

Worlds of Joseph Smith

The Library of Congress and Brigham Young University will hold a joint symposium May 6–7, 2005, in Washington, D.C., to examine the religious, social, and theological contributions of Joseph Smith Jr. in recognition of the bicentennial of his birth. The Worlds of Joseph Smith symposium, to be held in the Coolidge Auditorium of the Library of Congress, will feature sessions focusing on Smith's own world, his recovery of "past worlds," his challenges to the theological world, and his founding of a global religion, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Religion experts from Baylor, BYU, Columbia, Pepperdine, and other major universities will participate in the symposium. Elder Dallin H. Oaks, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, will be a featured speaker. Prior to his call to full-time Church service, Elder Oaks served as a Utah Supreme Court justice, as president of BYU, and as a professor of law at the University of Chicago.

The symposium is open to the news media and invited scholars in the fields of American religious history and religious studies. Each session will feature the presentation of a paper, three respondents, and time for open discussion. Some seating by registration only will be available to the public. The program will also be broadcast via the Internet.

James H. Hutson, chief of the manuscript division at the Library of Congress, says people will find it instructive to be informed by a group of distinguished scholars exactly how the Church, founded by Joseph Smith, evolved from a small, persecuted band to a major religion influential in the United States and the world.

"Other religious persuasions important in American history—Puritanism, for example—traced the same trajectory but, unlike Mormonism, reached a limit from which their influence receded," said Hutson. "This topic will be among the many subjects that should stimulate reflection and make the symposium an intellectual feast."

Jack Welch, professor of law at BYU and co-planner of the symposium along with Hutson, is pleased that the Library of Congress and BYU could come together to sponsor a scholarly examination of Smith's life.

"Joseph Smith is a towering religious figure. Perhaps for that very reason he draws a lot of lightning but also channels extraordinary power," said Welch. "The conference is not aimed at pros-

elytizing or advocating any particular point of view. It will not involve polemics or propaganda. Anyone who would be interested in knowing how informed scholars approach the study of Joseph Smith, just as they might study Buddha, Moses, Mohammed, St. Francis, or any other major religious leader, will find the outcome of this conference informative, up-to-date, interesting, and reliable. . . . We anticipate that modern scholars and the general public will appreciate the relevance of the principles he taught."

Robert Millet, the Richard L. Evans Professor of Religious Understanding at BYU, who was instrumental in the genesis of the symposium, says the event will recognize and explore the impact of an important religious figure.

"Even if one doesn't accept Joseph Smith's claims of divine inspiration and authorization, it's hard to dismiss his impact on the theological world," said Millet, a professor of ancient scripture. "As we approach the anniversary of his



Daguerreotype of an etching with the image of Joseph Smith, the first president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and his brother Hyrum. Courtesy of L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

birth 200 years ago, it's important and worthwhile to examine and explore his contributions, which include the establishment of a worldwide church."

Another of Smith's contributions was the translation of the Book of Mormon, a religious history of peoples who lived on the American continents before and after the time of Christ. Today the book is printed in 104 languages. A first-ever commercial edition of the Book of Mormon will be published this November by Doubleday.

Richard Bushman, the Gouverneur Morris Professor of History emeritus at Columbia University and chair of the executive committee at the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History at BYU, said: "The time is ripe for an assessment of Joseph Smith's position in American culture. Events of the 200 years since his birth have proven that the religious culture he created has staying power."