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Insights

A WINDOW ON THE ANCIENT WORLD VOLUME 22 | 2002

Number 4

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World of Abraham Topic of FARMS Conference

Continuing a series of conferences on the Book of Abraham, the Institute sponsored “The World of Abraham,” a free public event at Brigham Young University on 23 March featuring new research that further illuminates the geographical and cultural horizons of the Book of Abraham. Institute executive director Daniel Oswald greeted a crowd of 350 people in the Tanner Building auditorium and dozens more in an overflow room. Many others viewed the event via delayed Web transmission a few hours later.

After remarks and introductions by associate executive director M. Gerald Bradford, BYU scholar Brian Hauglid, coeditor of FARMS’s Studies in the Book of Abraham series, gave an overview of the world of Abraham. He discussed the time period when Abraham lived (most scholars give a date of 2000–1500 B.C.E., the middle bronze age); the idolatry

of Abraham’s day (Genesis is silent on this, but the Book of Abraham and numerous ancient traditions indicate that idolatry was rampant at that time); the cultural and religious influences of Mesopotamia, Canaan, and Egypt; and the concrete, dialectic nature of ancient Hebrew thought.

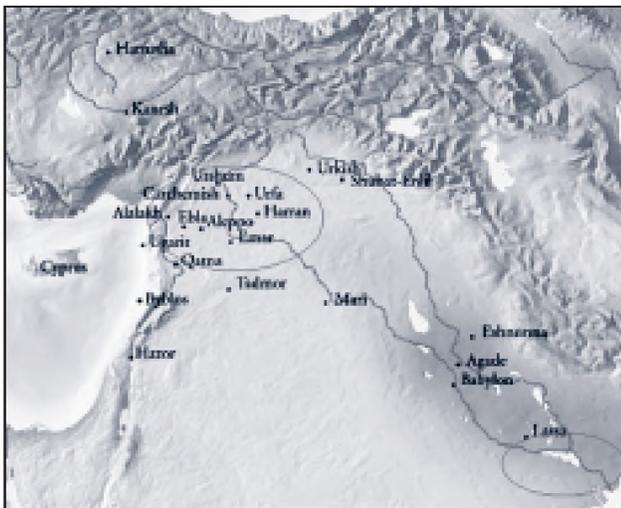
The first session, chaired by Kent Jackson, professor of ancient scripture at BYU, dealt with geography. Institute senior resident scholar John Tvedtnes reviewed the considerable evidence for placing Ur of the Chaldees near Harran (in southern Turkey), farther north than the usual view. His evidence is based on such things as personal names in Abraham’s family that correspond to place-names near Harran, patriarchal customs such as adoption and inheritance, and early traditions and writings about

Ur. Locating Ur in northern Syria or southern Turkey is important, he said, because that location fits the description of Abraham’s homeland as found in the Book of Abraham.

Kerry Muhlestein, a graduate student in Near Eastern languages and culture at UCLA, addressed the question of whether Facsimile 3 in the Book of Abraham fits into a historical context that supports the unique story of how Abraham came to teach Pharaoh in his court. Muhlestein noted archaeological evidence dating to Egypt’s Middle Kingdom period (time of Abraham) for (1) Egyptian influence at Megiddo, Byblos, Ebla, and many other sites in the Levant (Syria-Palestine area); (2) a mixed presence in the Sinai Peninsula; and (3) Asiatic presence in Egypt. He concluded that the significant degree of

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Evidence presented at the conference favored the location of Abraham’s “Ur of the Chaldees” in northern Syria/southern Turkey rather than in southern Mesopotamia, the usual view (see the circled areas). Map by John Gee.

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Submerged just off the southern coast of Guatemala's scenic Lake Atitlán is an ancient settlement of stone buildings that suggests an intriguing possible linkage with the Book of Mormon city of Jerusalem, an apostate Lamanite city destroyed by sudden flooding. Photograph by Douglas Kasteler.

The Submergence of the City of Jerusalem in the Land of Nephi

In touring southern Guatemala, many FARMS patrons traveled west of the capital city to visit Lake Atitlán, one of the most photogenic spots in Central America. Tour guides have told thousands that the beautiful “waters of Mormon” beloved by Alma and his people (see Mosiah 18:30) might well be Lake Atitlán. The Nephite record also tells us that a city called Jerusalem, which was constructed by Lamanites led by Nephite dissenters, was located “away joining the borders of Mormon” (Alma 21:1–2).

