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Insights

A WINDOW ON THE ANCIENT WORLD VOLUME 21 | 2001

Number 4

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BYU Conference on Hebrew Law a Success

A FARMS-sponsored conference held at BYU on Saturday, 24 February, highlighted research on legal aspects in the Book of Mormon. Titled "Hebrew Law in the Book of Mormon," the day-long conference was the first ever on this topic. As such, the event was both a culmination and a beginning, marking two decades of research as well as pointing the way for further inquiry into a profitable subfield of Book of Mormon studies.

Attended by some 350 people, the event was a fitting tribute to the late Hebrew University professor Ze'ev Falk, whose book *Hebrew Law in Biblical Times* (1964) has remained a favorite textbook among students of biblical law even though it has been out of print for many years. The conference coincided with the release of a new edition of the book, copublished by BYU Press and Eisenbrauns.

The conference featured 16 presentations and a panel discussion. Following are some of the highlights.

After opening remarks by Daniel C. Peterson, the first session focused on Falk's life and work. John W. Welch, Robert K. Thomas Professor of Law at BYU and conference organizer, commented on the new edition of Falk's book. He praised Falk for balancing "faith and relevance with tradition and sound research" in an area where scholars disagree on the uniqueness of Hebrew law, some seeing it as originating in the Talmud and others seeing it as the product of ancient surrounding cultures. Setting the tone for the rest of the day, Welch concluded, "The more we know about Hebrew law, the more we know about the Book of Mormon." Douglas Parker, a retired BYU law professor, also shared reminiscences of his association with Falk, describing him as a deeply spiritual and gifted teacher who radiated a zest for learning and life.

Noel B. Reynolds, BYU professor of political science and associate academic vice president, likened

the Book of Mormon prophet Lehi to Moses. He explained that Lehi's final address to his people in 2 Nephi 1 invokes 13 Mosaic themes (e.g., a promised land and a chosen people). Such close parallels suggest that Lehi was familiar with Moses' final address recorded in Deuteronomy and that he alluded to it in his own final words in order to help his rebellious sons accept his prophetic leadership. In similar fashion, BYU law student Drew Briney related many aspects of Nephite law to possible precedents uniquely found in Deuteronomy.

James R. Moss, a California attorney, discussed allusions to Mosaic concepts of slavery and debt servitude in King Benjamin's speech. Noting that Benjamin relieved his people of a tax burden that might have fed debt servitude, Moss saw images of that idea in Benjamin's focus on unprofitable servants and beggars. In this view, God is seen as the creditor and his children are at his mercy as debtors. "King Benjamin does not explicitly link redemption to debt slavery, but the link is there," Moss said. Donald W. Parry,

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Nibley Fellowship Deadline

For a number of years FARMS has sponsored a graduate fellowship program that provides financial aid to students who are pursuing advanced degrees in fields of special interest to the Foundation. Named in honor of Hugh Nibley, the program seeks to foster the next generation of faithful scholars who will contribute to the work of FARMS.

Fellowships are not automatically granted or automatically renewed. Both new applicants and current Nibley fellows seeking to renew their fellowships must apply by 1 June 2001 for the 2001/2002 academic year. For an application, write to M. Gerald Bradford, Director of Research, FARMS at BYU, P. O. Box 7113, Provo, Utah 84602.



COURTESY, ORIENTAL INSTITUTE

War prisoners of Ramses III being led by cords bound around their necks.

Bound with Flaxen Cords

An interesting feature of the Book of Mormon is the subtle ways that it plays upon and develops biblical themes. In fact, allusions to the Bible are sometimes so understated that they are not apparent even to careful readers.

The reference to a flaxen cord in 2 Nephi 26:22 is one example: “He leadeth them by the neck with a flaxen cord, until he bindeth them with his strong cords forever.” This passage contains some obvious biblical themes. The submitting of the neck to a yoke or placing the hand or foot upon the neck of a captive and binding prisoners with cords are familiar,¹ but what of the gentle binding with

the flaxen cord followed by the final and inescapable binding with strong cords? Does this image also have a biblical source?

Flax was a common material used to make cords and ropes, because it is soft and strong and does not stretch, which makes it useful for measuring.² Archaeological examples from Egypt are known from the First, Twelfth, and Eighteenth Egyptian Dynasties.³ The Bible often refers to flax (or tow) and its byproduct linen (the same terms, *pēšet* and *pištah*, are used for all three), but only rarely can these references be understood to mean cords of flax. Examples of the latter usage may be found in Judges 15:14, Isaiah 19:9, and Ezekiel 40:3.

