



Bruce Van Orden

The Interview: Bruce A. Van Orden, emeritus professor of church history and doctrine at BYU, has completed a comprehensive biography of one of the most interesting converts to early Mormonism. [We'll Sing and We'll Shout: The Life and Times of W. W. Phelps](#) chronicles the vast contributions of Phelps to early Mormonism and the attempts to build Zion. Phelps's activities went far beyond composing his noteworthy hymns.

To date, the Joseph Smith Papers Project has published seventeen volumes. These books demonstrate the pivotal roles Phelps played in the early days of the LDS Church, often at the side of Joseph Smith himself. Van Orden drew extensively from the Joseph Smith Papers volumes and online resources. He also researched thoroughly Phelps's writings in newspapers and almanacs he edited or co-edited such as the *Evening and the Morning Star*, the *Upper Missouri Advertiser*, the *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate*, the *Northern Times*, the *Times and Seasons*, *The Wasp*, the *Nauvoo Neighbor*, the *Deseret News*, and the *Deseret Almanac*.

W. W. Phelps was an important church leader. He was one of seven presiding high priests in Zion (Jackson County, Missouri), 1832–1834; a member of the Missouri church presidency, 1834–1838, and even presided most of the time given the absence of David Whitmer; a member of church's governing "council of presidents" in Kirtland, 1835–1836; and a prominent member of the Council of Fifty under both Joseph Smith and Brigham Young.

Phelps was a voluminous and verbose writer, both of prose and poetry. His writings comprised much of what Latter-day Saints of his era were exposed to as they learned of Joseph Smith's visionary plans for building Zion. In Utah Phelps continued teaching and promoting the illuminating doctrines brought forth through the Prophet.

In the Nauvoo chapters, Van Orden lays out his discovery that Phelps was often a ghostwriter for Joseph Smith's publications including church's history recitations, doctrinal essays and poetry, and political campaign pamphlets. This may be the most prescient part of the biography.

Van Orden doesn't ignore W. W. Phelps's eccentric personality traits and fiery zeal. He shows the accuracy of Joseph Smith Sr.'s blessing upon Phelps:

Thou art a "speckled bird," and the Lord hath held thee up to be gazed at. Thou art a strange man. The Lord has given thee understanding and knowledge and wisdom, and discernment; and thou hast thought thou wast somebody; thou hast been exalted, and hast been lifted up: nevertheless, if thou continuest faithful, and humblest thyself, thou shall see great things, and have greater knowledge.

Listen in as Laura Harris Hales interviews Bruce A. Van Orden about the life and work of W. W. Phelps, a unique witness to the events of the early Church on this episode of the LDS Perspectives Podcast. He had so many interesting things to say that we broke this up into two audio links/podcasts. This is Part 1.

About Our Guest: Bruce A. Van Orden received his bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees from Brigham Young University. Bruce is an emeritus professor of church history and doctrine at Brigham Young University. Earlier he taught in Seminaries and Institutes. He served in the South German Mission from 1965 to 1967. During retirement, Bruce and his wife, Karen, had a seven-year prison ministry. Bruce has served twice as a bishop and four times as a high councilor. He has served on LDS Church curriculum committees and on the Pioneer Sesquicentennial Committee ("Faith in Every Footstep"). He has published widely on scriptural and church history themes. Bruce and Karen have five children.

Transcript: For a transcript of this podcast, go to [LDS Perspectives Podcast](#).

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