# Scholarly Inquiry: Jared Farmer

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*We recently invited Jared Farmer, associate professor of history at Stony Brook University and author of On Zion's Mount, to answer some questions about his latest project,* Mormons in the Media, 1830–2012.

**What was the genesis of this (e-book) project? Did it start as a casual interest that only later became a serious project? Was it an outgrowth of teaching?**

All of the above. The past couple of years I spent a lot of time creating a personal archive of historic images for use in my lecture courses. In the process I got quite good at finding images online—using familiar search engines (e.g., Google Images, Flickr), as well as some obscure sites, and many educational databases that are inaccessible to non-academics because of paywalls. This past spring, once Romney cinched the GOP nomination, I decided it would be worthwhile—and fun—to put my image-finding skills to public use. What began as a diversion from my book manuscript (*Trees in Paradise: A California History*, due out next year) became a minor obsession; what was supposed to be a little online illustrated essay on portrayals of Mormon facial hair became *Mormons in the Media*. I ended up spending far more time than I budgeted, and I used up my professorial tithing on eBay buying LDS ephemera.

**What led you to publish electronically rather than in a more traditional format?**

Three reasons: 1) I wanted to get it out in time for the election season; and e-publishing, whatever else you may think of it, has a fast turnaround. 2) I wanted to reach a non-academic audience, including journalists. 3) It would be a violation of

copyright law to commercially publish most of the twentieth-century material, and it would be a nightmare to track down permissions for print publication (and prohibitively expensive to pay use fees).

**In the preface, you indicate that you will consider outsider-generated images of Mormons, as well as images promoted by Latter-day Saints themselves. To what extent were these coherent categories?**

Today, Mormons are much more in control of their image than a century ago. There were, of course, Mormon painters, illustrators, and photographers in the pioneer period, but most of their work was created for home consumption, and there were precious few Latter-day Saints in positions of media power outside of Utah. For heuristic purposes, I would propose this rough periodization of Mormon image-making in the U.S. public sphere: 1) From Joseph Smith, Jr., to Joseph F. Smith, when outsiders largely defined the (overwhelmingly negative) visual image of Mormons. 2) From Joseph F. Smith to David O. McKay, when the LDS Church reacted defensively to continued anti-Mormon visual stereotypes, including cinematic images, and set up a rudimentary PR program. 3) From President McKay and the television until President Hinckley and the Internet, when the brethren in Salt Lake presided over a permanent, professionalized, proactive PR program. 4) The current era, dominated by the Web, in which images generated by Mormons, ex-Mormons, non-Mormons, and anti-Mormons swirl together, often making reference to one another; and in which lay members at their internet-connected devices do as much work as the expanded corps of media relations officers in the Church Office Building to shape the image of Mormons and Mormonism (sometimes at the invitation of the brethren, sometimes to their chagrin).

**Who do you envision using this collection (the media? teachers? students? scholars?) and how?**

I'm hoping that during the election season, my e-book will find its way into the hands—laps?—of many journalists assigned to the Romney beat and/or the religion beat. Although there are many new and noteworthy LDS-themed books out there— Joanna Brooks, Matthew Bowman, Spencer Fluhman, and John Turner being the most prominent authors—I think my work fills a niche: it's illustrated, it's in color, and it's free.

At some point after the election, I plan to take down the website, and work on a final, revised version of *Mormons in the Media* that includes events up to Election Day. I

also want to obtain higher-resolution scans of some of the older material. Next year I plan to create a personal website where I will permanently host the revised e-book.

Speaking of revisions: I rushed this out in time for the GOP convention. When I go back for a new round of editing, I anticipate that I will find more than a few errors and typos. If any of your readers spot mistakes, they should let me know. I also welcome ideas for additions.

After this "Mormon Moment" ends (I can sense the impending fatigue), my e-book will primarily be useful as a resource for undergraduate courses on U.S. western history and U.S. religious history. I would be delighted if professors devised primary source assignments around the collection, or simply projected some of the images in their lecture halls.

Also, perhaps a few graduate students and independent scholars will find seeds of research projects in this collection—or "image dump," if you want to be critical. For this audience—including readers of the Juvenile Instructor—I wanted to provide a fresh (if admittedly rough) update to the classic (but now dated and out-of-date) *The Mormon Graphic Image, 1834–1914* by Bunker and Bitton.

It's a bit puzzling, given the current prominence of media studies and mass communication studies in academia, that scholars haven't done more with LDS visual and material cultures as manifestations of American pop culture. For Mormon cultural apologetics, you can consult Terryl Givens's excellent *People of Paradox*, but that's not exactly what I'm looking for. I'm unmoved by the perennial question, "Where are the great Mormon artists?" (I think the answer remains "nowhere"—though I have a soft spot for Minerva Teichert). More fertile questions might include: Thinking historically and sociologically, what is the function of the "Mormon middlebrow"—the aesthetic behind almost all LDS art, architecture, and visual culture? What explains its endurance? What is the historical relationship between Joseph Smith's fantastic religious imagination and the uninspired realism of twentieth-century visual imaginings of the pre-life, the afterlife, and the Book of Mormon? Why does the interior decoration of contemporary Mormon temples so closely resemble the faux-aristocratic styling on display in the steroidal mansions of the nouveau riche? How would one write the history of Mormon fashion—including outerwear, garments, and hair? What is the relationship of Latter-day Saints, past and present, to images of religious violence? How do anti-Mormon visual portrayals of temple violence relate to the much older anti-Semitic iconographic tradition of blood libel? And so on.

Your readers probably don't need this advice, but I'll give it anyway: For umpteen images of seldom-seen Mormoniana with expert historical commentary, you must follow Ardis Parshall at Keepapitchinin. Her blog is a box of treasures.

**Do you see yourself, in part, as a "Mormon historian," given that you wrote your first two books on Utah/Mormon-related topics and have now issued this e-book on Mormons in the media? Do you have future plans to write on Mormons/Mormonism?**

Actually, I've never considered myself a Mormon historian. I wear two main hats: environmental historian and historian of the American West. As a subset of the latter, I proudly think of myself as a historian of Utah (and will be contributing the first chapter to a forthcoming textbook on that subject). My discomfort with the label "Mormon historian" is not primarily political. It's more about being aware of my limitations as a scholar. I have expertise in the peoples and landscapes of Utah, the Great Basin, and the Colorado Plateau. But when it comes to the history of Mormonism, there is such a high standard of scholarship! When I compare myself to the leading researchers in the field, past and present, I can really only claim to be an expert on Mormonism of the 1850s, and perhaps Mormon-Indian relations across the nineteenth century. My command of Church history is competent but hardly extraordinary.

Because I am an insider-outsider (in contradistinction to Jan Shipps, an outsider-insider), I enjoy a sideways view of Mormonism. Because I know enough—but not too much—about LDS history, I probably see certain things and make certain connections more easily than most insiders and outsiders. I enjoy being an interloper.

In addition to my two main fields (environmental, western), I aspire to be a cultural critic with a broad purview, including religion. For example, I recently wrote an essay on yoga for *Reviews in American History*. Earlier I wrote a review of *The Book of Mormon* (the musical) for Religion Dispatches. *Mormons in the Media* falls in this category of cultural criticism.

After the upcoming revision of my e-book, I don't anticipate doing another Mormon (or even western) project in the foreseeable future. My next couple of book projects will take me toward the global history of science and technology. But who knows: maybe someday, in my "senior years" as a scholar, I'll come back home, as they say.