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Insights

A WINDOW ON THE ANCIENT WORLD

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New Book Enriches NT Study

A new book from FARMS offers a world of information about the New Testament and its background. *Charting the New Testament* contains scores of charts, tables, and graphs, each with helpful explanatory and reference materials in a reader-friendly format. Covering a wide array of topics—from the ancient Jewish setting of the New Testament and the world of the Greeks and Romans in which the activities of Jesus and his apostles took place to detailed analysis of the scriptural text itself—the book offers an extensive overview of matters doctrinal, literary, and historical. A companion volume to *Charting the Book of Mormon*, this handy resource is designed with both the student and the teacher in mind.

“The charts used in this book have been developed, tested, and used in a number of settings,” BYU professors John F. Hall (classics) and John W. Welch (law) write in the preface to their book. “We appreciate what we have learned by using these charts in our university classes, during public lectures, at conferences and workshops, and on travel-study tours in

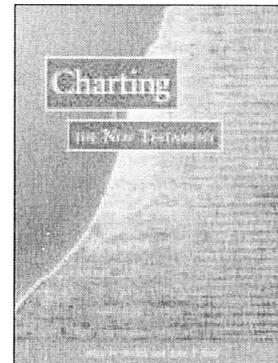
many parts of the Mediterranean world.”

The historical background in the first sections of the book ranges from broad overviews of events to detailed chronologies. Interesting, for instance, are explanations of aspects of daily life that are encountered throughout the New Testament yet are

often puzzling to modern readers. Understanding the culture and daily life of the period is key to grasping the significance of a myriad of New Testament verses that refer to the objects and customs of the time.

The exposition of Jesus’ life and teachings comprises a main component of the book. Analysis of the Savior’s sermons reveals the often underlying doctrinal significance of his teachings. For example, the parable of the good Samaritan lays out the plan of salvation, and the Sermon on the Mount encapsulates

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Hor Book of Breathings Analyzed in New Study

The Hor Book of Breathings: A Translation and Commentary, by Michael D. Rhodes, was recently published by FARMS. This landmark volume is a full publication of the Hor Book of Breathings (the extant portions of the roll from which Facsimiles 1 and 3 of the Book of Abraham also derive) and includes a transliteration, translation, and philological commentary; a complete glossary of all Egyptian words in the surviving text; and both color and grayscale digital images of the papyri.

“I hope that this publication will prove useful to scholars interested in Egyptian religious writings of the Greco-Roman era and will provide material for a better understanding of the grammar, vocabulary, and paleography of that period,” writes author Michael D. Rhodes in the preface.

The Hor Book of Breathings is a part of eleven papyri fragments in the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art that came to the attention of Dr. Aziz Atiyah in 1966. These fragments, subsequently donated to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 1967, came from three separate papyri rolls. Joseph Smith Papyri I, X, and XI are from the Book of Breathings belonging to Hor (*Hr*), the son of Usiwer

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Early Christianity and the Question of Evil

If God is good, why does he permit evil to exist? People through the ages have wrestled with this philosophical question, often called simply “the problem of evil.” The Bible contains one of the earliest works to address it—the book of Job.

Job is perplexed why he, a good and pious man, has suffered the catastrophic loss of family and fortune. His friends all offer theories, none of which are comforting, while Job becomes insolent in his despair and challenges God to manifest the reason for his indictment (Job 31:35–37).

“Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said, Who is this that darkeneth counsel with words without knowledge? Gird up now thy loins like a man; for I will demand of thee, and answer thou me. Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?” (Job 38:1–4). As the Lord catalogs his ineffable and mighty acts, Job is humbled and convinced that, even if there is no apparent reason for his suffering, God does nothing without a purpose. Those purposes, according to Job, are beyond human understanding.

Not everyone since Job has been satisfied with that answer, least of all the early Christian

fathers. They inherited the question of evil from both Judaism and Greek philosophy, but found the answers of neither to be completely satisfying. The commonplace philosophical answer was perhaps the most immediately attractive. Evil has no real existence—it is simply the absence of good. True, most of us find a room where light is absent to be as black as one in which darkness exists, but God cannot be found guilty of causing or tolerating evil if there really is no such thing. Many Christian theologians therefore took this as the starting point for their “defense of God,” even if ultimately the absence-of-good theory, however useful for theodicy, fails to satisfy.

If the reality of evil is acknowledged (the Fathers reasoned) and yet God is good, then evil *must* serve a divine purpose and lead to some good end. Job’s solution was revisited and then surpassed as early Christian writers sought to discover what that good end might be. Origen of Alexandria (c. 185–251) believed that greater good was free will. All God’s creatures are free yet mutable, and when mutability and freedom are wed, the result is diversity and divergence from God. But that same freedom that leads to evil is also necessary for good, for there can be no moral

action, no praise or blame, if there is no moral choice.¹

Origen also believed that the evils humans perpetrate are providentially ordered for the good of the righteous. “Powerful is our good God, so much that even a work of evil, although it is destructive for the one from whom it proceeds, is nevertheless disposed to become a blessing for the one against whom He sends trials, when that evil has been vanquished.”² The “evils” in nature, the common sufferings of mortality, are also used by God to benefit his creatures, as are the punishments meted out to the wicked. All suffering is educative.

That God uses evil providentially would become a commonplace in Christian theology. Said Augustine: “God, who is supremely good in his creation of natures that are good, is also completely just in his employment of evil choices in his design, so that whereas such evil choices make a wrong use of good natures, God turns evil choices to good use. . . . Evil things are allowed to exist in order to show how the righteousness and foreknowledge of the Creator can turn even those very evils to good account.”³

Evil also adorns and beautifies the world by providing contrast with the good, in the same way that antithesis gives beauty to poetry.⁴ Yet even if he turns evil deeds to a good end, God is simply making the best of a bad

situation. There is in all this no implication that God is in any way a party to sin, except perhaps in that he brought a cosmos and creatures into existence that, due to their mutable natures, tend toward suffering and sin.