The example from Judges concerns the binding of Samson, one of the most dramatic stories in the Old Testament.

Relying on his supernatural strength, Samson allowed the men of Judah to bind him and deliver him to the Philistines: “. . . and the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon him, and the cords that were upon his arms became as flax that was burnt with fire, and his bands loosed from off his hands” (Judges 15:14). When a flaxen cord is burned, the ash retains the cord’s outward form but crumbles at the touch, making burned flax a suitable image for fragility.⁴ Later, Samson playfully allowed Delilah to bind him with green withes and with new ropes and to weave his hair into a web. In each case he escaped easily, mocking the Philistines, until at last he was betrayed by his overconfidence, deprived of his strength, and bound with unbreakable fetters.

The story of the binding of Samson is a powerful lesson in the dangers of flirting with evil and confiding in our own strength. In 2 Nephi 26:22 the image of the flaxen cord being replaced by unbreakable strong cords recalls the binding of Samson, suggesting that Nephi was familiar with that story and that some version of it may have been preserved on the brass plates. It

is also significant that, of the prophets in the Book of Mormon, only Nephi, who was familiar with the Old World, mentions flax. Flax seems to have been unavailable in the New World, where cotton and hemp were used instead.⁵ 

Notes

1. See Robert K. Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice* (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1993), 113–19; Lorelei H. Corcoran, *Portrait Mummies from Roman Egypt* (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1995), 53–55.
2. See Ezekiel 40:3; Robert G. Hatfield, *The American House-Carpenter* (New York: Wiley, 1852), 42.
3. See A. Lucas and J. R. Harris, *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Industries*, 4th ed. (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover, 1962), 134–35.
4. See Isaiah 42:3, Matthew 12:20; *Notes, Critical and Practical, on the Book of Judges* (New York: Ivison & Phinney, 1857), 201.
5. Robert J. Sharer, *The Ancient Maya*, 5th ed. (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1994), 723–26.

By Paul Mouritsen

INSTITUTE NEWS

New Translation Series to Set International Standard

A major effort of the new BYU Institute for the Study and Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts is the Graeco-Arabic Sciences and Philosophy series, which is overseen by its originator, Daniel C. Peterson, associate executive director of the Institute. Peterson has recently added Glen M. Cooper to his team as series editor. Cooper began college in his early teens and has earned a bachelor's degree in physics from BYU and a doctorate in the history of Arabic medicine and astronomy from Columbia University; he has also studied classics, philosophy, and languages at BYU, Oxford, and the University of Tajikistan.

Cooper's diverse studies have uniquely prepared him to direct two translation projects now under way. The first project is a new edition and translation of the complete works of Moses Maimonides. This project, which will eventually comprise about 12 volumes, is a groundbreaking effort to provide a complete reference to the medical writings of Maimonides, including Arabic-Hebrew critical texts, English translations, notes, glossaries of medical terms, early Latin translations of the same text (where available), and Arabic-Latin glossaries. Maimonides, a medieval Jewish physician and philosopher writing in Judaeo-Arabic (Arabic written in Hebrew characters), composed influential med-

ical, philosophical, and religious treatises. His works are an important contribution to the development of science, which led to the rise of modern thought.

Cooper is also preparing his own series of translations of certain treatises of Galen, which were influential with both Greek and Arabic scientists. Galen, a second-century Greek physician and philosopher, wrote about astrological medicine (e.g., he explained the occurrence of periodic fevers by the phases of the moon), employing a remarkably modern scientific method. Neither the Arabic nor the English translations of these works have ever been published. Cooper, one of the few Graeco-Arabists in the world, is editing three volumes of these Galenic translations, which will also include extensive lexical aids.

As series editor, Cooper oversees an international advisory board of leading scholars who review the translations and publications of this initiative for accuracy. Regarding his work with the various projects, Cooper said, "In this effort to make neglected Arabic texts accessible, we are in a position to set the standards of quality for an entire international field. Because of this project, for generations to come, scholars the world over will associate the name of Brigham Young University with an unsurpassed commitment to scholarly and publishing excellence and cross-cultural understanding." His academic training and work with ancient Graeco-Arabic texts are enhancing the scholastic prestige of the Institute. 

