh probably stood in the temples of the pre-exilic Hebrews. See Stavrakopoulou, *God: An Anatomy*, 417.

In Stavrakopoulou's view, however, it was the rise of Trinitarian theology (beginning at the first great ecumenical Council of Nicaea in AD 325 and continuing at the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451) that gave the final *coup de grâce*, at least in mainstream, orthodox Christian theological circles, if not necessarily among the masses of ordinary Christians, to the idea that God was a corporeal, anthropomorphic, personal being. There was, simply, no conceivable way in which a bodily person could simultaneously be Father and Son and Holy Spirit. There was no way, in the words of the so-called "Athanasian Creed" (which probably dates to the late fifth or early sixth century), to do so while "neither confusing the Persons nor dividing the Substance."[17] In her words,

> [I]t was the insistence that God was at once Father, Son and Holy Spirit, rather than three separate entities or a deity comprising three parts, that would ultimately destroy God's body. …
>
> At the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE), assembled bishops from east and west had finally agreed that, as Father, Son and Spirit, God was a singular divine nature or "substance," distinguishable as three "persons" only by the manner in which each possessed that substance. … Ultimately, this meant that God could not have a body. Although the incorporeality of God would not be formally declared at Chalcedon, and earlier theologians had already arrived at this conclusion, the council's explication of the triune God prioritized and endorsed a Platonic framework for early Christian theology, according to which God was necessarily assumed to be an absolute, simple entity: the supreme, single and permanent ultimate principle, by which the universe and everything within it should be accounted. As the source of the universe, God transcended it, and was therefore utterly unlike it. This rendered God immutable, in contrast to the

17. There were, I contend, other ways to think of the Trinity or the Godhead that would not have incurred the difficulties — which, to my mind, are insuperable — entailed by Nicene Trinitarianism. But they were not taken. See Daniel C. Peterson, "Notes on Mormonism and the Trinity," in *"To Seek the Law of the Lord": Essays in Honor of John W. Welch*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson and Daniel C. Peterson (Orem, UT: The Interpreter Foundation, 2017), 267–316; republished as Daniel C. Peterson, "Notes on Mormonism and the Trinity," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 41 (2020): 87–130.

> fluctuating, changeable universe, and non-composite, unlike the universe, which was composed of parts. As an immutable, non-composite entity (upon which mainstream Trinitarian theology now insisted), it was impossible that God could have a body, for a body is mutable and composite, which can not only be divided and separated into its constituent parts, but presupposes an external "composer" to put it together in the first place, as Aquinas would later emphasize. As the ultimate principle and source, God could have neither a body nor a composer. The divine is inherently simple, not composite. When hundreds of Church patriarchs, bishops, abbots and royal representatives from across the Latin West gathered in Rome for the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, this dogma would be plainly stated: God is *substantia seu natura simplex omnino* — a substance or nature that is absolutely simple. (420–21)

However, Stavrakopoulou insists, nothing even remotely like that dictum is to be found in the Bible. Neither in the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible nor in the New. To which we Latter-day Saints would offer a hearty "Amen!"

"All scripture is given by inspiration of God," wrote the Apostle Paul in his second letter to Timothy, "and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works" (2 Timothy 3:16–17).

The word in 2 Timothy 3:16 — it's a single word — that the King James translators rendered as "given by inspiration of God" is θεόπνευστος (*theopneustos*), which literally means "God-breathed."[18] In my experience, that verse, often translated in modern versions of the New Testament as "all scripture is God-breathed," is a popular one among Evangelical Protestants, who use it to argue (however inappropriately) for the inerrancy of scripture and related points of their doctrine. Francesca Stavrakopoulou, however, uses it to make a very different point: "Like the grin of the Cheshire Cat," she writes, "it was the breath of God that would remain, as his body gradually vanished" (412).

> [T]he distance between God and humanity is light years from the image of God in the Bible. The Christian construct

18. Think of the words *theism* and *theology*, of course, but also of words such as *pneumonia* and *pneumatic*.

> of God as a transcendent, invisible and incorporeal being is a distorted refraction, not a reflection, of the biblical image of God. The real God of the Bible was an ancient Levantine deity whose footsteps shook the earth, whose voice thundered through the skies and whose beauty and radiance dazzled his worshippers. This was a deity who crafted god-shaped humans from clay, and breathed life into their nostrils. But this was also a god who wept and talked and slept and sulked. A god who felt and fought and loved and lost. A god who sometimes failed and sometimes triumphed. (422–23)

"It is the first principle of the gospel to know for a certainty the character of God," said the Prophet Joseph Smith. "I want you all to know Him, and to be familiar with Him."[19] John 17:3 declares that life eternal is to know God and Jesus Christ, whom God sent.

I am deeply grateful for the knowledge that has been revealed to us about the character of God. And I'm far from alone in that. The Interpreter Foundation exists, to a large degree, because of the gratitude of its authors, reviewers, donors, designers, source checkers, copy editors, and other volunteers for the Restoration. And I'm grateful to *them*, for all that they do. Here, I particularly want to thank Allen Wyatt and Jeff Lindsay, the managing or production editors for the *Journal*. As every other officer of the Interpreter Foundation does, they volunteer their time, their talents, and their labor; they receive no compensation, financial or otherwise. Without them, there would be no *Interpreter*, and without others like them the Interpreter Foundation as a whole could not function. And yet, as I write, the Foundation is approaching the tenth anniversary of its launch. And the Foundation's *Journal*, which published its first article about a week and a half after that launch, has just, on 18 February 2022, marked its five-hundredth consecutive week of publication. That's a milestone that I contemplate with both satisfaction and deep gratitude.

Daniel C. Peterson *(PhD, University of California at Los Angeles) is a professor emeritus of Islamic studies and Arabic at Brigham Young University, where he founded the University's Middle Eastern Texts Initiative. He has published and spoken extensively on both Islamic and Latter-day Saint subjects. Formerly chairman of the board of the*

19. "History, 1838–1856, volume E-1," p. 1970.

Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) and an officer, editor, and author for its successor organization, the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, his professional work as an Arabist focuses on the Qur'an and on Islamic philosophical theology. He is the author, among other things, of a biography entitled Muhammad: Prophet of God *(Eerdmans, 2007).*