Twenty-five years ago John Sorenson suggested that the city

of Jerusalem most plausibly fits into Mesoamerican geography if it is considered to have been located on the south shore of Lake Atitlán.¹ A scientific paper published in Guatemala in 2000 by two Guatemalans experienced in underwater archaeology, Henry Benítez and Robert Samayoa, supports that idea with dramatic new evidence.²

Third Nephi 9:7 reports that immediately after the great series of physical catastrophes that accompanied the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, the Lord's voice out of the heavens told the Nephites that “the city of Jerusalem and the inhabitants thereof” had

been covered by water (“waters have I caused to come up in the stead thereof”), an event that took place within a matter of hours.

Part of the data Sorenson used to frame his proposal was a report from geologists of “long-term periodic fluctuations in [Lake Atitlán's] level which seem to be due to shiftings of deep-seated fissures, variously opening and closing outlets.”³ The lake owes its existence to the growth of the three volcanoes on its south shore that block normal stream drainage, leaving only subterranean outlets through the lava “dam.” Changes in the level of the lake of up to 15 feet per year were reported in historical documents in Spanish, but no evidence of a sudden rise or fall was known until recently.

Benítez and Samayoa report a submerged site, which they call Samabaj, just off the lake's south coast, not far from Santiago Atitlán. House foundations of hewn stone are located at a depth of 17 meters (about 55 feet) below the present lake level. The building remains are situated atop what was once a steep-sided island about 300 meters across and a couple hundred meters offshore. Obviously, when the place was settled and the houses constructed, the lake level had to have been at least 17 meters lower than it is now. The submerged island drops off

sharply on either side to a depth of 80 meters or more beneath today's lake level. Exploration by the divers has also demonstrated that at times in the past the surface of the lake was even lower—as much as 60 meters beneath the present surface (as shown, for example, by remnant beach terraces).

Scuba divers have mapped the underwater ruined settlement, giving careful attention to the orientation of the buildings, and have found that it includes at least three groups of buildings with walls marked by well-hewn stones. The area called Group III features a large building (about 9 by 26 meters, or 30 by 77 feet) that appears to have once had a stairway up one side of it. A smoothed basalt stela, or standing monument, had been erected in front of the stairway. The archaeologists consider this large building to have been the political-administrative center of the ancient settlement.

The divers also concluded that the submergence of Samabaj beneath the lake waters had been comparatively sudden, for they could observe little damage to the structures from wave action (much damage would be expected if the submergence process had been prolonged).

Until further work is done (the human and material resources at the disposal of these men, working without any institutional funding, have limited their ability to explore further) the archaeologists refrain from trying to date this ruin. However, some finds in the Atitlán area indicate that settlers lived in the vicinity since before the time of Christ,⁴ and the smoothed stela at Samabaj points to a date possibly earlier.

At the least we can say that if the apostate New World city of Jerusalem did sit adjacent to Lake Atitlán, we now can understand how it could have been covered up by rising water in a

matter of a few hours, as 3 Nephi indicates. 

Notes

1. John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985), 223–25. The position was first put in writing in a manuscript widely distributed in photocopy form between 1977 and 1984.
2. Henry Benítez and Roberto Samayoa, “Samabaj y la arqueología subacuática en el Lago de Atitlán,” in *XIII Simposio de Investigaciones Arqueológicas en Guatemala, 1999* (Guatemala: Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología, 2000), 2:849–54.
3. Felix Webster McBryde, *Cultural and Historical Geography of Southwest Guatemala*, Smithsonian Institution, Institute of Social Anthropology Publication 4 (Washington D.C.: 1945), 132–33.
4. Samuel K. Lothrop, *Atitlán*, Carnegie Institution of Washington Publication 444 (Washington, D.C.: 1933).

By John L. Sorenson

Helpful Resources for Scripture Study

Three manuals prepared by the Church Education System for use in seminary, institute, and university classes are excellent resources for students of the Old Testament at any level: *Old Testament, Genesis–2 Samuel*; *Old Testament, 1 Kings–Malachi*; and *The Pearl of Great Price*.

“These very inexpensive student manuals provide good overviews, helpful notes and commentaries, important quotations, and useful points to ponder,” says FARMS founder John W. Welch. “Budding scholars as well as even the best gospel scholars should be aware of everything covered therein. Because so many people in the church have read them, these manuals

have become a de facto coin of the realm. To avoid plowing old ground or reinventing the wheel, gospel scholars need to know what has been written in the past and then move on from there. And when speaking to informed audiences, they ought to be able to assume that most people in the audience are familiar with these basic materials.”