Scholar Reviews Future Directions in Book of Mormon Research

In a FARMS brown bag lecture on 10 January 2001, John L. Sorenson, emeritus professor of anthropology at BYU and a senior research scholar at FARMS, reported on three of his ongoing projects—each a monumental effort in itself—that share the ultimate goal of strengthening his synthesis of the Book of Mormon account and scholarly knowledge about ancient Mesoamerica. Two of the projects involve mining large bodies of empirical research in order to lay the groundwork for the third, a correlation between the archaeological record of Mesoamerica and Book of Mormon geography, events, and chronology. The three project reports that follow are based on Sorenson’s lecture and his subsequent input.

Transoceanic Contacts in Ancient Times

For years Sorenson has cataloged the evidence for cultural diffusion between the Old and New Worlds, resulting in *Pre-Columbian Contact with the Americas across the Oceans: An Annotated Bibliography*, a seminal two-volume work coauthored by Martin Raish that was published in 1990 and updated in 1996. Sorenson continues that effort by gathering decisive evidence for the interhemispheric transfer of flora and fauna that could have occurred only by way of human migrations by sea. Nearly all anthropologists, botanists, and geographers continue to assume that few or no plants were shared between the two hemispheres and that diffusionist theories are not supported by solid evidence.

However, a well-documented example of flora transfer is maize, a native American plant depicted in stone carvings in ancient temples of India. The intricate detail of these carvings demonstrates that the sculptors used as their models real maize ears grown locally, the plant having been introduced to India from the Americas. Some of the carved images in India date from B.C. times.

Evidence for flora transfer also includes archaeological specimens dating to before 1492, empirical

studies on the distribution of plants, and similarities in plant names in New and Old world languages. The plants involved—among them chili peppers, amaranth, cotton, the cashew nut, and pineapples—total more than 40 species, with scores of others possible.

The evidence for fauna transfer includes infectious organisms. One striking example is the hookworm. Although this organism originated in the Old World, hookworms were found in a Brazilian mummy dating to 5200 B.C. Because of temperature and life cycle limitations, hookworms could not have survived a migration to the Western Hemisphere via the Bering Strait; rather, the only logical explanation for their arrival in the Americas is that they were transported by infected humans traveling on sailing vessels. A few Old World animal species also turned up in the New World,

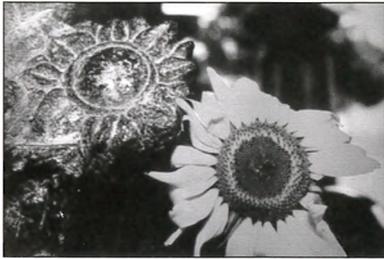


PHOTO HERE AND ON NEXT PAGE COURTESY CARL L. JOHANNESSEN

Carvings on Indian temples, like the one above, often show figures holding ears of maize, providing evidence of transoceanic contact in pre-Columbian times.

including, surprisingly, the American turkey, known in medieval Europe.

Sorenson and collaborator Carl L. Johannessen, a University of Oregon geography professor, will summarize their work at a conference at the University of Pennsylvania in May. Full details will



Stone carving in India and American sunflower show striking similarities.

appear in a book they are preparing.

Sorenson lamented the fact that academicians tend to ignore or dismiss, largely for political reasons, the increasingly

compelling body of diffusionist studies that challenge time-honored views. Noting that such wide-ranging and time-intensive research is best undertaken by an interdisciplinary team of specialists, Sorenson invited the help of interested colleagues.

Mesoamerican Chronology Project

Another long-standing research interest of Sorenson's is the archaeological chronology of Mesoamerica, on which he published professionally in 1955 and again in 1977. He feels that the vague sequence of events as presently established needs to be fixed more accurately before the chronology can be treated as history to which the Book of Mormon historical account can be usefully compared.

He set out to create the most accurate Mesoamerican chronology to date by consulting the primary sources on comparative pottery chronology and radiocarbon dating (over 430 publications or unpublished papers). From these he first constructed a massive chart that matched up the sequences of pottery for 130 sites or regions, but without any year dates attached. He then gathered 1,700 radiocarbon dates for Mesoamerica and subjected them to a quality evaluation. Old, poorly described, or inconsistent dates were put aside; the best were then connected to the pottery chart to define the time periods as well as they can be with today's information. The result was offered to the experts on Mesoamerican chronology to correct

or supplement the alignments and dates. Two dozen leading specialists responded with enthusiasm for the project, but none has been able to furnish new C-14 dates or significantly modify the product.

