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INSIGHTS

AN ANCIENT WINDOW

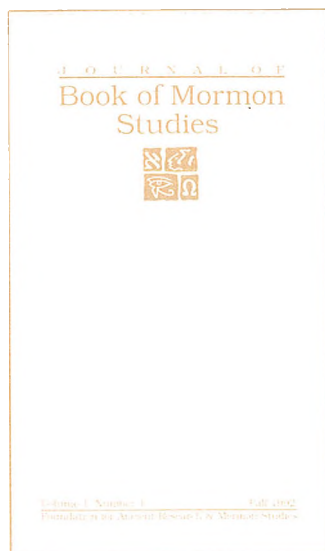
1993, No. 3

"...by study and also by faith." D & C 88:118

May

Second Issue of Journal Features Sword of Laban and Near-Death Experiences

The 1993 spring issue of the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* features more than ten outstanding articles, plus notes and communications. Like the first issue of the *Journal* (which is available again, now in its third printing), this issue contains some of the most recent re-



search on the Book of Mormon. It also features a classic older paper, now updated, that sheds light on some of the new research.

In "Nigh unto Death," Kevin Christensen (a technical writer and English major) compares research on modern near-death experiences with certain narratives in the Book of Mormon, particularly from the books of Mosiah and Alma, and finds that there are some striking similarities. Alma's conversion while "nigh unto death" shares many elements of a common pattern of near-death experiences. Both

discuss the sword of Laban in different contexts. Gordon Thomasson, Ph.D., considers the sword of Laban as part of his exploration of the complex symbolism of kingship revealed in the reign of King Mosiah. Daniel Rolph, assistant professor of Ancient and Medieval History at Hahnemann University, Philadelphia, examines evidence that suggests the weapon may have been the birthright sword of biblical tradition, a sacred heirloom wielded by the patriarchs until the time of Joseph of Egypt.

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Scrolls Broadcast Received Well

In March the VISN Interfaith Satellite Network broadcast nationally a program entitled "The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Era Dawns." It consisted of highlights of the conference on the Dead Sea Scrolls that F.A.R.M.S. helped to sponsor and supplemental information about the scrolls. The number of calls received by the F.A.R.M.S. office indicates that the program generated considerable interest.

The one-hour broadcast, now available on videocassette from F.A.R.M.S., provides a clear and succinct introduction to the content and history of the scrolls and highlights the controversy that has surrounded them since their discovery. It focuses especially on the excitement and greater scrutiny of the scrolls that has been prompted by the recent publication of photos of scroll fragments. It brings up-to-date those who have followed the history of the scrolls from the beginning.

Copies of the videocassette may be ordered from F.A.R.M.S. using the accompanying order form.

The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies is a nonprofit research and educational organization dedicated to the study of ancient scripture. Your tax-deductible contributions enable F.A.R.M.S. to sponsor and coordinate a wide range of research projects that enhance our understanding of these sacred writings.

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F.A.R.M.S. UPDATE

The Foundation for Ancient Research & Mormon Studies

Number 88

May 1993

The Sword of Laban as a Symbol of Divine Authority

The sword that Nephi took from Laban played an important role in Nephite history, not only as the model after which the Nephites later made swords to defend themselves, but also and perhaps more importantly as a symbol of the legitimate authority of the Nephite rulers, beginning with Nephi himself.

Many histories and traditions have used weapons as symbols of royalty and authority. Swords in particular have had cultic importance in almost every culture. Most of these can be categorized as either kingly or heroic swords.

In the kingly pattern, the sword helped to establish the possessor as the ruler, the one on whom divine kingship was conferred. It symbolized his responsibility to protect the society and to mete out justice. It originated with a deity and ratified the king's office. The sword was passed on to the heir as a transfer of authority, and the giving of the sword to the new king was a widespread feature of coronation ceremonies.

The heroic pattern, found mainly in literature and mythology, established the possessor as one invested with divine authority for some holy quest or heroic deed. The sword was more than a weapon, giving the hero extra power and the blessing of the gods. For example, Beowulf used magical swords to overcome the monster Grendel.

In some tales, the elements from both the kingly and heroic combine to symbolize complete divine kingship and authority. For example, King Arthur drew Excalibur from the stone, which symbolized his divine right to kingship and gave him power to defeat the Saxons. David took Goliath's sword and cut off Goliath's head. Then apparently with that sword David heroically led the Israelites against the Philistines and later became king.

Like David, Nephi used the sword of Laban to cut off the head of its owner. This act led to his obtaining the records and helping to lead his people to a promised land, where he was made ruler. He apparently passed the sword to his successors, for it was used later by King Benjamin when he "did fight with the strength of his own arm, with the sword of Laban," to defend his people against the Lamanites. King Benjamin passed the sword to his son Mosiah along with other sacred objects when he transferred "charge concerning all the affairs of the kingdom" (Mosiah 1:15-16).

Even after the reign of kings came to an end and judges began to rule, the "sacred things," which apparently included the sword, were passed on amongst the judges or the prophets as symbol of divine authority. Even though the sword is not mentioned, textual clues show that it was prob-

ably still part of the sacred implements of authority.