But did not God give our first parents access to sin in the Garden of Eden—the tree of knowledge of good and evil? Is sin not just inevitable but in some way a necessary part of God’s plan for us? Early Christian writers uniformly shun this idea, except for one. Theodore of Mopsuestia (c. 350–428), bishop of a small town near Paul’s Tarsus, said of the garden:

[God] did not place death upon man either unwillingly or against his better judgment, neither did he provide access to sin for no good purpose; for he was able, if he did not wish this to be so, to do otherwise. But he knew it was beneficial for us, nay more, for all rational creatures, at first to have access to evils and inferior things, and thereafter for these to be blotted out and better things introduced. . . . For if from the beginning he had made us straightway immortal, we would be no different from irrational creatures, not knowing our own good. For ignorant of mutability, we would be ignorant of immutability; not knowing death, we would not know of the riches of immortality; ignorant of corruption, we would not praise incorruption; not knowing the burden of passions, we would not marvel at impassibility. Briefly stated, lest I lengthen my discourse, not

knowing the experience of evils, we would not be able to earn knowledge of those goods.⁵

This is in accord with Theodore’s belief that rationality and freedom are rooted in the choice between contraries.

For the Lord made us rational, and wished to help that very rationality to be effective in us, because in no other way could it be made manifest except by choosing between contraries [*discretione contrariorum*]. From among these, the choice of the better can be reached—for this is the highest rational attainment of every rational being.⁶

Only by the Lord’s placing good and evil before us could we choose the good. Only by choosing the good can we obtain joy in this life and be perfected in goodness in the world to come.

This is very like Lehi’s final instructions to his son Jacob. “For it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things. If not so, my first-born in the wilderness, righteousness could not be brought to pass, neither wickedness, neither holiness nor misery, neither good nor bad” (2 Nephi 2:11). If there is no sin, there is no righteousness; if no righteousness, no happiness. Therefore, “to bring about his eternal purposes in the end of man,” the Lord created “the forbidden fruit in opposition to the tree of life; . . . [for] man could not act for himself save it should be that he was enticed by one or the other” (2 Nephi 2:15–16).

Theodore was condemned posthumously for his teachings about the necessity of opposition and of the Fall, since the early Christian church regarded the Fall as an unmitigated cosmic tragedy. But Theodore discerned what Lehi knew—death and sin are a necessary part of God’s plan for us. 

Notes

1. *On First Principles* 3.1; *Commentary on Genesis* 1.3 (*Philocalia* 23); *On Prayer* 6.2.
2. *Commentary on Romans* 8.13.
3. *City of God* 11.17; 14.11. Henry Bettenson, trans., *City of God* (Harmondsworth [UK]: Penguin, 1984), 449, 569.
4. *City of God* 11.18.
5. *Commentary on Genesis* fr. 1.
6. *Commentary on Galatians* 2.15–16.

By Carl W. Griffin

Nibley’s *Time Vindicates the Prophets* on CD, Cassette

FARMS is pleased to announce the release of Hugh Nibley’s classic lecture series *Time Vindicates the Prophets* on a set of eight CDs or cassettes. These lectures, broadcast over the radio over a period of six months in 1954, have been digitally remastered to capture Nibley’s insight and wit and are being distributed for the first time ever on CD.

To obtain these CDs, see the enclosed order form or visit the bookstore section of the FARMS Web site.

New Testament continued from page 1

the requirements for entering into temple covenants that hold the secrets of life eternal. The miracles and other acts of Jesus are depicted in their relation to the teachings of his ministry. The events of Jesus' life are outlined in detail and set in their historical perspective, as in the case of the contemporary legal setting for the prosecution and crucifixion of the Savior.

The apostles' and other disciples' courageous lives of service devoted to the Master's cause constitute an exciting portion of the book. The lives and teachings of Peter, John, and Paul are treated extensively. Confusing situations are sorted out, including questions like, Who are all the different Johns in the New Testament? Who is James the brother of the Lord? How many Marys appear in the gospel accounts? The book also presents charts on the apostolic era and the post-apostolic age, introducing the first stages of the apostasy that would involve the loss of many plain and precious things.

Also included are detailed maps of various regions mentioned in the New Testament and bibliographic notes that lead the most interested readers to scholarly treatments of the topics contained in the charts. *Charting the New Testament* can be the means to initiate further investigation into this exciting scripture or a way to share LDS perspectives with others who also value this sublime book of scripture. Its primary aim, the authors write, is "to make the New Testament simple without simplifying this vastly complex text." To order a copy of this book, use the enclosed order form or visit the bookstore section of the FARMS Web site. 

Book of Breathings continued from page 1

(*Wsir-wr*), which is the subject of this book. (The Book of the Dead fragments will be the subject of a separate book.)

The Hor Book of Breathings is the second volume in the Studies in the Book of Abraham series, following *Traditions about the Early Life of Abraham* (edited by John A. Tvedtnes, Brian M. Hauglid, and John Gee), published by FARMS in 2001.

In addition to providing a translation and transliteration, Rhodes, an associate research professor in the Department of Ancient Scripture at BYU, examines such topics as the history and paleography of the papyrus, grammatical forms and vocabulary, the language of the Book of Breathings, the vignettes, and the Book of Breathings made by Isis.

To obtain a copy of *The Hor Book of Breathings: A Translation and Commentary*, see the enclosed order form or visit the bookstore section of the FARMS Web site. 

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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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