The manuals can be purchased at distribution outlets of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (online at www.ldscatalog.com) and from many LDS bookstores. For a list of more specialized readings on the Old Testament, see the “Recommended Readings” section of the FARMS Web site.

Brown Bag Report

Each semester the Institute sponsors a series of brown bag presentations. These lectures give researchers the opportunity to present their latest findings to their peers in related fields and to receive constructive comment. Reports of four recent lectures follow.

Eastern Christian Studies at BYU

On 16 January Kristian Heal, resident scholar at the Institute, reviewed the past, present, and future of Eastern Christian studies at BYU. Heal is the directing editor of the Institute's Eastern Christian Texts publication series and also oversees the Eastern Christian Digital Preservation Initiative. He began his lecture by reviewing the work of the pioneers of Eastern Christian studies at BYU, Sidney B. Sperry and Hugh W. Nibley, both of whom studied and taught Semitic languages and Syriac. Their donations of books to the Harold B. Lee Library provided the basis for an extensive Syriac collection. The next generation of Eastern Christian scholars, including C. Wilfred Griggs and S. Kent Brown, delved into Coptic studies. Brown's monumental project to microfilm Coptic manuscripts laid the foundation for the Institute's efforts to digitize Eastern Christian manuscripts. Heal concluded that the goal of Eastern Christian studies is to make these important manuscripts available in digital form and to produce critical texts, editions, and translations to benefit scholars throughout the world.

Understanding Biblical Genealogies

On 31 January Professor Aaron Demsky of Bar-Ilan University in Israel, a specialist in biblical history and Hebrew language and epigraphy, addressed the topic "The First Families of Manasseh: Understanding Biblical Genealogies." He discussed how principles of historical geography and social anthropology can help "break the code" of puzzling biblical genealogies. An example is 1 Chronicles 7:14–19, a "segmented" genealogy that records geographical separation within the family

clan. This genealogy traces Manasseh's lineage west of the Jordan River through his Israelite wife as well as his lineage east of the Jordan through his Aramaean concubine. Demsky noted that a basic function of biblical genealogies was to undergird and preserve the "social contract"—clan relationships and obligations concerning matters of marriage, inheritance, and welfare that were based on tribal structure. Before they became fixed in literary form in the Bible, these genealogies were adjusted to equalize lineage status in response to social need, for example, when a certain line was destroyed or no sons were born to it, potentially leaving legal rights and social obligations in question.

Augustine and the Corporeality of God

On 13 March Carl Griffin, resident scholar at the Institute, reported on a paper he recently published with David Paulsen in *Harvard Theological Review*, titled "Augustine and the Corporeality of God." Griffin began with a history of the paper. In 1990 Paulsen published a paper in the same journal arguing that the writings of Origen and Augustine show that early Christians may have believed in a corporeal, anthropomorphic God. Three years later a published response to Paulsen's paper claimed that Augustine's writings do not support that view. Paulsen then hired Griffin as a research assistant, and together they wrote a meticulously researched counterresponse.

Griffin then touched on the major arguments of their paper. He said that although Augustine, the fifth-century bishop of Hippo, did not believe in a corporeal God, his letters show that the common Christians of his time did. Griffin argued that a careful look at Augustine's subtle writings reveals more than sufficient evidence to show an early Christian belief in an anthropomorphic God.

Ancient Temples Initiative

On 20 March William J. Hamblin, associate professor of history at BYU, reported on the Institute's Ancient Temples Initiative. As director of this effort, Hamblin is involved in developing a comprehensive database on ancient temples that will be available on the Web. The database will identify major sacred sites worldwide and will

analyze art, ritual, architecture, symbolism, literature, and other topics related to ancient temples. Hamblin gave a preview of the Web site, which features dozens of high-quality images and will eventually include site plans, maps, time lines, artifacts, primary texts, analyses, virtual tours, bibliographic material, a search engine, and links of interest. Val Brinkerhoff of BYU's visual arts department discussed his role in photographing elaborate temple complexes throughout Southeast Asia, and illustrator Michael Lyon discussed the durability of sacred motifs in Asia and the usefulness of 3-D modeling. Lyon then gave participants a virtual tour of Solomon's temple, a work in progress created by BYU computer animation students. 



The new Ancient Temples Initiative Web site will feature images, site plans, maps, time lines, virtual tours, and many other important tools for the study of ancient temples from around the world. It can be found at ancienttemples.org.

Abraham continued from page 1

intellectual exchange between Egypt and the Semitic Levant shows Facsimile 3 to be consistent with that international setting.