When Alma passed the sacred treasures to his son Helaman, he explained:

And now remember, my son, that God has entrusted you with these things, which are sacred, which he has kept sacred, and also which he will keep and preserve for a wise purpose in him, that he may show forth his power unto future generations. (Alma 37:14)

Clearly the records were intended for a future generation, but was the sword intended to have some purpose at a later time?

In the restoration of the Church of Jesus Christ to the earth through Joseph Smith, the sword of Laban appears to have provided an additional witness to the Prophet's divine authority. There is no direct evidence as to whether Joseph Smith ever possessed the sword of Laban. But some of his contemporaries thought that he did, and that belief clearly lent legitimacy to his authority in their minds.

For further information, see Brett L. Holbrook, "The Sword of Laban as a Symbol of Divine Authority," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2 (Spring 1993).

Based on research by Brett L. Holbrook.

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Journal Articles

Laban, a descendant of Joseph, may have inherited the birthright sword along with the plates of brass, both of which eventually passed to Nephi, a descendant of Joseph, as was Joseph Smith. And Brett Holbrook, M.A. student in Near Eastern Studies, discusses "The Sword of Laban as a Symbol of Divine Authority" (see the F.A.R.M.S. Update on page 2).

Russell Ball of Provo treats the destruction and three days of darkness described in 3 Nephi, particularly the intense lightning unaccompanied by rain, the inundation of cities not listed among the cities "sunk in the depths of the sea," and the absence of contemporary accounts of this destruction in the histories of other nations. He develops an hypothesis that the destruction and darkness were caused primarily by

seismic and volcanic activity.

Mark Morrise, J.D., argues that the simile curse, a special form of malediction found in the Bible and in other Near Eastern texts, is also found in the Book of Mormon. For example, in Alma 44:14, when a Nephite soldier declares, "Even as this scalp has fallen to the earth, . . . so shall ye fall to the earth," he is using a simile curse. These curses in the Book of Mormon are similar in context and subject matter to Old World examples. Morrise concludes that the people of the Book of Mormon shared common traditions with the peoples of the ancient Near East.

Richard Draper, assistant professor of Ancient Scripture at BYU, discusses how the Book of Mormon sheds light on the unique nature of Christ's mortality. Draper considers what the Book of Mormon tells us of the relationship between Christ's mortal and eternal missions and of his role as the Father and the Son. As Abinadi taught, he took upon

himself the *form* of man, but he was not a man, for as Alma testified, his sacrifice was not a sacrifice of man; he remained, in Amulek's words, the very Eternal Father.

Todd Compton, Ph.D., examines a theme that the Book of Mormon shares with both ancient and modern cultures and religions: the theme of the despised outcast (such as the Lamanites or the poor) who have a special aptitude for spirituality, contrasted with others who are richer, more civilized, and more overtly religious, yet who are often declining in righteousness. This theme points out the complexity of the Book of Mormon, which is not a simple melodrama or a simplistic portrayal of good Nephites versus bad Lamanites.

Other topics covered include the tree of life and problems with the anti-Mormon approach to the geography and archaeology of the Book of Mormon. Copies of this new issue of the *Journal* can be obtained using the order form.

Correction

Sole credit for Update number 87, printed in the March issue of *Insights*, should have been given to Diane E. Wirth. She initiated the research, and the analysis is hers. She and we wished to express appreciation to John S. Robertson and Brian Stubbs for responding to her communication with them on the subject, but she alone is responsible for the content of the Update.

Video Recording Begins on a New Book of Mormon Lecture Series

Filming has begun for a new video series that will present fifty or more lectures on the Book of Mormon. F.A.R.M.S. has invited BYU faculty and others to deliver one-hour lectures on favorite Book of Mormon topics, to be videotaped for broadcast on public and community-access cable television stations and for release in 1994 on videocassette.

Presenters with expertise in a wide range of topics were selected to give broad coverage. No pre-

cise date has been set for completion of the project, but advance notice will be given in future issues of the newsletter.

This project has been made possible by the generosity of F.A.R.M.S. subscribers and friends, especially Karen and Alan Ashton. BYU has cooperated by making classrooms and auditoriums available. Filming is being done by KBYU-TV, with technical support from our friends at NuSkin.

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Another method of long-term support for the Foundation is to make a gift of an insurance policy. F.A.R.M.S. becomes the irrevocable beneficiary, you pay the premiums, and you take the deduction as a charitable gift.

These are good ways to help F.A.R.M.S. and yourself at the same time. If they will work for your estate planning, contact your financial advisor to discuss details.

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Reduced prices make some valuable computer data base products from Infobases, Inc., more affordable than ever. The company has also made available to F.A.R.M.S. subscribers some new products at a discount, which we offer as an aid to your study of the scriptures. See the enclosed flier.

Phoenix Begins Broadcast

Dimension Cable (channel 22) in Mesa has recently begun broadcasting the Hugh Nibley Book of Mormon class on Fridays at 6 P.M. Cable America is also broadcasting the class at 8:00 A.M. daily on Mesa channel 66. Broadcast-quality copies will be made available free to any station that wishes to broadcast the class as a public service.

Friend-raiser

People you know might like to receive this Newsletter. You are our best means of letting others know about the services that the Foundation can provide. It is a big help to all if you can send the names of your friends who you think might be interested in the work of the Foundation. We will send them an introductory packet describing F.A.R.M.S. and extending an invitation to subscribe.

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