Recent methodological work on radiocarbon dating has demonstrated that inherent technical problems will probably always limit the precision that was once anticipated. Eleven kinds of statistical and technical uncertainties have now been identified, making it inevitable that C-14 dating at best will never have a margin of possible error less than ± 140 years. Particularly troublesome is the fact that wood, which in the form of charcoal is the material most often dated, frequently was up to centuries old by the time it was burned and so can yield misleadingly old ages. The present difficulties mean that, for example, charcoal from a burned building that one might initially think resulted from a fire around A.D. 30 in Book of Mormon terms cannot be dated by the C-14 method more firmly than "sometime between 110 B.C. and A.D. 170."

So while Sorenson's new chronology scheme is the latest word, it leaves him without the level of accuracy needed to definitively correlate historical details of the Nephite record with the archaeological results.

Correlating Mesoamerican Historical Chronology with the Book of Mormon

To whatever degree the Mesoamerican chronology can be refined, the next step for Professor Sorenson will be to harmonize that "history" with the Book of Mormon narrative. Over a period of 50 years, he has noted numerous connections that need to be assessed and set forth articulately in a book demonstrating that what archaeology has established as a stream of events and contexts can be connected to the Book of Mormon in plausible terms. This year Sorenson is undertaking to organize and perhaps to write a version of how those two versions of the past connect with each other.

His work in this area is also supported by a grant from the BYU Religious Studies Center and is expected to result in a fully documented scholarly treatment of this subject. ■

Conference continued from page 1

BYU associate professor of Hebrew language and literature, noted that Benjamin conveyed strong images of Old World slavery culture by equating service to man with service to God. He explained that in the Old Testament the concept of service means temple service and that, significantly, the temple was the setting for Benjamin's address.

In the first afternoon session, John Welch discussed the slayings of Laban and Ammoron. The slaying of Laban was not a case of culpable homicide and thus lay outside the bounds of ancient definitions of deliberate, punishable murder on several grounds, he said, referencing the Code of Hammurabi, Hittite law, and Hebrew law. The slaying of Ammoron was problematic, Welch said, because Teancum used treachery (killed deliberately) and was not led by the Lord. Rather, he went forth "in his anger" (Alma 62:36) to slay Ammoron, a motivating emotion prohibited by Numbers 35:22. Alison V. P. Coutts, director of publications for the Institute, then addressed the legal concept of refuge. In the Nephites' acceptance of the Ammonite refugees, she sees strong evidence that the Nephites followed the Mosaic stipulations for asylum.

Stephen D. Ricks, BYU professor of Hebrew and Semitic languages, described the key elements of oaths in the Old Testament and noted their remarkable correspondence to oath formulations in the Book of Mormon. The covenantal aspect of oaths in the Book of Mormon helps Latter-day Saints understand their role as latter-day Israel, he said.

In the last session, independent researcher Carol P. Bradley spoke on family law and women. She noted that although Israelite law was harsh on women, its rules were a vestige of earlier tradition and were often not applied, while other social norms in Lehi's day operated in favor of women. "You cannot define Hebrew society by legal aspects only," she said. "Women were still autonomous and important." Hebrew men had complete control over their children, but not over their wives, Bradley said, a fact mirrored in the Book of Mormon when Lehi rebukes Laman and Lemuel, but not Sariah, for murmuring. She concluded that "equality reverberates throughout the Book of Mormon" and that women of those times were devalued only among apostate groups.

Other speakers during the day included Claire Foley, Gregory R. Knight, Hannah Clayson Smith, Eric Vernon, and David W. Warby. All presented interesting findings. The papers from this conference, along with many others on law in the Book of Mormon, are being prepared for publication in due course. 

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Insights

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The Purpose of FARMS

The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) encourages and supports research about the Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ and other ancient scriptures.

FARMS is part of the Brigham Young University Institute for the Study and Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts. Its main research interests include ancient history, language, literature, culture, geography, politics, and law relevant to the scriptures. Although such subjects are of secondary importance when compared with the spiritual and eternal messages of the scriptures, solid research and academic perspectives alone can supply certain kinds of useful information, even if only tentatively, concerning many significant and interesting questions about the scriptures.

FARMS works to make interim and final reports about this research available widely, promptly, and economically. These publications are peer reviewed to ensure scholarly standards are met. The proceeds from the sale of these publications are used to support further research and publications on the scriptures. As a service to teachers and students of the scriptures, research results are distributed in both scholarly and popular formats.

It is hoped that this information will help all interested people to "come unto Christ" (Jacob 1:7) and to understand and take more seriously these ancient witnesses of the atonement of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

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