John Gee, assistant research professor of Egyptology at the Institute, discussed how the geographic “horizons” (the area of contact of a given political entity at a given time) in Abraham’s day provide information for narrowing the time period in which he lived. Textual references and archaeological remains are evidence of such contact, Gee said. His research along these lines has enabled him to posit narrowed dates for Abraham’s travels: in (northern) Ur sometime between 1860 and 1810 B.C., in Harran after 1800 B.C., and in Egypt before 1775 B.C.

S. Kent Brown, a professor of ancient scripture at BYU and director of the Ancient Studies Program, chaired the second session of the conference, which dealt with cultural aspects of Abraham’s world. BYU associate research professor Michael Rhodes discussed the eternal nature of the family in Egyptian belief, as evidenced in funerary statues, tomb paintings, coffin texts, letters to the dead, and

the Book of the Dead. The literary, inscriptional, and artistic evidence indicates strong belief in the continuation of the family structure in the afterlife and emphasizes the joy and deification of those who are moral and righteous, Rhodes concluded.

Thomas Wayment, an assistant professor of ancient scripture at BYU, reviewed evidence from Greek and Roman sources (e.g., the writings of Euripides, Aeschylus, Plutarch, and Eusebius) indicating that human sacrifice—including the slaying and offering up of a beloved son as a ransom for military success—persisted in ancient Near Eastern culture at least since Canaanite times. The practice may reflect an archetypal belief in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ that was subsequently altered, he said.

In the final presentation of the conference, Terrence Szink, an instructor in ancient scripture at BYU, showed that God’s covenant with Abraham resembled an ancient simile oath. This oath made in the name of God and accompanied by a ritual ceremony (such as the slaughter of an animal) was self-execrative in nature, the violator of the oath suffering a stipulated penalty, such as death in the manner of the sacrificed animal (see Genesis 15; compare Jeremiah 34:18–20). Szink noted examples

of simile oaths in the Old Testament (Ruth 1:16–17) and the Book of Mormon (Alma 46:21–22) and concluded by relating these oaths to the sacramental covenant (see Exodus 24:3–8; Matthew 26:26–28; D&C 19:16–17).

Concluding the conference, Brian Hauglid highlighted the key contributions of each presentation and pronounced the event a success. The proceedings of this conference, as well as those of past and future Institute-sponsored conferences on the Book of Abraham, are expected to be published in book form by FARMS. Notices of these publication efforts will appear in *Insights*. ❏

Video coverage of the recent FARMS Book of Abraham Conference “The World of Abraham” will be available for viewing on the FARMS Web site at farms.byu.edu until 10 June 2002.

A broadband Internet connection is recommended.

FROM OTHER PUBLISHERS

Understanding Islam: An LDS Perspective, a new audio-tape from Covenant Recordings in which Daniel C. Peterson, a BYU scholar of Islam and Arabic, provides a fascinating look at the history and beliefs of a religion of more than 1.4 billion adherents. See the order form.

***BYU Studies*, vol. 40, no. 4 (2001)**, a special issue two years in the making, is just off the press. In it LDS scholars engage various dimensions of Islamic thought. Topics include a history of Islam, the Qurʾān, Islamic art and architecture, the holy city of Jerusalem, and notable similarities between Islam and Mormonism. See the order form.

FORTHCOMING PUBLICATION

The Hor Book of Breathings: A Translation and Commentary, by Michael D. Rhodes, treats the fragments of the Joseph Smith Papyri associated with Facsimiles 1 and 3 of the Book of Abraham. Featured at the sales display accompanying FARMS’s recent “World of Abraham” conference, a mock-up of this long-awaited book drew a lot of interest, in part because of its use of hieroglyphs that were custom designed for the project. Available in June 2002.

Insights

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FARMS is part of Brigham Young University’s Institute for the Study and Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts. As such, it encourages and supports research on the Book of Mormon, the Book of Abraham, the Bible, other ancient scripture, and related subjects. Under the FARMS imprint, the Institute publishes and distributes titles in these areas for the benefit of scholars and interested Latter-day Saint readers.

Primary research interests at FARMS include the history, language, literature, culture, geography, politics, and law relevant to ancient scripture. Although such subjects are of secondary importance when compared with the spiritual and eternal messages of scripture, solid research and academic perspectives can supply certain kinds of useful information, even if only tentatively, concerning many significant and interesting questions about scripture.

FARMS makes interim and final reports about this research available widely, promptly, and economically. These publications are peer reviewed to ensure that scholarly standards are met. The proceeds from the sale of these materials are used to support further research and publications. 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 appreciate more fully the scriptural witnesses of the divine mission of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

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